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Key Findings

- Truth Social claims to be a platform free from heavy handed content moderation, yet their terms of service are more restrictive than any other major social media platform.
- Truth social has blocked content on topics such as abortion and the January 6th attack on the Capitol.
- Both conservative ideas and discussion of seemingly unobjectionable topics have also been inexplicably blocked.

Truth Can't Handle the Truth: Censorship on Truth Social

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Summary

President Donald Trump was banned indefinitely from Twitter and Facebook after the platforms found that his posts incited violence on January 6, 2021, in violation of their terms of service.¹ In reaction, he chose to launch his own platform, Truth Social, a year later. He described the platform as a haven for free speech where content would be only sparsely moderated and not censored on the basis of political ideology.² However, the young platform was quickly marred by accusations of biased censorship and account suspensions.³

While Truth Social promised minimal and transparent content moderation, early users reported experiencing bans after selecting usernames or authoring posts that made fun of

¹ Perrigo, B. (2021, January 7). Why Facebook and Twitter suspended trump after capitol riots. Time. From <https://time.com/5927398/facebook-twitter-trump-suspension-capitol/>

² Clark, N. (2022, February 22). Trump's social media site hits the App Store a year after he was banned from Twitter. NPR. From <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/22/1082243094/trumps-social-media-app-launches-year-after-twitter-ban>

³ Binder, M. (2022, February 24). Truth social already censoring content, bans user who made fun of Trump Media CEO. Mashable. From <https://mashable.com/article/trump-truth-social-free-speech-bans>. See also Ulanoff, L. (2021, October 22). Trump's new social media platform won't let you hurt his feelings. Medium. From <https://onezero.medium.com/trumps-new-social-media-platform-won-t-let-you-hurt-his-feelings-546b7555c9f>

or criticized the former president and his allies.⁴ Early versions of the platform's terms of service even required users to agree not to, "disparage, tarnish, or otherwise harm, in our opinion, us and/or the Site."⁵ While that provision has since been removed, users continue to report that they have experienced censorship and bans after talking about topics that are unflattering to the former president, including the January 6 Committee hearings.⁶

While Truth Social was marketed as an alternative to other major social media platforms for users who believed their content moderation was too expansive, Truth Social's terms of service are actually more restrictive than Twitter, their closest competitor.⁷ Unlike Twitter, Truth Social bans all sexual content and explicit language. Furthermore, terms of service also allow their moderators (a combination of volunteers and bots) to ban anyone if they deem content to be "libelous, slanderous, or otherwise objectionable." While the extent of their disclosed content moderation practices is vast, their undisclosed censorship goes further.

Our own research on the platform confirms that the site engages in shadow banning, which is fully or partially blocking users' content without warning, notice, or recourse. This is prevalent with regard to both progressive subject matter and across various other topics. Truth Social does not disclose in their terms of service that users may be subject to these shadow bans, nor do they provide information on how they decide which content to block in this fashion. Overall, we found that Truth Social censors more content than they suggest, both progressive topics and seemingly conservative content are subject to shadow bans, and their content moderation practices lack the transparency, consistency, and nuance expected of a major social media platform.

⁴ Id. See also Smith, G. (2021, October 27). Trump promises truth social will not shadow ban or censor speech. Right Side Broadcasting Network (RSBN) - Live Coverage of Political Events, News and Commentary. From <https://www.rsbnetwork.com/news/trump-promises-truth-social-will-not-shadow-ban-or-censor-speech-2/>

⁵ Id.

⁶ Levin, B. (2022, June 13). Trump's truth social is allegedly banning people for talking about the January 6 hearings because of course it is. Vanity Fair. From <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2022/06/donald-trump-truth-social-january-6-hearings>

⁷ Chen, B. X. (2022, April 27). Truth Social Review: Trump's uncensored social app is incomplete. The New York Times., From <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/27/technology/personaltech/truth-social-review-trump.html>. See also Wong, Q. (2022, April 29). Trump's truth social plagued by challenges: Everything you need to know. CNET. From <https://www.cnet.com/news/politics/trumps-truth-social-plagued-by-challenges-everything-you-need-to-know/>

Blocked Progressive Content

Prochoice Content

In June 2022, Truth Social users reported that any post containing the phrase “abortion is healthcare” would automatically be shadow banned from the platform. Much of this report describes my firsthand experience on Truth Social. When I attempted to post the phrase “abortion is healthcare,” I received the standard notification that my “truth had been posted,” which would usually signify that my post would now be visible on my personal profile and on my feed. Instead, the post was nowhere to be found. I made a video explaining that my “truth” had seemingly disappeared into a black hole that went viral on Tik Tok with over 1.2 million [views to date](#). Five days after I initially tried to post my “truth”, after my Tik Tok video attracted such significant attention, it suddenly appeared. As a result, the first interactions with the post including comments and likes are dated five days after the date of posting.

