



## Twitter Is Just The Beginning Of Jack Dorsey's Speech Revolution

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Jack Dorsey has left Twitter, which he co-founded and ran for more than a decade. Many on the American political right frequently accused Dorsey and other prominent social media CEOs of censoring conservative content. Yet Dorsey doesn't easily fit within partisan molds. Although Twitter is often lumped together with Facebook and YouTube, its founder's approach to free speech and interest in decentralized initiatives such as BlueSky make Dorsey one of the more interesting online speech leaders of recent years. If you want to know what the future of social media might be, keep an eye on Dorsey.

Twitter has much in common with other prominent "Big Tech" social media firms such as Facebook and Google-owned YouTube. Like these firms, Twitter is centralized, with **one set** of rules and policies. Twitter is nonetheless different from other social media sites in important ways. Although often discussed in the context of "Big Tech" debates, Twitter is much smaller than Facebook and YouTube. Only **about a fifth** of Americans use Twitter and most are not active on the platform, with **10 percent of users being responsible for 80 percent of tweets**. Despite its relatively small size, Twitter is often discussed by lawmakers because of its outsized influence among cultural and political elites.

Republican lawmakers' focus on Twitter arose out of concerns over its content moderation policies. Over the last few years it has become common for members of Congress to decry the content moderation decisions of "Big Tech" companies. Twitter is often lumped together with Facebook and YouTube in such conversations, which is a shame given Dorsey's views on free speech.

Dorsey has been more supportive of free speech than many on the American political right might think. Did Twitter, under Dorsey's leadership, adhere to a policy of allowing all legal speech? Of course not. Did Twitter sometimes inconsistently apply its policies? Yes.

But no social media site could allow all legal speech. The wide range of awful but lawful speech aside, spam and other intrusive legal speech would ruin the online experience. Any social media

site with millions or billions of users will experience false positives and false negatives while implementing a content moderation policy.

Yet Dorsey defended keeping former President Trump's Twitter account live, and expressed **concern about suspending Trump's Twitter account** in the wake of the January 6th coup attempt.

It became clear in the last few years that Dorsey is open to new ideas that may end up being considered mainstream eventually. We are still in the early years of the Internet and social media and users are used to centralized platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. But, increasingly, there are decentralized alternatives, and a few years ago Dorsey announced the decentralized social media project **BlueSky**, with the goal of moving Twitter over to such a system eventually.

Dorsey has not been shy about his passion for decentralization, **citing the cryptocurrency bitcoin** as a particular influence, "largely because of the model it demonstrates: a foundational internet technology that is not controlled or influenced by any single individual or entity. This is what the internet wants to be, and over time, more of it will be."

**I predict** that in the coming years decentralized social media will gradually become more popular than current centralized platforms. As I wrote earlier this year:

*"Americans across the political spectrum may look to decentralized social media and cryptocurrencies if their political allies continue to criticize household name firms. Those involved in protest movements as varied as Black Lives Matter and #StopTheSteal are especially likely to embrace such alternatives given their experiences with surveillance.*

*But Americans fed up with what they perceive to be politically-motivated content moderation and Big Tech's irresponsible approach to harassment and misinformation may also join an exit from popular platforms and use decentralized alternatives. If they do, members of Congress upset over the spread of specific political content, COVID 19 misinformation, and election conspiracy theories will have to reach beyond Big Tech and grapple with decentralized systems where there is no CEO to subpoena or financial institution to investigate."*

Such platforms can embrace a Twitter-like aesthetic. **Mastodon**, a decentralized and open source social media service, looks very similar to Twitter, allowing users to send "toots." Gab, a right wing social media network, which also mimics Twitter, became a Mastodon fork **in 2019** after adopting Mastodon software. As policy fights over "Big Tech" and online speech continue, we should not be surprised if more people across the political spectrum adopt decentralized social media.

Dorsey clearly believes in a future where decentralized social media replaces centralized online speech platforms. If he is vindicated in that prediction it is likely that Dorsey's legacy will be more bound to his work in decentralization more than his career at Twitter.

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