

## ***Podcast Orange – The Memo #17***

Social media : can speech be regulated online?

— Joe :

As you may know, Donald Trump is very active on Twitter. He loves to fire off comments on current events. In late May, he took an interest in the Democratic primaries in Wisconsin. In the midst of the current health crisis, authorities had made mail-in voting easier. The US President disapproved of the measure, and in a tweet, claimed that absentee voting leads to massive fraud. Turns out his tweet was factually incorrect. Mail-in ballots have never been linked to an increase in fraud.

This is when something unprecedented happened: Twitter fact-checked the President of the United States. Next to his tweet, there is now a warning, and users are encouraged to “get the facts about mail-in ballots”. Twitter is basically saying: Donald Trump isn’t telling the truth.

Another blow, a few days later, in the midst of riots sparked by the death of George Floyd, a black man killed by police officers as he was being arrested. Donald Trump tweets: “when the looting starts, the shooting starts.”

Twitter flags this sentence for glorifying violence and hides the tweet from Trump’s followers. You can still find it online but it’s masked, with a message from Twitter warning that the text violates the platform’s rules. OneZero, on Medium, gives a behind-the-scenes account of the platform’s decision...a decision that unleashed Trump’s fury.

*[Jingle]*

— Joe :

Hello Chloe !

— Chloe :

Hi Joe !

— Joe :

Welcome to this new episode of the Memo. Today we’ll take a look at internet speech and the role of social media. Can we really regulate these new public spaces? Can social platforms and networks influence our democracies? In fact, that’s what Donald Trump claims: that social networks are censoring free speech when it comes to conservatives.

— Chloe :

Yes, tensions between the US president and Democrat-friendly Silicon Valley have been running high ever since he was elected. Republicans led by Trump have accused social networks of systematically targeting Conservative posts and videos...and outright censoring them. I read in the Washington Post that nearly half of all Americans believe that social networks are politically biased. As a result, the president has threatened Twitter with repealing Section 230, which states that platforms are not responsible for content published by their members.

— Joe :

We started by talking about Twitter, but what about the other platforms – how are they handling political content?

— Chloe :

Twitch and Reddit have also deleted Trump-related accounts because of their hateful content. This is according to the French daily *Le Monde*. Twitch, as you know, is a live video platform. Until recently, it wasn't used much for political debates, but in recent months, this has changed: Donald Trump has his own profile on there and broadcasts his own videos. What got him blocked was posting old footage from a 2015 meeting, in which he'd claimed that Mexicans crossing the border were rapists.

— Joe :

Content that the platform deemed to be 'hateful conduct'

— Chloe :

Yes ! And the disciplinary measures were serious: the platform, owned by Amazon, temporarily suspended the president's account! This is how Twitch justified the move: "Like anyone else, politicians on Twitch must adhere to our Terms of Service and Community Guidelines. We do not make exceptions for political or newsworthy content, and will take action on content reported to us that violates our rules." After issuing several warnings, the aggregator Reddit has also removed communities of Trump fans for the same reason... Youtube is tightening its policy on moderating hateful content...a decision that lead to 25,000 channels being taken down.

— Joe :

From what you're saying, I gather platforms are getting tougher on regulating speech online -- is this a general trend?

— Chloe :

More or less - at least for Big Tech.

The first battle these platforms took on was against fake news and political advertising. The Verge reports that Twitter, for instance, was particularly careful about tracking posts that linked COVID-19 to 5G. They applied the same treatment to this content as to Trump's tweet, by referring users to more reliable facts. According

to Le Monde, in June 2020, Facebook deleted hundreds of pages and accounts suspected of attempting to influence elections in Africa. These networks have clearly understood that they can't let content go completely unregulated online.

That said, on the political front, specific companies and their policies can diverge in pretty significant ways...you'll find the most telling difference between Twitter and its CEO, Jack Dorsey, on the one hand, and Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg's network, on the other. That's according to the Wall Street Journal.

— Joe :

What sets them apart ?

— Chloe :

For Twitter, it's simple: Jack Dorsey has chosen to ban all political campaigning from his platform. Only ads for a specific cause are allowed. Facebook and Google still allow political advertising, but they watch out for two things: false allegations, so fake news, essentially, and the hyper-targeting of these ads... You'll recall Cambridge Analytica, which allegedly influenced the Brexit referendum, then the presidential campaign in the US.

