

Promising no censorship, social network Gab draws 'alt-right'

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Squeezed out of Twitter and other social media websites cracking down on hate speech, far-right activists are finding a home on a new platform that promises never to censor content.

Launched in August, Gab has become known as a safe haven for the "alt-right" movement dominated by the white supremacists who are helping fuel America's deepening polarization.

The social network currently has 100,000 members and another 200,000 on its waiting list, according to the company.

"All are welcome to speak freely," spokesman Utsav Sanduja says.

Gab is unable to accommodate all those who want to join, he adds, because it is still in its test phase.

The social network's rise comes amid Twitter's suspension of political activists for purportedly promoting racist and harassing comments.

One of the new "Gabbers," Richard Spencer, heads the white supremacist National Policy Institute, whose account Twitter has suspended.

Spencer, whose "Hail Trump" comments were seen as evocative of the Nazi era, joined the Twitter exile along with Milo Yiannopoulos, accused of fomenting a social media campaign against the African-

American actress Leslie Jones.

Rising acrimony

Gab's appearance follows the launch two years ago of another free-speech labeled platform, Voat, which has had limited success.

But the new site comes amid escalating tensions and acrimony over politics in social media.

Some say the new guidelines for major platforms represent an effort to curb harassment and hate, others call it censorship.

Reddit, an online news and messaging board, announced last month that it would crack down on "toxic users" in an effort to curb some incendiary comments from supporters of President-elect Donald Trump.

"We have identified hundreds of the most toxic users and are taking action against them, ranging from warnings to timeouts to permanent bans," Reddit chief Steve Huffman wrote.

Gab meanwhile pledges no censoring or filtering, allowing users to post messages of 300 characters, compared to Twitter's 140-character limit.

Headquartered in the Caribbean island Anguilla, Gab is "bootstrapped," or self-financed, with some donations from the "Gab community."

Despite its user base, Gab denies having a political agenda.

"Gab is for everyone and our mission is to challenge censorship on a global scale," Sanduja says.

"Whether it is from authoritarian governments persecuting their own

people, politically incorrect citizens engaging in peaceful and civil discourse or whistleblowers in establishment institutions seeking a safe refuge, Gab will always be there for them and the people."

Overtly racist

Although the platform's terms prohibit calls for violence or "terrorism," many messages on the site are overtly racist or anti-Semitic.

That reflects the belief of Gab's founders "that free speech is a fundamental right, one that is absolute and cannot be vitiated in any way," Sanduja says.

That means "a free exchange of ideas" on the site "without proscription."

Instead of censoring content, Gab enables its users to filter their news feeds by blocking messages with certain keywords or from specific users.

Sanduja points to the startup founders' backgrounds as a reflection of diversity.

He is a Canadian Hindu with roots in India. The other co-founders include Ekrem Buyukkaya, a Muslim of Kurdish origin, and Andrew Torba, the chief executive who calls himself a "Christian conservative."

However, that kind of symbolism does little to mollify the concerns of those worried that services such as Gab keep users inside "filter bubbles" that reinforce their own ideas and block out other viewpoints.

"The service that they have created is an echo chamber for extremely conservative opinions," says Lauren Copeland, associate director of the Community Research Institute at Baldwin Wallace University.

"It may be open to everybody, but it certainly doesn't appeal to everybody."

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