



Donald Trump Has To Build And Protect Truth Social With Both Hands Tied Behind His Back

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February 22, 2022

Former President Donald Trump’s media group released its Truth Social app for download in Apple’s App Store on Sunday night. By Monday, it quickly hit number one in the App Store’s top charts. Devin Nunes, former GOP congressman and CEO of Trump Media and Technology Group, told Fox News on Sunday that the company plans to make the app fully operational by the end of March, at least in the United States.

The rollout has been beset with not only a few bugs, but more than a few people lying in wait to call out the app’s flaws. Among them are right-leaning, self-described free-market groups – the ones who make their living telling critics of Big Tech to “build their own” while defending the status quo as perfectly acceptable.

The problem with the purveyors of the “build your own” argument is that it’s an intellectual fraud, one they don’t even try to stand behind when people actually do go out and build alternative platforms.

I documented this phenomenon at the launch of the Twitter alternative, Parler, nearly two years ago. Parler had a similar rollout to Truth Social. Twitter users, sick of the platform’s double standards and outright pretextual content moderation decisions, flocked to an alternative app in spite of its early bugs and crashes. Within days of its launch, Parler, like Truth Social, topped the charts of most downloaded apps in Apple’s App Store.

But far from supporting robust competition in the marketplace they all purport to valorize, free-market groups and publications across the spectrum relished in mocking the app’s terms of service, its interface, and its users.

The libertarians at Reason magazine, who are forever finger-wagging at anyone with bad things to say about Big Tech, started making fun of the platform’s conservative slant. Apparently it’s OK to call out the biases of Parler’s creators, but not Twitter’s. Got it.

Upset about Parler's attempt to woo more liberals to its site to create more diversity of views, Mike Masnick of the tech industry blog TechDirt helpfully lit into them as a "sh-thole platform for -sshholes and trolls."

Gleefully, the writers at Reason, the tech industry blog TechDirt, and, of course, The Dispatch's David French began pointing out that Parler—which markets itself as a "First Amendment platform" and says "if you can say it on the streets of New York, you can say it on our platform"—were banning users for pornographic content, posting pictures of fecal matter, and other smutty content.

Haha! This crowd exclaimed. It's not a "free speech" platform! They're banning people! See? Content moderation is hard, isn't it? (The unstated corollary being Twitter, the sainted platform, is thus entirely justified in its moderation practices.)

As Aaron Ross Powell of the Cato Institute hopefully put it, "Parler will be a ghost town in six months and everyone who ran to it as a safe space for conservatives will be back on Twitter pretending the whole episode never happened."

In some ways, Powell got what he wanted, although not because Parler failed. Parler continued to grow in sustained popularity until, in January 2021, it was collectively kneecapped by Apple, Google, and Amazon Web Service under the pretext that it didn't do enough to moderate content on its platform in the wake of the January 6, 2021 Capitol riot.

The rationale was an obvious sham. In charging documents for those arrested in relation to the fracas, the Department of Justice cited posts from Facebook, Instagram (owned by Facebook), and YouTube at nearly ten times the rate it cited posts on Parler. Yet those apps remained unmolested in Apple and Google's stores. (Jack Dorsey, then CEO of Twitter, Parler's direct competitor, tweeted out a heart emoji of thanks when Parler no longer showed up on Apple's list of popular apps.)

Parler was eventually let back into Apple's store after Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, and Rep. Ken Buck, R-Colo., sent a letter to Apple CEO Tim Cook grilling him about the unfair treatment – and after Parler agreed to make changes to its moderation terms. In the meantime, Parler remains banned by Google's Play store. The app has only regained 4 percent of its user base.

Deplatforming works. It's why the big guys do it.

There Is No True Free Market In Social Media Apps

So what does all this mean for Truth Social and the social media app environment writ large? Broadly, it reveals Truth Social isn't simply competing on its merits – it's up against app market gatekeepers and the terms they impose on entrants to their stores.

