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POLITICS

# Newly released emails show coordination between social media companies and Biden administration on COVID information

Social media giants deferred to the Biden administration over whether to censor dissenting COVID-19 opinions online

By Joshua Lee | Sept 7, 2022, 11:35am EDT





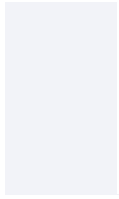
The Twitter application is seen on a digital device, April 25, 2022, in San Diego. Biden administration officials appear to have pressured Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms to censor content the federal government considered misinformation, according to federal government emails obtained by two Republican state attorneys general. | Gregory Bull, Associated Press

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Top-ranking Biden administration officials appear to have pressured Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms to censor content the federal government considered misinformation, according to federal government emails obtained by two Republican state attorneys general.

The emails, procured in a federal lawsuit filed by Missouri Attorney General Eric Schmitt and Louisiana Attorney General Jeff Landry, detail months of apparent coordination between federal administration officials and social media giants on how to address information regarding COVID-19.

“The discovery provided so far demonstrates that this censorship enterprise is extremely broad,” Schmitt and Landry said in a joint statement. The lawsuit’s discovery identified 45 federal officials who communicated with social media executives on what information to censor.



The new revelations add to questions on whether it was appropriate for social media fact-checkers to censor contrarian views, even inside America's scientific community.

Facebook, for example, affixed a "Missing Context" label to Johns Hopkins surgeon Marty Makary's Wall Street Journal op-ed, which was on how social media companies put their thumb on the scale in scientific debates over COVID-19. When questioned, the social media giant's fact-checkers said a team of three scientists disagreed with Dr. Makary's conclusion. Although it's not clear if administration officials intervened specifically on Makary's op-ed, other posts and tweets were directly called out by the White House and removed by social media companies shortly after.

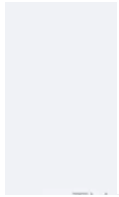
In July of last year, Clarke Humphrey, the White House digital director of the COVID-19 response team, asked an Instagram employee to take down a parody account of Dr. Anthony Fauci.

"Any way we can get this pulled down?" Humphrey wrote in an email. "It is not actually one of ours." Less than a minute later the Instagram official answers, "Yep, on it!"

The relationship between the administration and social media employees indicated by the email's familiarity and response time was the product of numerous meetings between federal bureaucrats and the social media companies.

An email from April 2021, discusses a scheduled meeting for Biden staff to be "briefed by Twitter on vaccine misinfo." Later in the summer, a Facebook official proposes to a Center for Disease Control and Prevention official that "in addition to

topics communicated a few days prior so that you can bring in the matching experts and chat casually for 30 minutes or so.”



The CDC official responded, “Yes, we would love to do that.” The emails show many instances where Facebook officials wouldn’t go forward on censoring a COVID-19 claim until getting input from the administration’s “debunking team.”

The emails also show social media companies eager to work with the administration. On July 16, 2021, President Joe Biden publicly accused Facebook of “killing people” because the company had not taken down misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines. A Meta executive (Facebook’s parent company) emailed Surgeon General Vivek Murthy to run damage control after the president’s statement.

“Reaching out after what has transpired ... and culminating today in the President’s remarks about us,” wrote the Meta executive. “I know our teams met today to better understand the scope of what the White House expects from us on misinformation going forward.”

The same Meta executive texted Murthy later that same day. “It’s not great to be accused of killing people,” he wrote, and adding that he was “keen to find a way to deescalate and work together collaboratively.”

The emails show that that is exactly what he did. A week later the Meta executive wrote to a Department of Health and Human Services official where he discussed changing company policies and removing several objectionable pages, groups and accounts spreading what the administration had identified as misinformation.

The attorneys general lawsuit accuses the Biden administration of enacting a speech code that would be unconstitutional if the government tried to impose it themselves.

“Having threatened and cajoled social-media platforms for years to censor viewpoints and speakers disfavored by the Left,” the lawsuit says, “senior government officials in the Executive Branch have moved into a phase of open collusion with social-media companies to suppress disfavored speakers, viewpoints, and content on social media platforms under the Orwellian guise of halting so-called ‘disinformation,’ ‘misinformation,’ and ‘malinformation.’”

Earlier this summer, the Justice Department refused to produce communications between federal government bureaucrats and social media officials. So the Missouri and Louisiana attorneys general filed a petition with the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Louisiana to compel the federal government to produce the emails.

The court ruled in favor of the petition resulting in the recently published batch of emails. However, the Department of Justice is claiming “executive privilege” for communications between the highest-ranking Biden administration officials and the social media giants.

“The government has been uncooperative and has resisted complying with the discovery order every step of the way,” a statement reads from the New Civil Liberties Alliance (NCLA) that is party to the lawsuit against the federal government.

The lawsuit’s revelations have heightened concerns among Republicans.

“Confirming that this is the most dangerously anti-free speech administration in American history AND that Facebook (or Meta or whatever) is nothing but an appendage of the deep state,” Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., posted on his Twitter account.

House Republicans are proposing legislation to stop the Biden administration from coordinating with social media companies on content censorship. The Protecting

other executive branch officials from encouraging private companies to censor or limit speech.

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