The Washington Post ran an interesting article that shows how differently these platforms and aggregators will treat the same content. Some political advertisements that spread misinformation are accepted on Facebook. Senator Elisabeth Warren, an unsuccessful candidate in the Democratic primary, even tested this with an intentionally false political ad.

— Joe :

So there's real discrepancy between platforms.

— Chloe :

Right, especially Facebook and Twitter. At the heart of the debate is freedom of expression. While Twitter is spearheading regulation, with often dramatic results, like Trump's tweets, over at Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg has repeatedly called for neutrality. In 2019, at Georgetown University, he insisted that social media shouldn't be arbiters of truth. According to him, users should be free to express themselves however they want. You can find much of his speech in the New York Times. And this year too, after Trump's infamous tweets, he repeated on Fox News: "Private companies probably shouldn't be...in the position of doing that," he said. According to him, this is not his platform's role. Besides, posts from public figures containing false allegations are interesting in and of themselves.

— Joe :

And so they're able to stay politically « neutral » ?

— Chloe :

Well, neutrality isn't all that easy. That's what Kevin Roose explains on an episode of *The Daily*. Roose hosts a podcast series called Rabbit Hole on our lives online, and one of the things he talks about is Black Lives Matter: though it's a movement that the majority of Americans support, on Facebook, you're likely to see more content opposing it.

— Joe :

And how do you explain that?

— Chloe :

For Kevin Roose, it's precisely because Facebook didn't want to alienate even the most outrageous conservatives that it has turned into a particularly welcome space for the far right. That's why Facebook is now their favorite platform. Over the years, posts defending Black Lives Matter have become less and less influential, garnering fewer likes and comments and shares.

— Joe :

The line between censoring outrageous content and protecting freedom of expression isn't always clear, it seems. In fact, that's what France's constitutional court was grappling with when ruling on a recent hate speech bill.

— Chloe :

Yes, the Avia law : according to this bill, social media platforms have to take down content flagged as hateful within 24 hours...without the involvement of a judge. France's constitutional authority deemed this to be a threat to freedom of expression and struck it down.

— Joe :

Building a legal arsenal that reconciles freedom with the censorship of offensive speech is no easy task. But governments are not the only actors trying to get Facebook to change its policies: brands have also joined forces with the Stop Hate for Profit campaign. Adidas, Coca-Cola, Ford, Verizon... have all pledged to cut their advertising budget on Facebook if the network does nothing to stop online hate. Given the amount of money these brands spend on advertising, that's billions of dollars in potential losses for the tech giant... \$42 million from Unilever, for instance or \$36.5 million from Hershey's, the chocolate brand. You can check out these astronomical figures in *The New York Times*, we'll be keeping a close eye on what comes of it.

Thank you all for listening to us. Feel free to follow us on your favorite podcasting platform and share this episode if you liked it. We'll be back soon with the next issue of the Memo!

Resources :

One Zero (Medium) [Inside Twitter's Decision to Fact-Check Trump's Tweet](#)

The Washington Post – [Trump's growing feud with Twitter fuels free-speech concerns](#)

Le Monde - [Reddit, Twitch et YouTube s'attaquent aux comptes qui promeuvent haine et racisme](#)

The Verge - [Twitter starts aggressively fact-checking tweets linking 5G to COVID-19](#)

Le Monde – [Fake news : Facebook ferme des centaines de pages visant à peser sur des élections en Afrique](#)

The Washington Post - [Facebook, Twitter and Google Write Their Own Rules for Political Ads—and What You See](#)

The New York Times - [Defiant Zuckerberg Says Facebook Won't Police Political Speech](#)

Fox News - [Zuckerberg knocks Twitter for fact-checking Trump, says private companies shouldn't be 'the arbiter of truth'](#)

The Daily – [How Facebook is undermining 'Black lives matter' ?](#)

Le Monde - [La loi Avia contre la haine en ligne largement retoquée par le Conseil constitutionnel](#)

The New York Times - [CVS, Dunkin', Lego: The Brands Pulling Ads From Facebook Over Hate Speech](#)