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Let him back on Twitter

Donald Trump's ban from Twitter is wrong. A few tech corporations should not get to decide who can express their opinions

Read this article in German.

His favourite toy has been taken away. Two days after his supporters violently stormed and looted the American Capitol building, the microblogging service Twitter finally banned Donald Trump, the most powerful person on earth. For good. Facebook had already blocked his account indefinitely the day before. Commentators, journalists and politicians worldwide have praised the decision, with Sacha Baron Cohen tweeting: 'This is the most important moment in the history of social media.'

Since Friday, 8 January, Trump's nearly 89 million Twitter followers are informed that *@realDonaldTrump* has been permanently suspended because of the 'risk of further incitement to violence'. Two Trump tweets that day are cited:

In the first, Trump addressed 'the 75,000,000 great American Patriots' who had voted for him and promised that they would have a 'GIANT VOICE long into the future: They will not be disrespected or treated unfairly in any way, shape or form!!!' Soon after, he tweeted: 'To all of those who have asked, I will not be going to the Inauguration on January 20th.'

A vague Twitter policy

According to Twitter, the two short messages violated its policy on 'glorifying violence'. The very vague explanation suggests interpretations for Trump's tweets, including that his absence from the ceremony could be taken as encouragement to commit violent acts. 'Our determination is that the two Tweets above are likely to inspire others to replicate the violent acts that took place on January 6, 2021.'

Sorry, what? After almost 56,000 tweets – thousands of lies and nasty insults, conspiracy theories and false statements about stolen votes and supposed electoral fraud, as well as appeals to vote twice and thereby commit a criminal offence – these two innocuous statements were enough to end Trump's social media presence?

While it's true that the outgoing president traditionally attends their successor's inauguration, Trump staying away (which, by the way, is fine with Joe Biden) should not be viewed as a serious transgression in any way. It sounds like flimsy grounds for the tech firm's momentous decision.

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The tech giants also took aim at Parler, which Trumpsters used – instead of Twitter –to communicate before and after attacking the Capitol. Parler was number 1 in the Google and Apple app stores yet was removed at the weekend. In addition, Amazon Web Services no longer hosts Parler, so the controversial self-proclaimed 'Free Speech Social Network' can no longer be accessed.

A dangerous precedent

The tech giants' move is tricky. First of all, it illustrates the unprecedented power that some Silicon Valley CEOs have amassed. With just the click of a mouse, they deprived the planet's mightiest man of his mouthpiece. As private companies, they have terms of use that allow them to freely decide who gets access and who doesn't. While this is legal (at least in the US), suspending Trump shows tech giants' monopoly that prevents someone switching to other providers without losing a great many digital contacts. It also illustrates how easily Silicon Valley kingpins can get rid of their sole emerging competitor – Parler.

Furthermore, Twitter & Co. have created a dangerous precedent by banning Trump. In the past, Palestinian activists often suffered from bans on social media. Now dissidents worldwide have to be concerned about access. If this move, which liberals broadly approve, is unconditionally accepted, Zuckerberg and his like will feel their fantasy of techno-omnipotence has been confirmed and will quickly adapt to changing politics.

With less than two weeks to go as US President, Donald Trump was a sitting target. Big tech made billions from Trump's outpourings for years – only to put a stop to them days before he's got to hand over the White

House. Hypocrites are suddenly brave.

Progressives could be next

Furthermore, the notion that tech companies have content guidelines that they consistently and uniformly enforce beggars belief: Ayatollah Khamenei, for one, is still allowed to tweet calls for the violent destruction of the 'Zionist Regime'. Enforcement appears to respond to political pressure. But social media have become the digital agora for exchanging opinions and it is *not* okay for just a few companies to be the bouncers.

Yet progressive forces must not allow Twitter's action to distract them from a key issue: *What role do tech companies play in our societies and how can they be forced to act for the common good?* Psychology professor Geoffrey Miller writes: 'Twitter is a de facto public utility, and it should act as non-partisan as an electric company.' The argument that tech giants, as private enterprises, should be free to choose their business practices is especially hard for leftists to accept. After all, progressives and unions have been fighting for years against unworthy working conditions in the almost unregulated gig economy.

Should all opinions be allowed free expression? Of course not. However, numerous rules and laws already exist.

Antipathy to Trump should not obscure the fundamental problem. Of course, his behaviour has been extremely irresponsible. But big tech must not be free to decide which opinions are acceptable and which are not. This is not about the *person* but rather, the *principle*. While many observers believe that silencing Trump is justified, this is not how to do it. If this practice prevails, the next time the other side may benefit – or lose. Who can guarantee that Silicon Valley CEOs won't soon have a righteous Democrat in their cross hairs?

Trump's martyrdom

Should all opinions be allowed free expression? Of course not. However, numerous rules and laws already exist. In most countries, threats, defamation and incitement to violence, among other things, are illegal; in Germany, Holocaust denial is a criminal offence. Tech companies are overshooting the mark by allowing themselves to silence disagreeable political opinions and eliminate annoying competitors in the name of justice. Free speech is often the only way to defend truth and values,

discourse and democracy.

Trump is a powerful individual. Usually, though, it's the powerless who are silenced. In recent days, many social media accounts have been suspended: Twitter didn't just block right-wing channels, but also the more left-wing podcast Red Scare and the People's City Council of Los Angeles, a local advocacy group and watchdog.

Finally, there's the question of the measure's efficacy. 'If you hang a despot, they become a martyr,' says Tom Walker as the fictional journalist Jonathan Pie. After the Capitol attack, Trump was universally condemned and had his back against the wall. But now big tech could cause Trump and his supporters to gain momentum: 'This is a win for Trump.'

Indeed, Silicon Valley is presenting him the perfect parting gift: victimhood. The CEOs from Big Tech are *once again* enabling Trump, who has systematically deluded his fans into believing he's the only one fighting the elites. This time, they're making it easy for Trump to assume the role of the opposition – out of office.



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