Trump campaign’s false COVID-19 claims taken down by Facebook and Twitter

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For the first time, both Facebook and Twitter acted to remove content shared by the campaign to re-elect President Donald Trump from their platforms, citing policies against spreading false claims about COVID-19.

Both the @TeamTrump campaign Twitter account and the official Donald Trump Facebook account shared a video late yesterday in which Trump claimed children are immune from the novel coronavirus. The video was a clip from an interview in which the president spoke by phone with *Fox & Friends* hosts about schools reopening this fall. “My view is that schools should be open,” Trump said. “If you look at children, children are almost—and I would almost say definitely—but almost immune from this disease. So few, they’ve got stronger, hard to believe, I don’t know how you feel about it, but they have much stronger immune systems than we do somehow for this. They don’t have a problem. They just don’t have a problem. They are virtually immune from this problem.”

Children are in fact people and are just as susceptible as the rest of us to breathing in and sneezing out germs. (Possibly

more so, if you ask any parent of a toddler.) Kids do, on average, tend to have much less severe cases of COVID-19 than adults when they catch it, but repeated outbreaks in camps and schools since June have made it abundantly clear that children can both catch and transmit the virus.

Facebook, which has until now taken a hands-off stance with the Trump account when it spreads misinformation and false claims, was first to remove the post. “This video includes false claims that a group of people is immune from COVID-19 which is a violation of our policies around harmful COVID misinformation,” a company rep said in a statement.

Twitter followed suit shortly thereafter, hiding the post and temporarily suspending the Team Trump account until the account deleted the offending post. The post violated the Twitter rules against COVID-19 misinformation, a spokesperson said, adding, “The account owner will be required to remove the tweet before they can tweet again.” The account did indeed take down the post and addressed the matter this morning with a tweet that tagged in Twitter and Facebook and said only, “STOP THE BIAS!”

New call

Twitter has for several months shown an increasing willingness to take action when accounts affiliated with Trump break its rules. In late May, the platform appended a fact check notice to a tweet from Trump that claimed all mail-in voting is inherently fraudulent. (It is not.) Shortly after, another Trump tweet, which was also shared by the official White House account, had a rulebreaker warning tacked onto it when Twitter found it to be in violation of its policy against glorifying violence. And just last week, the site temporarily suspended the account of Donald Trump Jr. for posting false COVID-related claims.

For Facebook, meanwhile, this action is a first. The platform

has to date been infamously reticent to do anything when high-profile accounts post content that would otherwise be against its rules. Politicians are explicitly exempt from both hate speech rules and the fact-checking process, Facebook has repeatedly said, including in advertising.

In recent weeks, however, and amid widespread criticism, Facebook appears to be fractionally softening its stance. Against the background of the nationwide civil rights protests that followed George Floyd's death, company employees and civil rights groups loudly condemned Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg's position on Trump's calls to violence.

In mid-June, Facebook took down a Trump advertising campaign that contained imagery used by the Nazi Party after being contacted by several media outlets about the ads. The company's head of security policy was, in the very moment the ads were taken down, testifying to Congress about Facebook's moderation and content policies.

More than 1,000 organizations took part in a month-long Facebook advertising boycott in July. On June 29, just ahead of the boycott start, Zuckerberg said Facebook would change its policy to begin labeling the rule-breaking messages it leaves up under its public-interest exemption, much in the same way Twitter does.

Too wide a net

Twitter's attempt to contain bad information about COVID-19 unfortunately aimed too wide, also taking down several users' attempts to fact-check Trump's claims.

Multiple reporters and news outlets linked to the video in Tweets that editorialized and/or fact-checked the comment and had their accounts temporarily locked until they, too, deleted tweets including the video links.

The Recount, a news site, shared a screenshot of the warning it received from Twitter over its post, which quoted parts of Trump’s statement and added the dry editorial claim, “This is where we’re at.”

Reporter Bobby Lewis, who often live-tweets along with Trump’s Fox appearances, said he had his account locked several times in the past day for critically quoting Trump or sharing the video in which he made his false COVID-related claims.

Aaron Rupar, an editor with Vox, also posted a message that included excerpt’s from Trump’s interview, adding, “Holy shit… just stunningly irresponsible stuff.” Twitter temporarily suspended his account as well, according to a screenshot he posted. “My account was locked for quoting and fact-checking Trump, and I was forced to delete this tweet,” Rupar wrote. “Why am I getting punished for shining a light on the president’s falsehoods?”

“Accounts that tweeted the video may also be required to remove their tweets,” Twitter spokesperson Liz Kelley explained to Ars, “as it’s the video itself that violates our COVID-19 misinformation policy.”

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