



Will Big Tech Gun Censorship Affect the 2020 Election

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Imagine if, in the early 20th century, the newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst not only grew from owning a single newspaper in San Francisco to building a media empire in New York and beyond, which he did, but also was able to build a company that could actually control private conversations between individual Americans. More than that, imagine if he could silence companies he didn't like by simply banning or "shadow banning" them from his vast communication platforms. And then, with this control over speech, imagine how he could really have begun to influence elections.

Now you're getting an idea of how much power San Francisco-based tech firms currently have as we close in on a presidential election this November 3.

All of this would be nothing more than a plot for a dystopian fiction author if these companies—Google, Facebook, Twitter...—were only interested in maintaining nonpartisan platforms for free expression. The thing is, when it comes to guns, they are not.

The official policies, the secret algorithms and the bias from management who mostly have the same politics in these billion-dollar social-media companies is affecting gun-related companies big and small.

For Jessica Keffer, the marketing manager at The Sportsman's Shop in East Earl, Penn., wrestling with the arbitrary "rules" of the social-media censors has become a daily burden and a steep impediment to the survival of her small business.

"The issues we have experienced directly relate to our attempts to 'boost' or promote our posts through Facebook and Instagram. We have had content approved and then disapproved," Keffer said. "We have been told that, because our website states we sell firearms, and the ads direct to our website, they are not permitted, as they are against their policies."

As a result, the company is allowed to post content, but not to advertise. If Keffer happens to get a response from a real person, and not a robot, when she appeals, it is usually along the lines of “it’s because you have a link to your website on your page which does sell firearms. That’s also against our policies, I’m afraid.”

Not only is it exhausting, Keffer said, but it is only getting worse as the November 2020 election looms and the gun-control debate grows.

“The Second Amendment is a right for all,” she said. “We need to challenge every incorrect statement in a polite and professional way. We cannot go quietly into the night.”

But, with the countdown to the ballot box on, dominant social-media companies are making it increasingly difficult for Second-Amendment advocates to be heard. Big tech—namely Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Google—continue to censor the firearm industry, gun owners and anything that could be related to guns; all in the name of “community standards.”

“When Trump won in 2016, the media and social-media companies began working to silence the prerogative online. We are now fighting a move to make social-media policy more international, and no other nation has quite the free speech tradition we do,” said Dan Gainor, vice president of business and culture at the Media Research Institute. “Social media is run by the anti-gun left. That plays out in content regulations. Look at Facebook. It has two separate restrictions for weapons that are worded vaguely enough; you could either approve posting information about guns or not.”

He also underscored that Facebook just created an Oversight Board that is 75% international and that, therefore, is made up of people who do not come from an American understanding of First Amendment or Second Amendment principles.

So, even though buying and selling firearms is a protected right, these tech bigwigs have been implementing policies that clearly discourage legal gun sales; they have gone far beyond just the commerce realm to delete and block anything that doesn’t jibe with their views. The term used to describe these purges is “de-platforming,” and it refers not only to shutting down the accounts of targeted users, but it also makes it difficult for firearms-related companies to even function on the internet.

A renewed and major anti-gun push took hold in 2018, in the lead-up to the primary elections, led by the Google-owned YouTube, which moved aggressively against gun postings. Hundreds of law-abiding users lost videos and often a chunk of their livelihoods.

The tech oligarchs even shut down longstanding gun accounts. At that time, YouTube even temporarily cancelled the popular channel for the renowned firearms parts company Brownells.

The company uses its channel to explain how various firearms work, and how to safely assemble and maintain their guns. This prompted confusion and complaints as to why they were being targeted. Products designed by the company to enhance gun safety have also been curiously banned, including advertisements for ZORE's gun-safety lock.

People complained and Brownells' channel was restored, but other companies never got their channels back.

"Content intended to sell firearms, instruct viewers on how to make firearms, ammunition, and certain accessories, or instruct viewers on how to install those accessories is not allowed on YouTube," reads YouTube's policy. "YouTube shouldn't be used as a platform to sell firearms or accessories noted below. YouTube also doesn't allow live streams that show someone holding, handling, or transporting a firearm."

And if you violate the policy, which company representatives have admitted was formed without any actual gun experts advising them, they will "email to let you know." First-time offenders get off with a warning; the second time "wrongdoers" get a channel "strike." If you accumulate three of these "strikes," the channel will be terminated.

InRange TV, which had built an admirable following of more than 144,000 subscribers, turned to an adult website to post its once heavily watched YouTube videos discussing everything from Glock 19s to cleaning techniques.

"At this moment, regardless of your personal belief, firearms and their accessories are legal in the United States. Schedule 1 substances are federally illegal, regardless of what you believe or what your local state's take is on the topic," said Karl Kasarda from InRange TV. "Why are we seeing continuing restrictions and challenges towards content about something demonstrably legal, yet not against that which is clearly illegal?"

Kasarda explained his hope that audiences would migrate to a different website as a potential bastion for free speech has not come to fruition; thus, navigating the social-media struggle remains difficult.

