

Sloppy Methodology: Social Media, Censorship and New York Post's Hunter Biden Story

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It was highly probable. Given the howls of concern that social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook nurse and nurture a bias (every choice on content entails one), a gift was made to critics to show just that. Last Wednesday, Twitter prevented users from posting links to a New York Post story. The story, claimed Twitter, was “potentially unsafe,” replete with “hacked materials”. Those attempting to post links to the article [faced a terse message](#). “We can’t complete this request because this link has been identified by Twitter or our partners as being potentially harmful.” Facebook followed suit by restricting the story’s spread, placing it in the hands of third-party fact checkers.

The [article in question](#) featured Hunter Biden, making mention of an alleged email from April 2015 suggesting that he had introduced his father, Democratic presidential contender and former Vice President Joe Biden, to Vadym Pozharskyi, an executive of Burisma Holdings, a Ukrainian energy firm. “Dear Hunter,” goes this email supposedly obtained by the *Post*, “thank you for inviting me to DC and giving an opportunity to meet your father and spent[sic] some time together. It’s realty[sic] an honor and pleasure.”

The email correspondence [had been purportedly obtained](#) from a laptop belonging to Hunter Biden, though the owner of the computer repair store who passed on the material to the FBI and one Rudy Giuliani was unsure if Hunter had left the computer with him. Thin stuff to go on.

Father Biden repeatedly claims to have never discussed his son’s “overseas business dealings” with him. The Biden election campaign [has also denied](#) that the meeting ever took place. “We have reviewed Joe Biden’s official schedules from the time and no meeting, as alleged by the *New York Post*, ever took place.”

At another time, the move by the platform might have caused a shrug of indifference. But Biden is leading in the polls. Every anti-Trump agitator is concerned to ease the pathway for the president’s defeat. Every advocate for Trump is keen to ensure that flames are lit under his opponent.

Republicans saw horror and golden opportunities, using a narrative long deployed by the Democrats against the Trump administration and the GOP: that social media platforms had become the unwitting, or even witting accomplices to electoral interference and misinformation glee. “This is a power grab from big tech billionaires drunk on their own power,” [fumed](#) Texas Senator Ted Cruz in a Saturday press call. “This is a direct act of electoral interference,” [asserted](#) GOP House Whip Steve Scalise (R-LA). “We ask: did

anyone at Twitter communicate with the Biden campaign? Did the Joe Biden campaign have any communications with Twitter, Facebook?"

Kayleigh McEnany, the White House press secretary, could also lay some claim to being victimised – in a fashion. Her personal Twitter account was locked after she posted the article late on Wednesday. On Thursday, Twitter momentarily blocked a link to a House Judiciary Committee webpage.

It was all too much for the Republican National Committee, which [filed](#) a Federal Election Complaint against Twitter on Friday arguing that censoring *Post's* article constituted an "illegal corporate in-kind political contribution" to Biden's campaign. Twitter, the complaint argued, had "engaged in arguably the most brazen and unprecedented act of media suppression in this country's history, and it is doing so for the clear purpose of supporting the Biden campaign."

For his part, President Donald Trump [released](#) a few volleys of rage. "So terrible that Facebook and Twitter took down the story of 'Smoking Gun' emails related to Sleepy Joe Biden and his son Hunter, in the @NYPost."

With what can only be seen as another twist of Cleo's irony, Trump again suggested the repeal of section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, the very same provision his detractors also argue should be confined to legislative oblivion. The section grants legal immunity to internet platforms for enabling users to post content. It also provides a "Good Samaritan" clause enabling platforms to remove or block material deemed offensive.

Earlier this month, the Trump administration [issued a scrappy, clumsy proposal](#) to reform section 230 that would penalise companies for removing material while sparing others. The proposal attempts to challenge company immunity for hosting material provided by a third party. Platforms, or "interactive computer services" would only be able to claim immunity from suit if they removed or restricted access or availability to such content falling within a range of objectionable categories. These include material "promoting self-harm," and "promoting terrorism or violent extremism" though definitions are left begging. As to how one is to arrive at such a standard, it is that of an objective, reasonable belief.

Biden [is of like mind](#) – at least in terms of his loathing for section 230. The stance there, as it has been for the entire anti-Trump coterie, is holding social media companies to account for knowingly disseminating misinformation and falsehoods. (The knowing element tends to be the problem.) In his January [interview](#) with *The New York Times*, Biden argued for its immediate revocation. "For [Mark] Zuckerberg and other platforms." A company such as Facebook was not "merely an internet company. It is propagating falsehoods we know to be false." There was "no editorial impact at all." It was "totally irresponsible."

The decision by Twitter and Facebook regarding the *New York Post* article recklessly adds fuel to GOP claims. While it was being [celebrated](#) by Kevin Roose in *The New York Times* as an indication that Facebook and Twitter were "finally starting to clean up their messes," there was little by way of elucidation. Cristina Tardáguila of the International Fact-Checking Network [had a few questions](#) for Facebook. What was their methodology in such cases? "How do they identify what needs to be less distributed?" Could such decisions ever eschew partisanship?

Twitter's decisions had not been well-argued or well-reasoned. The *Post* episode moved

chief executive Jack Dorsey [to an admission](#). “Our communication around our actions on the @nypost article was not great. And blocking URL sharing via tweet or DM [direct message] with zero context as to why we’re blocking: unacceptable.”

The storm duly caused a change of heart. The high priests of social media went about their business of tinkering and readjusting content policies. “Straight blocking of URLs was wrong,” Dorsey [reiterated](#), “and we updated our policy and enforcement to fix. Our goal is to attempt to add context, and now we have capabilities to do that.”

Vijaya Gadde, speaking for the Twitter collective as the company’s global lead for legal, policy, and trust and safety, [claimed](#) “that labelling Tweets and empowering people to assess content for themselves better serves the public interest and public conversation. The Hacked Material Policy is being updated to reflect these new enforcement rules.”

According to Gadde, Twitter [would no longer](#) remove hacked content except the sort “directly shared by hackers or those acting in concert with them”. Not exactly a rousing change. Tweets would also be labelled “to provide context instead of blocking links from being shared on Twitter.” Contextualised editorialising – of a sort.

The implications for such a decision are not small fare. Twitter’s decision to limit dissemination of the article for having content supposedly hacked was a scolding gesture to the way material is obtained. In the miasmic terror of foreign interference, bias and how electoral contests might tip in favour of or against the ogre in the White House, perspectives on what can be discussed and spread have been skewed. What of purloined material that exposes state or corporate misdemeanour, the bread and butter enterprise of such groups as Anonymous? With this rationale, as Glenn Greenwald [noted](#) with characteristic seriousness, reporting on everything from the Pentagon Papers to the Panama Papers would find itself restricted, if not blocked altogether. A real boon for the censors.

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