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THE SHIFT

In Pulling Trump's Megaphone, Twitter Shows Where Power Now Lies

The ability of a handful of people to control our public discourse has never been more obvious.

By Kevin Roose

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In the end, two billionaires from California did what legions of politicians, prosecutors and power brokers had tried and failed to do for years:

They pulled the plug on President Trump.

Twitter's decision to permanently suspend Mr. Trump's account on Friday "due to the risk of further incitement of violence," after a decision a day earlier by Facebook to ban the president at least through the end of his term, was a watershed moment in the history of social media. Both companies had spent years defending Mr. Trump's continued presence on their platforms, only to change course days before the end of his presidency.

Why these companies' chief executives — Jack Dorsey of Twitter and Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook — decided to act now is no mystery. They have been under pressure for years to hold Mr. Trump accountable, and that pressure intensified enormously this past week, as everyone from Michelle Obama to the companies' own employees called for a permanent ban in the wake of Wednesday's deadly Capitol riot.

These companies, corporate autocracies masquerading as mini-democracies, often portray their moderation decisions as the results of a kind of formulaic due process, as if "don't incite an insurrectionist mob" had been in the community guidelines all along. But high-stakes calls like these typically come down to gut decisions made under extreme duress. In this case, Mr. Dorsey and Mr. Zuckerberg considered the evidence, consulted

their teams, weighed the trade-offs and risks of inaction — including the threat of a worker revolt that could damage their ability to attract top talent — and decided that they'd seen enough.

Journalists and historians will spend years unpacking the improvisational nature of these bans, and scrutinizing why they arrived just as Mr. Trump was losing his power, and Democrats were poised to take control of Congress and the White House. The bans have also turned up the heat on a free-speech debate that has been simmering for years.

Losing his huge online following would deprive Mr. Trump of cultural influence. It takes away the privilege he seems to covet most: the ability to commandeer the world's attention with a push of a button. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

On Friday night, pro-Trump Republicans raged, claiming Twitter's move was an example of Silicon Valley's tyrannical speech controls. And while many liberals cheered Twitter's decision as an overdue and appropriate step to prevent more violence, some also cringed at the thought of so much control resting in so few hands.

"We understand the desire to permanently suspend him now," Kate Ruane, a lawyer for the American Civil Liberties Union, wrote in a statement on Friday. "But it should concern everyone when companies like Facebook and Twitter wield the unchecked power to remove people from platforms that have become indispensable for the speech of billions — especially when political realities make those decisions easier."

Above all, Mr. Trump's muzzling provides a clarifying lesson in where power resides in our digital society — not just in the precedent of law or the checks and balances of government, but in the ability to deny access to the platforms that shape our public discourse.

Mr. Dorsey and Mr. Zuckerberg's names have never appeared on a ballot. But they have a kind of authority that no elected official on earth can claim. This power appears mostly in subtle and unspoken ways — like the eerily calm, hostage-like video Mr. Trump filmed on Thursday, hours after Twitter and Facebook threatened to delete his accounts. In the video, Mr. Trump conceded that he had lost the election and condemned the Capitol attack, two things he had stubbornly refused to do even as Congress talked of impeaching him a second time and his own Cabinet members discussed invoking the 25th Amendment to remove him from office.

Legal and political concerns certainly pressured the president to adopt a more conciliatory stance. But there was another interpretation of his change of heart: Mr. Trump would rather lose his presidency than his posting privileges.

In some ways, Mr. Trump — who used to boast that the platforms "would never" ban him — would be correct to make his social media accounts a priority over his remaining days in office. A successful impeachment would be an embarrassing end to Mr. Trump's political career. But losing his huge online following — 88 million followers on Twitter, and 35 million on Facebook — would deprive him of cultural influence long into the future. It takes away the privilege he seems to covet most: the ability to commandeer the world's attention with a push of a button.

Mr. Trump is no ordinary inmate in Twitter jail. Unlike other de-platformed partisans, he has a huge right-wing media apparatus that will follow him wherever he goes, and legions of followers who will amplify what he says no matter where he says it. On Friday, his followers pledged to decamp to so-called "alt-platforms" like Gab and Parler, which have less stringent rules. But these apps are tiny by comparison and, because they are largely unmoderated, often amount to last-resort echo chambers for noxious extremists.