"The issue of oligarchical control over the Internet and all the impact over the ability to use it for free speech is going to only get worse. Even though these platforms are essentially the public square, they are seen as a free market and therefore it is 'acceptable' for corporations to determine what is allowed and not allowed to be spoken about," Kasarda said. "It is unclear what the rules are. Specifically, with YouTube, they pretty much enforce whatever they feel based on their bias of the day. I do know, for example, that we cannot post any type of manufacturing or cartridge reloading content, even when historical and antique in nature."

According to a study published by Stanford University's Business School in late 2017, bias emanating from the tech arena is widely ingrained. Despite claims from companies like Google, which professes to be apolitical, the vast majority of tech entrepreneurs adhere to the same ideology.

"While computer programmers may not create algorithms that start out being discriminatory, the collection and curation of social preferences eventually can become adaptive algorithms that embrace societal biases," said Nicol Turner-Lee, a fellow at the Center for Technology Innovation at the nonpartisan Brookings Institute.

Thus, the political persuasions of the programmers behind the screen have undoubtedly seeped into bias algorithms that support their political creed, which in more cases than not, goes against one's gun rights. As it now stands, Google deems firearm-related content to be in the "non-family safe" category.

Last year, Google even slapped the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF), a Montana-based conservation group, with an "animal cruelty" label after the RMEF posted a paid ad promoting a video on the importance of hunting. After several Republican congressmen wrote a letter in protest, Google reinstated the video.

"Google doesn't have a policy prohibiting hunting ads," an unidentified Google spokesperson wrote in an email statement on the censure. "We do have a policy against ads that promote animal cruelty or feature gratuitous violence towards animals. In this case, we made a mistake and the ad is now approved to run. We always encourage advertisers to appeal if they feel that an ad was wrongly disapproved—this helps us improve our systems and processes."

Meanwhile, Twitter proudly boasts about its extensive prohibition of "the promotion of weapons and weapon accessories globally." This includes the shuttering of even airsoft guns, paintball guns and antiques and "other self-defense weapons," ranging from stun guns and maces to pepper spray and taser guns.

"Whitey," from FourGuysGuns.com, a website run by four friends that not only sells firearm accessories but also provides a plethora of free videos and training tips, said he started noting an uptick in censorship around 2012, when Facebook went public.

"It suddenly became more focused on showing shareholders profit and shifting their business model," he said.

Whitey's blog used to have a reach of over 3 million per day, and sometimes per post. Now he is lucky to reach 10,000 views, unless he pays to reach more of the audience that "likes" their page.

“The catch is, I can’t, because Facebook has us listed as a business, and also flagged as a company that promotes, glorifies or sells weapons and violence,” he said. “We do not go against the constantly changing Community Guidelines, and it is tiring to constantly monitor.”

Companies big and small have been dragged into the social-media silencing quagmire. Tom Taylor, chief marketing officer and executive vice president of commercial sales for SIG Sauer, said that the suppression is unabashed. “Instagram and Facebook, Google and YouTube, Twitter, Yahoo—or virtually any mainstream search engine—is not allowing firearm manufacturers to advertise or promote via paid activities. No sponsored or paid posts are allowed. These platforms are built to be optimized by paid advertising, so the firearm industry is almost completely dependent on organic reach and grassroots efforts,” he said.

He underscored that it is only becoming worse as these companies configure more and more ways to utilize their algorithms to closely monitor certain words or categories.

“Many companies attempt to use hashtags that are unrelated to restricted categories/topics or to work with non-firearm specific partners,” Taylor said. “Even then, if it is used at a high enough rate, a company may be warned, flagged and/or blocked, or, that is, shadow banned.”

In another example, David Smith, who has built an internet persona as the “Parkinson’s Shooter,” goes around the world not only as a professional shooter but to tout the benefits of gun therapy for his debilitating and advanced condition. He said he often finds that posts have arbitrarily been taken down, which potentially threatens his ability to make a meager living.

“I’m disabled, and social media is one way I rely on to fight this disease. I have a positive message, and still I’m silenced,” he said. “Guns are always a topic ahead of any election, but this year it is already an especially big deal.”

But John Samples, vice president at the Cato Institute, contends social-media companies are platforms, not publishers.

“The Constitution offers strong protections for speech in general, and not just for political speech. Similarly, the right to hear the speech of others is protected by the First Amendment,” he said. “American law recognizes a small number of exceptions to these general protections for speech. Apart from these exceptions, speech by and for social-media users may be presumed to be free of government regulation.”

There is little doubt that our country’s Founding Fathers would have abhorred the idea of giving a handful of major tech giants the reins to dictate the discourse across the country, but the dilemma for lawmakers is: What can be done?

“There are two obvious options for gun-rights advocates, pressure the companies and legislators to allow them to post, or build out alternate platforms that won’t restrict them,” said Gainor. “That second option is massively expensive. Think billions of dollars to even try to compete. And even then, it’s risky, because Google is so powerful it could simply de-list the platform and 92% of all users wouldn’t know it existed.”

But without a fight, the impact could be significant when we head to the polls. Given that social media has metastasized into the central podium where many Americans get their news, its anti-gun tilt could have long-term and devastating ripple effects.

And many gun-rights supporters worry that without strong pushback, more platforms will be intimidated into getting in step with the anti-rights crowd.