What made the de-platforming of Parler so successful was less its removal from hosting by Amazon Web Services than the blackout by Apple and Google, whose app stores represent critical entry points to the mainstream app marketplace. If you're a social media app and you're not in these stores, you basically don't exist. (This is especially true of Apple, which does not

allow users to sideload apps onto their phone – that is, directly download apps onto the phone outside of their store.)

Smartphones account for nearly half of the digital traffic in the United States, a market that is almost completely dominated by Apple and Google. According to at least one study, 88 percent of the time people spend on their phones will be spent in apps, not browsers.

In other words, if you're a social media company, you live and die by the app. And the only way you can reach users is through the app stores of Apple and Google. Without that access, small businesses cannot survive. This gives Apple and Google tremendous power to set the terms of the small businesses that are effectively forced to use their stores to access the marketplace.

Truth Social Versus The Gatekeepers

This is an insight that Patrick Hedger, the executive director of Taxpayers Protection Alliance, appeared to stumble into unwittingly. TPA is a pro-small government, right-leaning group that promotes a hands-off approach to tech policy.

Naturally, a hands-off approach to tech policy also involves rushing to critique anyone's attempt to make the market work for them. "I downloaded Truth Social just to get a look at the terms of service," Hedger tweeted. "In a shock to no one, it contains a lot of weirdness. Here are most of the banned things, most of which are constitutionally-protected. Also, a typo in the first one."

Hedger was attempting to critique the platform for hypocrisy – a platform holding itself out as a free speech beacon will ban things! But he inadvertently demonstrated the power of Apple's gatekeeping approach. Truth Social's terms for content moderation are essentially a copy and paste of Apple's terms for user-generated content on apps hosted in its store.

Apple requires apps hosted on its site to have "a method for filtering objectionable material from being posted to the app," which includes "pornographic content . . . making physical threats, or bullying." (Truth Social's requirement that posts not be "false, inaccurate, or misleading" appears to be outside of Apple's requirements.)

The terms Hedger is attempting to drag, in other words, represent the cost of doing business with Apple. Or put another way, because Apple is so dominant, imposing these terms on their users is the toll Truth Social must pay to access the marketplace in the first place. It's a variation of the same fare Apple extracted from Parler to let it back into its store.

All of this raises the question: with Google and Apple so dominant, is a censorship-free app even possible? In other words, is it even possible for any small social media business to attempt a novel approach to content moderation outside of what Apple and Google think about it?

At the moment, with Apple and Google controlling access to the market, it would seem that, no, truly inventive content moderation (or even First Amendment style content moderation) is not possible. Small businesses can be as inventive as they want – up to a point, and then their survival is determined only by their adherence to what the two market gatekeepers say.

So much for permissionless innovation. There is no “free market” for content moderation. And it would seem that reality should preoccupy those preoccupied with assuring the rest of us that the app market is still a haven for creativity, and one which respects all entrants on their unique merits.

Apple’s Winners And Losers

In the end, however, much of this comes down to the subjectivity with which Apple enforces its own terms. The bigger platforms are always given more latitude because of their better “systems” for content moderation – not their success at it.

“Having the right systems” is how Apple and Google could justify Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram remaining in their stores despite the role their sites played in January 6 content, while nuking Parler for the same sin. It’s also why Twitter can let content that would seem to be in clear violation of Apple’s terms run wild, while Truth Social will likely be slapped down if it allows the same.

The reality of the app market is that success, for small social media companies, hinges on winning political favor with the gatekeepers. It’s tied to how well the app conforms to the speech standards that Apple and Google set. It remains to be seen if or for how long Truth Social can remain in the favored category, or if some clearly pretextual enforcement decision arbitrarily removes them from mainstream access.

Either way, the pro-free market groups on the right will be there to justify Truth Social’s demise just as they sniffed condescendingly at its entry. “Build your own,” they say. “Shoulder the risks and put yourself out there. Be the man in the arena. We’ll be here to throw rocks at you when you do.”