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The McConnell Twitter case: Faceless censors are a net loss for free speech

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I think I know how Mitch McConnell feels.

I'm talking about the issue of people screwing things up online.

In the case of the Kentucky senator, the people at Twitter took down a video that his campaign posted showing what campaign officials described as “an angry left-wing mob” uttering various threats against the Senate majority leader.

The point of the tweet, of course, was to show how unhinged McConnell's opponents are. Yet someone at Twitter decided to take it down anyway.

To do so required a suspension of any rational thought process. Yet such behavior is common on the internet.

I experienced it last week when I wrote a column in which I speculated about the possible negative political implications for U.S. Senator and Democratic presidential wannabe Cory Booker stemming from his vegan diet.

I reasoned that Booker's anti-meat stance might cut into his support in the No. 1 pork producing state in the union, Iowa. I also made fun of a Booker “block party” at which he served his supporters only meat-free pasta and soda.

As soon as I posted it online I began to hear from commenters who wanted to know why the Star-Ledger was “promoting” Booker's candidacy – by lampooning his views!

That sort of thing is all too common. I imagine that before there was an internet there were plenty of people who, upon encountering an opinion, would interpret it to mean its exact opposite. But back then, they had little chance to express themselves.

These days they're everywhere, including apparently in the management ranks of Twitter. McConnell's people had to fight for four days to get their account restored and to have the video reposted – though only through a “sensitive media interstitial.”

I hear similar complaints from my conservative sources who post on Facebook. Rick Shaftan, a campaign consultant from New Jersey who relocated to North Carolina, told me he was banned from Facebook for a week for posting a cartoon that compared left-wing antifa mobs to Nazi mobs.

That's a valid political point by any measure. Yet it landed him in Facebook jail - even though he spends considerable campaign funds on Facebook.

"A lot of people are getting kicked off," Shaftan said. "People are getting kicked off for sharing a Breitbart story. They say it violates community standards."

Breitbart is of course a news website that has conservative leanings. But these internet services don't necessarily discriminate against just Republicans.

There's also the case of Democratic presidential contender Tulsi Gabbard. The congresswoman from Hawaii found that her Google ads were frozen just as she was getting positive coverage for one of her debate performances. Gabbard is now suing Google.

I wish her luck. But she's up against a faceless enemy, said one expert in the field.

That's John Samples of the Cato Institute, a free-market think tank based in Washington.

Samples opposes any efforts to have the government regulate the internet. But he worries that's where all this might be heading.

"Does this lead to an FCC for the internet?" he asked.

The Federal Communications Commission, of course, was set up with the express mission of regulating radio and television broadcasting on the grounds that those are monopolies.

The internet's not a monopoly. But some imaginative politicians might make a case that companies like Twitter, Facebook and Google could be targeted on antitrust grounds, he said.

These companies are bringing the problem on themselves, Samples said.

"They've taken on something they can't do with human beings," he said. "They've got a lot tied up in the idea that you can do this through a machine learning how to do it."

The problem with machine learning, he said, is that it targets any content that falls into a broadly defined category. In McConnell's case, the algorithm targeted the violent speech without recognizing the political statement being made.

That was bad enough. Worse, the actual human beings at Twitter at first supported the censorship because they wanted to protect their system for moderating posts cheaply and efficiently, he said.

To give the companies their due, they've got a tough task. Virtually everyone wants them to target "a lot of illegal stuff, murder for hire, child porn and that stuff."

But when it comes to depictions of violence, those are common in the news.

"Are we going to get rid of reporting on massacres and human-rights violations?" Samples asked.

If so, people are going to have to go back to newspapers to get their news.

As the old saying goes, every cloud has a silver lining - even an internet cloud.