

International

Social networks face quandary on politics in the misinformation fight

Biden asks Facebook to take down 'debunked' claims

WASHINGTON: As social media firms ramp up their fight against misinformation, politicians have been largely left exempt. To some, that's a huge problem. Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms have decided to allow politicians including President Donald Trump extra leeway to their rules, seeking to avoid stifling political debate and leaving "newsworthy" content online.

But Trump's efforts to push falsehoods and conspiracy theories have prompted calls for platforms to rethink those guidelines to prevent the president and others from spreading false and misleading information. Democratic presidential hopeful Joe Biden recently asked Facebook to take down "debunked" claims in a Trump ad on the leading social network, only to be rebuffed. In a response to Biden, Facebook said statements by politicians, even if false, are "considered direct speech and ineligible for our third-party fact checking program."

Senator and presidential candidate Kamala Harris meanwhile called on Twitter to ban Trump after the president violated the platform's rules by accusing his critics of "treason" and warning that an attempt to impeach him amounted to a "coup." The candidates' demands are typical of the conundrum social media firms face as they seek to remain open for public debate while curbing "hate speech," abusive conduct and patently false claims from politicians.

Facebook and Twitter have both steered away from removing "newsworthy" content

which may include false or misleading comments from political leaders. YouTube offers a similar exemption. This policy "seems like a troubling compromise because it's an invitation to political actors to say whatever they think is expedient whether it's true or not," said Paul Barrett, deputy director of the Stern Center for Business and Human Rights at New York University and author of a report on "Disinformation and the 2020 Election."

Barrett's report recommends that social networks take down "provably false" information, though he acknowledged that would leave big loopholes for politicians stretching the truth. The report noted that a majority of deliberately deceptive or false information shared on social media comes not from Russia or other foreign sources but from within the United States, making it more complicated to take down. "It's a real conundrum. I don't think there's a an easy answer," Barrett said.

'Vector for misinformation'

Facebook vice president Nick Clegg said last month the social network would treat speech from politicians "as newsworthy content that should, as a general rule, be seen and heard." Gaurav Laroia of the watchdog group Free Press said exceptions allowed by Facebook means the company "is allowing its platform to be a vector for misinformation in the lead-up to the 2020 election."

Facebook's ad policies leave a gaping loop-

tailed discussions". Varadkar told Ireland's parliament on Wednesday that he would work "until the last moment" to get a deal, but added: "Certainly not at any cost."

'Blame game'

After days of trading increasingly bitter accusations of inflexibility, the diplomacy appears to be intensifying in a late bid to find a breakthrough. "The reason the prime minister is meeting Leo Varadkar is not simply just to have a social conversation," Business Minister Kwasi Kwarteng told BBC radio. "They are seriously focused on trying to resolve this issue and trying to get a deal on which basis we can leave the EU."

"We're coming to a situation where I think a deal is possible". Brexit Secretary Steve Barclay will meet his EU counterpart Michel Barnier in Brussels today. "We've put forward serious proposals and have been willing to be flexible. Now it's time for the EU to do the same," Barclay said. But Barnier struck a downbeat tone Wednesday, telling the European Parliament that "we're not on the point of envisioning and finding a deal".

And Guy Verhofstadt, the European Parliament's Brexit coordinator, weighed in, saying Britain's proposals were "not serious" and were aimed at starting a "blame game". "The real traitor is he or she who risks bringing disaster upon his country and it's citizens, pushing the UK out of the EU," the former Belgian premier tweeted.—AFP



ROCHESTER: Democratic presidential candidate, former Vice President Joe Biden greets supporters following a campaign event in Rochester, New Hampshire. —AFP

hole for Trump, the biggest political ad spender on the platform, as he faces a congressional impeachment inquiry, according to Free Press. Senator Elizabeth Warren, another presidential candidate, accused Facebook of buckling to pressure from the White House on political misinformation. "Trump and (Facebook CEO Mark) Zuckerberg met at the White House two weeks ago. What did they talk about?" Warren tweeted.

"Facebook is now okay with running political

ads with known lies." Facebook maintains it has not changed its stand but clarified a policy of steering clear of the touchy subject of moderating political speech. "Our approach is grounded in Facebook's fundamental belief in free expression, respect for the democratic process, and the belief that, in mature democracies with a free press, political speech is already arguably the most scrutinized speech there is," Facebook public policy director Katie Harbath said. —AFP

British, Irish PMs meet over Brexit stalemate

LIVERPOOL: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his Irish counterpart Leo Varadkar met for last-ditch Brexit talks yesterday, with just days left to strike an EU divorce deal as both sides blame each other for the deadlock. Time is running out to sign off on any agreement at an October 17-18 European Union summit, ahead of Britain's scheduled departure from the bloc at the end of the month after nearly five decades of membership.

Johnson has vowed Britain will leave on October 31 with or without a deal - despite MPs passing a law last month that requires him to seek another Brexit delay if he fails to secure a pact at the summit. Johnson and Varadkar arrived in Liverpool, northwest England, according to an AFP photographer in the city, after days of recriminations over the failure to find an acceptable compromise on the key stumbling block over the Irish border.

They were later seen arriving at the exclusive Thornton Manor estate across the River Mersey on The Wirral peninsular for what Downing Street said was "a private meeting to allow both leaders and their teams to have de-

Romania beleaguered government collapses in no-confidence vote

BUCHAREST: Romania's beleaguered left-wing government collapsed in a no-confidence vote yesterday, paving the way for the president to appoint a new prime minister. The collapse comes just weeks before a presidential election and amid controversy over the country's nominee for EU commissioner. Prime Minister Viorica Dancila lost her parliamentary majority in August when the junior coalition partner of her Social Democrats (PSD), withdrew support, citing major disagreements.

That followed hard on the heels of shock losses for the PSD - Romania's biggest party - in May's European Parliament elections and the jailing of its once all-powerful leader, Liviu Dragnea, on corruption charges. A total of 238 MPs in the 465-seat parliament voted in favor of the motion against Dancila's government, clearing the way for President Klaus Iohannis to name a new prime minister. "I leave with a clear conscience of having accomplished my duty," Dancila, 55, said after the vote. Before the vote, opposition lawmaker Raluca Turcan denounced

Dancila's "political patronage" and "lies" to ensure her government's survival.

Brussels watching closely

"This is the last day where we are addressing an illegitimate prime minister who has trampled on Romanians' expectations to move faster toward Europe," Turcan said. Dancila had lobbied lawmakers until the last moment to back her. She had instructed her own party lawmakers to abstain from voting to prevent possible "betrayals" and had tried to win support, promising to pay local communities 300 million euros (\$330 million) this Friday to make sure their MPs back her. Lawmakers likely to change sides had also been offered public service posts and spots on party lists for next year's legislative elections.

The result of the vote was being eagerly awaited in Brussels after Dancila's candidate for EU commissioner was rejected. Newly-elected European Commission head, Ursula von der Leyen, has requested a replacement. Dancila - whose PSD has been in power since late 2016 but has seen massive protests over controversial judicial reforms - is also due to run in presidential elections with the first round scheduled for November 10. Incumbent centre-right President Iohannis already looks set to be re-elected for a second term, and the collapse of Dancila's government will weaken her chances even further. —AFP