

House Committee on Oversight and Accountability

February 8, 2023 Hearing

Protecting Speech from Government Interference and Social Media

Bias, Part 1: Twitter's Role in Suppressing the Biden Laptop Story

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Good morning Chairman Comer, Ranking Member Raskin and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you.

There is an urgent need for us to understand the impact social media companies are having on our democracy.

I was not involved in the decision around Hunter Biden's laptop. I was involved in decisions made leading up to, during and after the January 6th attack on the Capitol. If we are going to talk about social media and the government, we need to talk about Twitter's failure to act before January 6th.

I am here to tell you that doing nothing is not an option. If we continue to do nothing, violence is going to happen again.

My background is as a trained lawyer and journalist. My expertise over the past decade has been in the areas of media, technology, law, and policy with a particular focus on social media and free expression.

I joined Twitter in 2019. By 2020, I was the most senior expert on Twitter's U.S. Safety Policy Team. My team's mission was to protect free speech and public safety by writing and enforcing content moderation policies around the world. These were around abuse, harassment, hate speech, violence, and privacy.

If no other algorithm or human could decide if a Tweet violated my team's policies, the safety policy team - my team - acted as the final moderators. If a high-profile individual - like a member of this committee or President Trump - tweeted something controversial, it was sent to my team's desk.

Every day we had to decide whether a particular piece of content equated to yelling "Fire!" in a crowded theater.

My work at Twitter, and subsequently at Twitch, put me in the middle of key events in history. I've learned social media played and continues to play a role in these major events. And two years after January 6th, we still need to better understand the role Twitter played in order to prevent it happening again.

So what do we need to understand?

First, Twitter leadership bent and broke their own rules in order to protect some of the most dangerous speech on the platform.

This is what happened in the months leading up to January 6th. For months, my team worked to minimize the threat of violence that we saw coming.

After President Trump instructed the Proud Boys to 'stand back and stand by' in a debate, we considered the danger that statement would have if he tweeted it.

We crafted a "Coded Incitement to Violence" policy to address dog whistles like this.

Instead of approving it, management bent over backwards to find reasons to not approve it.

On January 5th, with the policy still not approved, I led a meeting where one of my colleagues asked management whether someone was going to have to get shot before we would be allowed to take down tweets. Another colleague looked up live tweets and read them to management to try to convince them of the seriousness of the issue. Still no action was taken.

On the morning of January 6th, I sent Twitter's lawyers a message warning them that our team was hamstrung by leadership. Two days later, when it looked like it might happen again, I asked management whether they wanted more blood on their hands. Only then did they act.

Second, there is too much power concentrated in the hands of too few.

With January 6 and many other decisions, content moderators like me did the best we could, but far too often there were far too few of us, and we were being asked to do the impossible. For example, in January 2020, after the US assassinated an Iranian General and the US president decided to justify it on

Twitter, management literally instructed me to make sure that World War Three did not start on the platform.

No person, people, or company should have that kind of unchecked power – or responsibility. Content moderators show up every day and try to do their best in impossible situations. But the modern-day public conversation should not be susceptible to the whims of any one company or individual.

Fixing the systemic issues that lead to bad decisions is not going to be easy. But people like me who have been in the trenches can help lead the way.

But coming forward and offering transparency is difficult and risky. Doxxing and harassment are real and people are scared to tell what they know. We need to make sure there are protections for those who do speak the truth.

We need to create space to hear from people on the front lines. We need to give them protection so they can share their experiences. Only then can we begin to understand the full scope of the problem and find solutions.

There is too much at stake for us to do nothing.

Thank you.