

What Happens When Politicians Break the Rules on Social Media?

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14 hours ago
Key insights:

- Twitter's recent decision to restrict Trump's tweet has placed pressure on other social media companies.
- Facebook says if Trump's tweet violated its rules they would remove it—but it doesn't.

Twitter and Facebook executives have been at opposite ends of a crucial debate over the acceptability of President Donald Trump's posts.

Their interpretations of the same message call into question how other social media platforms will consider the president's posts moving forward and what it means for private users with accounts on those websites, particularly after Trump signed an executive order attempting to curb platforms' liability protections.

Consider Trump's message from last week, when he posted that "when the looting starts, the shooting starts," in response to the George Floyd protests in Minneapolis, Minn. Facebook left it up. But Twitter said it violated rules about "glorifying violence" and placed a "public interest notice" on it that required users to give it additional click to view.

Across platforms, these messages could be treated differently if posted by private users than if they're published by public officials.

So why are public officials treated differently? Which posts could be left up and what could warrant them being taken down?

Here's a guide to navigating social media companies' policies toward content like Trump's controversial posts, the challenges that presents and what the future could hold:

Twitter

Policy: Twitter has robust rules on its website about inciting and glorifying violence, neither of which are allowed for average users. However, the platform thinks it may be in the public interest for people to see some posts if government officials are the violators. But if a government official violates these rules, the site will consider leaving them up and add a public interest notation.

Twitter introduced these public interest notices in June 2019 as a way to flag tweets from public officials that violate site rules. "We may allow controversial content or behavior which may otherwise violate our rules to remain on our service because we believe there is a legitimate public interest in its availability," Twitter says on its website. "When this happens, we limit engagement with the tweet and add a notice to clarify that the tweet violates our rules, but we believe it should be left up to serve this purpose."

The notices place the offending tweet behind an interstitial, though users can still click to view it. It also restricts the ability to like, retweet or share that tweet and will not be "algorithmically recommended" by Twitter. "These actions are meant to limit the Tweet's reach while maintaining the public's ability to view and discuss it," Twitter policy says.

Similar action was taken in regards to Trump's tweet about the protests last week, removing the amount of engagement it received. It's not clear how long the post was up before a notice was added.

This week, another Republican who violated Twitter's rules didn't have his tweet removed, but received a public interest notice. Like Trump's tweet about shooting protesters, a tweet from Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-Fla.) was cited for glorifying violence. Gaetz wrote "Now that we clearly see Antifa as terrorists, can we hunt them down like we do those in the Middle East." and was hidden from view unless users clicked on it.

The rule has also been enforced outside of the U.S., when in April, Twitter applied a public interest notice on a tweet from Osmar Terra, the Brazilian minister of citizenship, for spreading misinformation related to the spread of Covid-19.

Twitter says it will also remove a tweet if public officials threaten or promote terrorism, violence against a group or individual, exploit children, encourage suicide or self-harm or share an individual's private information.

Challenge: By putting these notices on Trump's tweets, Twitter has opened Pandora's box. Now, every tweet from public officials, including the president, will be held up against this precedent. Even if public officials do not violate the most serious rules where the interstitial would apply—such as glorifying violence—they could see other modifications like the fact-check labels Twitter placed on Trump's tweets about mail-in ballots.

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