

Media, social media: Trump, Big Tech, and Free Speech

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Dave Kellaway looks at the implications of Big Tech banning Trump and his supporters.

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The decision of Big Tech (Amazon, Facebook, Google, and Twitter) to block Trump from its platforms probably got more attention among the public than all the intricacies of the impeachment proceedings.

Social media, particularly Twitter, was an important tool for Trump in building his base. He was the Apprentice TV personality who had no membership of the Republican Party. Big Tech was quite ready to host all his rants against Muslims, migrants, minorities, and political opponents. Only in the very last period did it start to flag up his continual lying. It took his denial of an obviously lost election and the cheering on of a direct attack on the Capitol by fascist thugs for Big Tech to move.

As described in a recent article on this site, hundreds of workers at Twitter, Google, and YouTube signed letters and demanded action be taken against Trump. This represented a big change from the isolated protests in these companies at previous Trump tweets. It is a sign of the radicalisation we have seen with the Black Lives Matter movements that have mobilised up to 25 million people in demonstrations.

However, Big Tech did not need a weatherman to see which way the wind was blowing and moved quickly in line with the shifts of big business and the 'mainstream' Republicans to dump Trump. As an editorial in the New Statesman this week puts it:

"Twitter's intervention was praised by some commentators but the timing was convenient: Mr Trump had only 11 days left in office when he was suspended. The social media site, which profited for years from the president's incendiary tweets, thus minimised the risk of retaliatory action."

Legislators in the US are looking at greater regulation of Big Tech. Although it was already supportive of Biden with campaign contributions, it would not hurt at this stage to keep well in with the new regime in Washington. Tens of millions of Trump followers did represent a great deal of advertising revenue but capitalist companies at times have to look beyond potential short-term losses. Consequently, Big Tech would probably have blocked Trump even without any mobilisation from employees.

The politics of Big Tech

Unlike newspapers, internet companies say that they are not content providers and are neutral over what is said on their platforms. They may claim to have no political voice but nevertheless, they share the bipartisan ideology of free markets and defence of bourgeois-democratic institutions.

Of course, this is contradictory, since the same companies are quite happy to do business with repressive regimes from Saudi Arabia to China. Domestically, at least, they tend to support the idea that parliamentary government should be conducted without violence, so a threat to an orderly presidential transition crosses a line. At the same time, they will tolerate hate speech and are relaxed about the everyday violence of the capitalist state as racist cops kill black people or border security imprisons children.

Historically, the print media and state or private TV have controlled the production and communication of news and the expression of opinion. In Britain, the labour movement in the past has managed to have either party papers such as the Morning Star or privately owned newspapers which were sympathetic to at least a moderate social-democratic ideology such as the News Chronicle or today's Daily Mirror. There has been some limited regulation of the media, but given the 'freedom' of the capitalist market, certain 'entrepreneurs', like Rupert Murdoch, have been able to build huge international print and TV empires.

There is, therefore, a huge media imbalance, with outlets that support even moderate left-wing politics heavily outnumbered by those that back the Tories and hard-right policies. Worse still, this imbalance directly influences the TV media, since all news programmes tend to have a slot that starts with an analysis of the daily newspapers. Aaron Bastani has made an excellent YouTube video showing how this works against the interests of working people and free speech.

The Labour Party and the left have campaigned for more regulation and the limiting of media empires but without much success. Hardly surprising if you remember how Tony Blair's election was partly down to a strategic alliance with Murdoch.

More democratic control and accountability of public broadcasters like the BBC are minimum demands. Today, despite the way the BBC collaborated in the media's demolition of Jeremy Corbyn, it is important to defend the principle of publicly owned broadcasting and the license fee, which the new Tory-supporting chairman threatens to ditch. More advanced demands should be free or low-cost access to media platforms and state-run distribution of print media. The French system allowed the revolutionary daily newspaper, Rouge, to keep going for a number of years. State aid to non-profit newspapers can also be useful; it has allowed Il Manifesto, a daily left newspaper in Italy, to survive.

One way to challenge right-wing control of the media is for the labour movement to develop its own. However, in Britain and internationally the quality and number of either party newspapers or pro-mainstream left media outlets has declined markedly. For example, the Communist Party paper founded by Antonio Gramsci, Unità, no longer comes out in Italy, and the Independent, a non-Tory UK paper has been downsized.