If none of the alt-platforms suffices, Mr. Trump may well start his own social network, one where he can post with abandon. And if all else fails, he can always call into Fox News.

But rebuilding a huge audience on a new platform is no simple thing, even for a former president, and these alt-platforms face their own legal and technical battles. Parler itself suffered a major blow on Saturday when Apple joined Google in blocking it from their app stores, citing the app's lax moderation policies.

No matter where he ends up posting, it's doubtful that Mr. Trump will ever have what he had in Facebook and Twitter — a frictionless soapbox, where he could joust with his enemies as well as bask in the adoration of his fans, and a direct line to every newsroom in the country.

In some ways, Mr. Trump's social media dominance was an accident of history. In 2009, when he first joined Twitter, Mr. Trump was a reality TV star looking for attention, and Twitter was a fledgling social network that needed high-profile celebrities to attract growth.

It was a perfect match, and Mr. Trump soon began honing the freewheeling, stream-of-consciousness style that would become his signature. For years, he used the platform to weigh in on everything from wind turbines (ugly) to President Barack Obama's birth certificate (fake) to Jon Stewart's comedy (overrated). Mr. Trump's filter-free musings turned out to be engagement gold for Twitter, which recommended his tweets to millions of new users through its algorithms.

Social media became an even more powerful asset for Mr. Trump when he turned to politics. And after he got elected president, thanks in large part to his dominance on Twitter and Facebook, he used his accounts in ways no world leader ever had: to announce major policies, bully foreign governments, whip up votes in Congress, hire and fire senior officials, and interact with a motley crew of racists and cranks.

In time, we learned that the version of President Trump we saw on our feeds was, in many ways, more real than the flesh-and-blood human who occupied the Oval Office. People who wanted to know what Mr. Trump actually thought about kneeling N.F.L. players or Speaker Nancy Pelosi didn't watch him read a prepared speech or hold a news conference. They looked to @realDonaldTrump, the most honest representation of who he was.

The most predictable result of Mr. Trump's dismissal from Twitter — and, most likely, a similar ban he'll face from Facebook after Inauguration Day — is that it will become a rallying cry for conservatives who see themselves as victims of Silicon Valley censorship.

"We are living Orwell's 1984," the president's son, Donald Trump Jr., fumed on his (still operational, 6.5 million-follower) Twitter account. "Free-speech no longer exists in America. It died with big tech."

No serious thinker believes that Twitter and Facebook, as private companies, are obligated to give any user a platform, just as no one doubts that a restaurant owner can boot an unruly diner for causing a scene. But there are legitimate questions about whether a small handful of unelected tech executives, accountable only to their boards and shareholders (and, in Mr. Zuckerberg's case, to neither) should wield such enormous power. These actions also raise longer-term questions, such as whether the business models of social media companies are fundamentally compatible with a healthy democracy, or whether a generation of Twitter-addicted politicians can ever be untaught the lesson that racking up retweets is a surer path to power than governing responsibly.

Mr. Trump's ban will have tangible effects on the spread of disinformation about the 2020 election, much of which originated on his accounts. It will also probably accelerate the splintering of the American internet along partisan lines, a process that was already

underway, and intensify calls on the right for the repeal of Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which shields social media companies from legal liability for their users' posts.

In the short term, people worried about a slippery slope of censorship on Twitter and Facebook can take some comfort in the fact that Mr. Dorsey and Mr. Zuckerberg appear to hate playing the role of speech police, and avoid doing it whenever possible. For them, Mr. Trump's case is unlike any other — a celebrity who rode their platforms to the presidency, then used them to stage an attack on American democracy itself — and their decisions to ban him aren't likely to set much of a precedent.

But that will be cold comfort to Mr. Trump, who now finds himself on the wrong side of the bright line these companies have drawn.

The president railed against Twitter's ban on Friday night, releasing a fiery statement through the White House press office that claimed, "We will not be SILENCED!"

But in the ways that matter most to him, he already had been.