



Facebook Refers Trump Account Suspension to Oversight Board

Sarah E. Needleman

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Facebook Inc. has referred its decision to indefinitely suspend the accounts of former President Donald Trump to its outside oversight board, as the company grapples with how to treat one of its highest-profile users after his exit from public office.

Earlier this month the social-media giant moved to disable Mr. Trump's Facebook and Instagram accounts for at least two weeks, after he encouraged protests of the election results and his supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol in a Jan. 6 attack that left five dead. Chief Executive Mark Zuckerberg said at the time that the risks of Mr. Trump's use of the platforms through Inauguration Day were too great.

"We believe our decision was necessary and right," said Nick Clegg, Facebook's communications and policy chief, in a blog post Thursday, one day after the swearing-in of President Joe Biden. "Given its significance, we think it is important for the board to review it and reach an independent judgment on whether it should be upheld."

Mr. Trump has condemned the violence but defended his conduct ahead of the riot, which followed a monthslong effort to advance baseless claims of a rigged election. He faces a second impeachment trial in the Senate on a charge of inciting insurrection. Bipartisan political leaders

including Sen. Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) have said publicly that Mr. Trump provoked the riot through his online and offline rhetoric.

A spokesperson for Mr. Trump didn't immediately comment.

Facebook said the former president's accounts would remain suspended while five members of the 20-person oversight board determine whether certain posts he made before the riot had violated the company's community standards and values.

They will also determine whether Facebook's removal of those posts respected international human-rights standards. The board—which has been likened to a Supreme Court for content decisions—is an independent group of academics, lawyers and human-rights advocates from around the world.

The five people hearing the case will be chosen at random and won't be identified publicly so they can focus on doing their job, said John Samples, an oversight board member and vice president of the Cato Institute, a public-policy think tank. Mr. Samples said that at least one of the five participants would be from North America because the matter pertains to a user there.

A majority of the board must sign off on the final decision, which is expected to be delivered within the next three months.

World leaders, members of Congress and Facebook's social-media peers will pay close attention to the board's verdict, said Avery Gardiner, general counsel at the nonprofit Center for Democracy & Technology.

“There's such an interest right now in figuring out how to handle content-moderation issues online,” she said. “The more we can have open dialogue about how social-media companies make these decisions, the better off we all are to decide where we want to consume news and other information.”

Social-media companies based in Silicon Valley have long fielded complaints that their content-moderation decisions have been not only uneven but targeted unfairly against

conservatives. That scrutiny increased around the November presidential election as platforms tried to curb the spread of misinformation.

Mr. Trump, whose Facebook account has more than 35 million followers and whose Instagram account has nearly 25 million, has frequently criticized social-media companies' power—typically through Twitter Inc.'s platform, where he had more than 88 million followers before the company permanently suspended him earlier this month.

Alphabet Inc.'s YouTube, Snap Inc.'s Snapchat and Amazon.com Inc.'s Twitch also placed limits on Mr. Trump's accounts, while online stores run by the Trump Organization and Trump campaign were taken offline by Shopify Inc., an e-commerce software provider. In addition, dozens of U.S. corporations halted all political giving and some said they would reconsider donating money from their political-action committees to Republican lawmakers who supported Mr. Trump's attempt to overturn the election results.

Facebook's oversight review of Mr. Trump's accounts mark the biggest issue the oversight board has addressed since it was established last year to help Facebook make the final call on difficult content decisions. Although Facebook created the board structure and funds salaries for board members, Mr. Zuckerberg can't overrule the panel's decisions, nor can anyone else at the company.

During the review, Mr. Trump will have the opportunity to submit a statement to the panel on why he believes Facebook's content-moderation decisions should be overturned, the company said. Members of the public will also be able to share their perspectives with the oversight panel as soon as next week.

Some prominent conservatives have responded to the social-media companies' moves by announcing plans to switch to platforms with less stringent content restrictions such as Parler, Gab and Wimkin. Parler has been working to return its social network online after several tech companies including Amazon.com Inc. dropped their support for the company, citing too-loose rules around content moderation.