

After Trump bashing, tech firms gird for congressional grilling

September 4 2018, by Rob Lever



Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey is set to appear at two congressional hearings where he is likely to face questions on foreign influence campaigns and political bias by social media firms

After days of vitriol from President Donald Trump, big Silicon Valley

firms face lawmakers in the coming week with a chance to burnish their image—or face a fresh bashing.

Top executives from Twitter and Facebook were to appear in two hearings on Wednesday, with Google's participation a question mark.

The hearings come with online firms facing intense scrutiny for allowing the propagation of misinformation and hate speech, and amid allegations of political bias from the president and his allies.

Twitter chief executive Jack Dorsey and Facebook chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg were set to appear at a Senate Intelligence Committee [hearing](#). Lawmakers were seeking a top executive from Google or its parent Alphabet, but it remained unclear if the search giant would be represented.

The tech giants are likely to face a cool reception at best from members of Congress, said Roslyn Layton, an American Enterprise Institute visiting scholar specializing in telecom and internet issues.

"The Democrats are upset about the spread of misinformation in the 2016 election, and the Republicans over the perception of bias," Layton said.

"They are equally angry, but for different reasons."

Layton, who was a member of the Trump transition team on telecom issues, said she did not view the president's comments as a threat to start regulation, but that Silicon Valley firms could nonetheless expect tougher scrutiny.

This could come in the form of tougher enforcement on consumer protection and deceptive practices by the Federal Trade Commission, or

congressional action on privacy in response to a law passed in California.

Still, she said the tech firms have a chance to improve their public image if they emphasize what made them successful.

"They forget to emphasize how much people love their products, how people use them around the world, including dissidents," she said. "Now they are on the back foot."



President Donald Trump recently warned Google, Facebook and Twitter to "be careful" with respect to political bias but stopped short of calling for regulation

Dorsey and Sandberg were to appear at a morning hearing in the Senate

on "Foreign Influence Operations and Their Use of Social Media Platforms," which could see an empty chair for Google.

Sources familiar with the matter said Google offered chief legal officer Kent Walker, who the company said is most knowledgeable on foreign interference, but that senators had asked for the participation of CEO Sundar Pichai or Alphabet CEO Larry Page.

Dorsey testifies later in the day at a hearing of the House Energy and Commerce Committee on online "transparency and accountability."

Questions of bias

Both hearings could offer lawmakers a chance to vent at the firms following claims from Trump and some Republicans that online firms have suppressed conservative voices.

In a series of tweets in recent days, Trump assailed Google for what he termed "rigged" results that hide news from conservative outlets and promote content from what he called "left-wing" media.

That followed similar comments from Republican lawmakers including House majority leader Kevin McCarthy who claimed that "conservatives are too often finding their voices silenced" on online platforms.

Technology and media analysts say there is little evidence to suggest Google is skewing results for political reasons. And if they did, the president would have little recourse under the constitution's free speech protections.

But public perception is another matter.

A Pew Research Center survey released in June found 43 percent of

Americans think major technology firms support the views of liberals over conservatives, and 72 percent accepted the idea that [social media platforms](#) actively censor opposing political views.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson, a University of Pennsylvania professor and author of an upcoming book on Russia's role in election hacking, said the hearings could give the companies a platform to explain how they operate.



Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer of Facebook, will represent the leading social network at a congressional hearing on foreign influence operations

"Hearings are an opportunity as well as a liability," she said.

"These companies have put in place fixes (on foreign manipulation) but they have done it incrementally, and they have not communicated that to a national audience."

'An opportunity'

Adam Chiara, a University of Hartford professor who follows social media and politics, said the public hearings will offer an opportunity for Silicon Valley firms to deliver their message to the public.

"I think we'll see the tech companies much better prepared than (in hearings) in November 2017," Chiara said.

While Silicon Valley's image has been battered in recent months, Chiara said, "if they can come up with a concrete message that the lawmakers can understand and the public can understand, maybe they can gain control of the wheel."

Chiara said Google's likely absence could end up hurting the company.

"Google is missing an opportunity to craft a message for itself," he said.

Jeff Hemsley, a Syracuse University communications professor, said the hearings are likely to bring greater public scrutiny to concerns which may have only been raised by a small percentage of the population.

"Being in front of Congress, regardless of the outcome, elevates some of these data privacy and [social media](#) bias issues into the national conversation," Hemsley said.

To avoid a further deterioration of their image, the companies "need to be seen to answer the questions and show they are paying attention.. they have to do their best to show the bias they are accused of is not there."

© 2018 AFP

Citation: After Trump bashing, tech firms gird for congressional grilling (2018, September 4)
retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-09-trump-bashing-tech-firms-gird.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.