An obvious resource from which a pro-labour movement newspaper or media could emerge would be the trade unions, but there has been little enthusiasm for it. The support of some left union leaders for the Morning Star, with its pro-Brexit line and uncritical support for ex-Stalinist regimes, hardly provides a credible alternative. Starmer's enthusiastic embrace of a regular column in the pro-Tory Telegraph suggests a Labour campaign against bias in the mainstream media is not going to start anytime soon.

Digitalised news

Today the debate has shifted as the print media have declined in importance and digital platforms are more important. Ever fewer younger people read print media. Even though the liberal centre in the USA led by Biden's Democratic Party has cheered on Big Tech's decision to dump Trump, they seem totally unconcerned about the undemocratic political process underpinning it.

Why should Jeff Bezos or Mark Zuckerberg be able to decide if Trump or his supporters can use their platforms? What is to stop these same billionaires deciding a progressive or revolutionary group cannot use its platforms in the future if they decide that they are a threat to US society? There is hardly any regulation of these platforms.

Glen Greenwald was an active supporter of whistleblower Edmund Snowden. He has written an interesting if provocative article [\[1\]](#) showing how Big Tech has recently crushed a new competitor, Parler, by refusing its app access to the Google, Apple, or iOS stores.

Parler became the biggest selling app on Apple store once Big Tech began to close down its platforms to Trump supporters. Whatever we may think of the politics of the Parler owner, decisions on this are taken by a few private corporations outside of any regulatory or public debate. Greenwald cites a civil liberties lawyer:

"One of that organization's [ACLU: the American Civil Liberties Union] most stalwart defenders of civil liberties, lawyer Ben Wizner, told The New York Times that the destruction of Parler was more 'troubling' than the deletion of posts or whole accounts: 'I think we should recognize the importance of neutrality when we're talking about the infrastructure of the internet.'"

According to Greenwald, unlike the Big Tech companies, Parler does not monetise or keep data that can be used commercially from its users. We may disagree with the way Greenwald sometimes appears to put an equals sign between the liberal centre and the Trump people, he is right to raise the issue of who controls Big Tech.

Here the discussion overlaps with the complexities of the free speech/no platform debate. Some people on the Left and even liberals see no problem in the state or Big Tech just deciding to ban all Trump or hard-right people from the platforms.

Think back to the debate around the BNP leader, Nick Griffin, appearing on Question Time. Some leftists thought he should have been no-platformed, but in the event, there were both mass mobilisations and his own (self) demolition on the programme.

No platform and bans should apply strictly to situations where there is a call for direct violence or physical intimidation. So calls for attacks on black people or fascists marching through an ethnic-minority area are legitimate cases for no platform and practical defence - like Cable Street in 1936 and Lewisham in 1977. Trying to ban people like Farage, Le Pen, or Salvini because they argue in a racist way against immigration is counter-productive. Indeed, nearly all serious left organisations here and in Europe do not actually argue for no platform in those cases. At the same time, banning all Trump supporters from platforms just drives them underground and into potentially more extreme positions.

In effect, social media have become like telephone lines, public roads, or railways. It is an infrastructure that should be public property. The internet itself was a product of public investment and research and not some brainchild of an enlightened capitalist entrepreneur. Although it was introduced rather clumsily in the 2019 general election, the Labour Party demand for free

broadband was a partial acknowledgement of this reality. It has since been proved highly relevant given the current class inequality for school students faced with remote learning during the pandemic.

Labour should be demanding a publicly run platform with easy access to all. A positive by-product of this would a huge reduction in what is effectively non-productive and anti-ecological advertising. Whether you do this through the state setting up its own platform – a bit like a BBC internet platform/provider – or through taking over one or more of the Big Tech companies or through some internationally policed regulations is a question for further debate.

Dave Kellaway

P.S.

- Anticapitalist Resistance. 15 January 2021:
<https://www.anticapitalistresistance.org/post/trump-big-tech-and-free-speech>
 - Dave Kellaway is a supporter of Anti*Capitalist Resistance, Socialist Resistance, and Hackney and Stoke Newington Labour Party, contributor to International Viewpoint and Europe Solidaire Sans Frontieres.
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Footnotes

[1] <https://greenwald.substack.com/p/how-silicon-valley-in-a-show-of-monopolistic>