Twitter, Facebook face blowback after stopping circulation of NY Post story

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Facebook and Twitter today are facing criticism from all sides after taking rare action to suppress an apparent attempt at blatant disinformation being spread three weeks before the election.

Both social media platforms are deprecating or outright blocking the sharing of a link to a story the New York Post published this morning about Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden. Although Twitter and Facebook have both acted in the past to deplatform fringe actors, today's action marks one of the extremely rare times either has taken action against a story from a relatively mainstream outlet.

The story

The story at the root of all the drama appears to be an attempt to duplicate the effect the Comey memo had on the 2016 presidential election by suggesting there's a scandal in the Biden camp. The New York Post claimed to have received copies of emails that were obtained from a laptop that Biden's son Hunter dropped off at a Delaware computer repair shop in 2019. These emails, which the Post called a "smoking gun," allegedly

indicate that Hunter Biden connected his father with Ukrainian energy firm Burisma in 2014.

During President Donald Trump's impeachment trial earlier this year (yes, that was 2020, it only *feels* like a decade ago), Republican members of the House and Senate tried to paint Biden and Burisma as the "real" scandal, although there was no actual evidence of corruption. "Burisma" has remained something of a byword among a certain conservative segment ever since, particularly as Biden's standing in the polls has continued to improve.

The thin sourcing of the Post story almost immediately led to questions about its veracity. Disinformation expert Thomas Rid, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, laid out several of the red flags in the story in a lengthy Twitter thread shortly after it was published. "To journalists considering writing about this toxic story: don't—unless you can independently verify more details," Rid advised. "And even if you can verify something, acknowledge the possibility of disinformation up-front, especially against the backdrop of 2016. Not doing so is bad practice."

Other outlets immediately began to dig into the story. Business Insider determined it to be "riddled with holes and red flags." New York Magazine also wrote out the implausibilities in the Post's account. And The Daily Beast managed to track down and interview the owner of the computer repair shop, who called Trump's impeachment a "sham" and alluded to the completely debunked conspiracy theory related to the 2016 murder of Seth Rich.

Biden campaign spokesman Andrew Bates denied the allegations in the Post's story, saying, "The New York Post never asked the Biden campaign about the critical elements of this story. They certainly never raised that Rudy Giuliani—whose discredited conspiracy theories and alliance with figures connected to Russian intelligence have been widely

reported—claimed to have such materials. Moreover, we have reviewed Joe Biden's official schedules from the time and no meeting, as alleged by the New York Post, ever took place."

Social media's move

Facebook took action on the New York Post story before Twitter did. A little after 11:00 this morning, a Facebook spokesman confirmed on Twitter that Facebook was deprecating the story. He said, "While I will intentionally not link to the New York Post, I want [to] be clear that this story is eligible to be fact checked by Facebook's third-party fact checking partners. In the meantime, we are reducing its distribution on our platform."

"Reducing distribution" isn't the same as banning. Instead, it deprecates how likely Facebook's algorithm is to amplify content. Several other outlets and pages, including right-wing sites such as Breitbart, continued to share the allegations and links to the story throughout the day.

Twitter's first approach was to deprecate the story so it wouldn't float to the top of algorithmically managed content. By mid-afternoon, however, Twitter had gone one step further and outright banned *all* links to the story from being posted, either in the regular timeline or in direct messages.

Twitter representatives pointed press to the company's hacked material policy, which prohibits sharing links to or images of hacked content. Twitter's guidelines for blocking URLs, which were updated this July, also include provisions for hacked material and content that "interferes with civic and election integrity."

Of course there’s blowback

Conservative politicians, who already endlessly claim—with no evidence—that social media platforms suppress right-wing speech were, naturally, incensed.

Sen. Josh Hawley (R-Mo.) said in a tweet that he plans to ask the Federal Election Commission “whether this coordinated intervention by Facebook [and] Twitter for the Biden campaign constitutes a violation of campaign finance or other election laws.” Hawley also sent letters to both Twitter and Facebook not only asking the sites to clarify their policies, but also demanding to know if anyone from the Biden campaign specifically asked for the story to be suppressed.

Neither were conservatives the only ones upset with Facebook’s and Twitter’s decision. Several observers, of every political stripe, argued that by banning the content, Facebook and Twitter instead ended up amplifying it in a textbook example of the Streisand effect. The New York Post certainly ran with the extra attention, publishing a follow-up story complaining about “censors” and the “suppression effort.”

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