

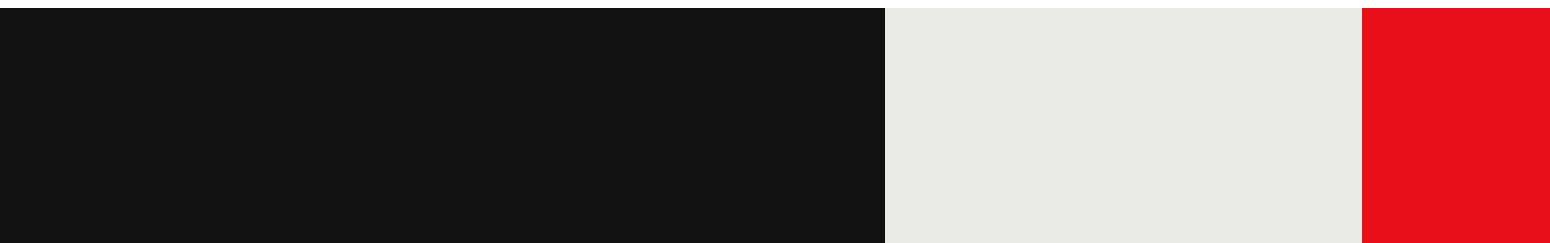
What would less news or politics mean for social media?

Article



In Q1 2021, Facebook and Twitter both made big moves to defend their beliefs about news and politics on their respective platforms.

Here are the highlights of what happened: First, Twitter permanently banned former US President Donald Trump's account, citing a "risk of further incitement of violence" after the January 6 riot on Capitol Hill. That sparked similar moves by the other major social networks,



including an “indefinite suspension” by Facebook that remains under the review of its Oversight Board at the time of this writing.

Then in February, Facebook pulled all news from its platform in Australia, ahead of a new law that would require the company, along with Google, to pay news publishers for their content. The ban, which also prevented users in Australia from sharing news content and foreign users from accessing Australian news, was reversed less than a week later, after the Australian government agreed to not apply the law if Facebook could demonstrate that it had struck enough deals with media publishers to pay them for content.

Why it matters: Facebook’s Australia news ban may have been short-lived, but it gave the world a glimpse into how large a part of the social media experience news and politics have become. In a Q3 2020 GlobalWebIndex survey, for example, 36% of US adults cited staying up to date with news and current events as the leading reason they use social media, tied with finding funny or entertaining content and ahead of all other activities measured.

And when Piplsay asked US adult internet users how they felt about the news ban, just days after the ban was lifted, nearly half (45%) said Facebook was wrong for prohibiting users and publishers in Australia from finding or sharing news content. What’s more, 66% said they would feel comfortable moving to another platform for news should Facebook implement a similar ban in the US.

Therein lies the biggest issue for social platforms in dealing with news and political content on their platforms: It’s a major driver of engagement, and without it, users may spend less time on social media.

Our January forecast for time spent with social networks already shows that this year, US adult social network users will spend less time on every platform except Snapchat than they did in 2020. Of course, time spent is falling from an all-time high, which was due to pandemic-related conditions that accelerated growth last year. But it’s also because there is likely to be less political and other news to read, share, and engage with in 2021—that’s one reason why Twitter will experience the sharpest drop in time spent this year. (Our forecast was completed before the social networks removed Trump from their platforms.)

To be fair, Trump’s Twitter account was just one account (though an extremely popular and prolific one), and Facebook isn’t going to issue a permanent ban on news worldwide. It remains to be seen whether the Trump social media blackout, and Facebook’s tinkering with news and other political content on its platform, lead to decreased engagement. But this

much is clear: Less engagement would mean fewer eyeballs on ads and other branded content. Fewer eyeballs, in turn, could mean decreased ad revenues for the social platforms.

For more on Twitter without Trump and Facebook without news, as well as our latest social media forecasts, Insider Intelligence subscribers can read our recent report:

Report by Jasmine Enberg Mar 30, 2021

Social Media Update Q1 2021