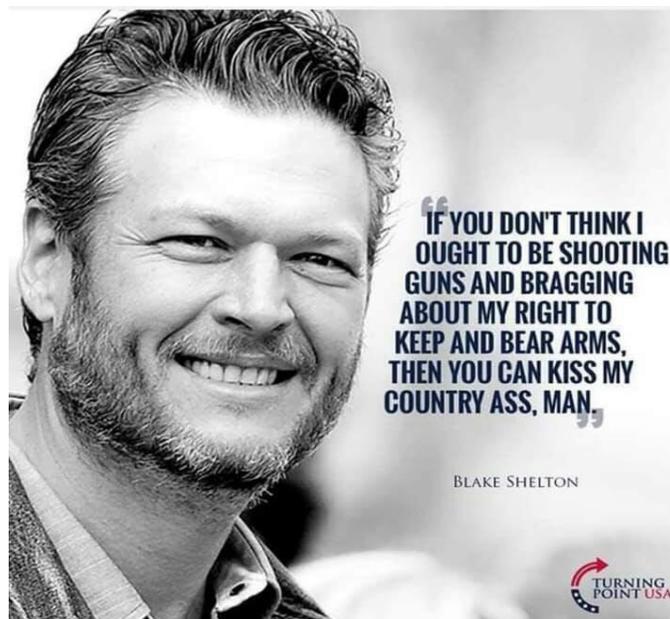
In July 2022, I attempted to post a response to another user’s “truth,” in which he argued that only those that know everything about firearms have the right to protest gun related issues. My response read, “And if you don’t own a uterus and know everything about women’s health, you have NO right to regulate abortion or birth control. When you think they can’t get any more hypocritical, this post says, ‘yes they can.’” That post was similarly blocked and also never showed up on my profile or feed. [see Figure 1].

dangerous. Time for accountability. #Jan6 #january6th #January6thHearings.” That post was blocked. However, when I copied and pasted the exact text and attempted to post it for a second time, the post became visible. To date, the original post has not appeared on my page.

Other Blocked Content

While some of the blocked content on Truth Social expressed progressive ideas, many other kinds of content also seem to be blacklisted on the platform. Users reported that an image of country music star Blake Shelton featuring a quote in favor of gun ownership [figure 2] was banned.¹¹

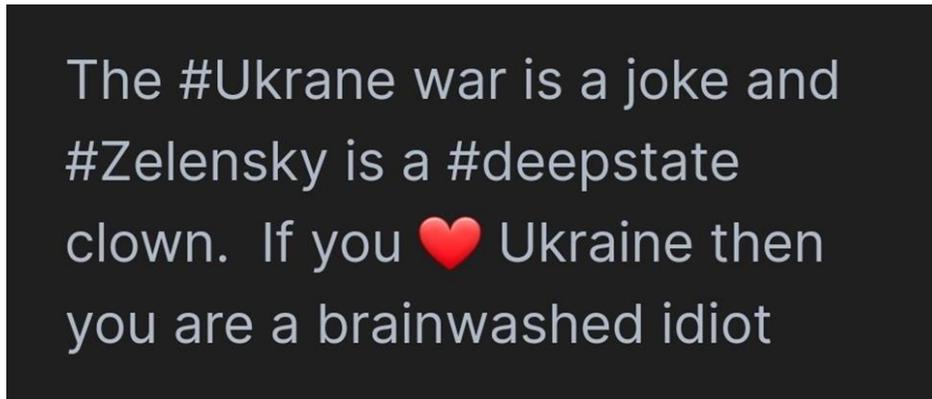
Figure 2: Blocked Image of Blake Shelton



¹¹ Goforth, C. (2022, June 23). 'the point was not to be censored': Trump's social media platform makes heavy-handed moderation choices, alienating his base. The Daily Dot From <https://www.dailydot.com/debug/trump-truth-social-moderatio-posts-censorship/>

When I attempted to post it myself, it never showed up on my profile or feed. Users similarly reported that a quote about Ukraine which read, “The #Ukraine war is a joke and #Zelensky is a #deepstate clown. If you [heart emoji] Ukraine then you are a brainwashed idiot” was banned. I was unable to successfully post the phrase. [Figure 3]

Figure 3: Screenshot of Blocked Post About Ukraine



Users also complained that links to articles on external websites were being blocked. One user suggested that they were unable a link to a Breitbart article claiming that former President Obama was responsible for an influx of crime committed by immigrants protected by the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program.¹² When I tried to post the link, it never showed up on my profile or feed. Setting aside the merits of the decision to deplatform the Breitbart article, it's worth noting that the article doesn't seem to violate any of their stated terms of service.

Inconsistent Moderation Practices

While some users report receiving notice in the form of an email from Truth Social when their posts are blocked or removed, many report that content moderation on the platform feels opaque, as posts seem to subject to bans without notification to the poster or an opportunity to appeal.¹³ To date, I have yet to receive notice from Truth Social regarding any of my seemingly blocked posts. Other users report that posts containing certain images will get covered with a sensitive content filter, also without notice or an

¹² Id.

¹³ Id.

opportunity to appeal.¹⁴ It remains unclear how Truth Social determines which content is labeled as sensitive.

Implications

When it comes to content moderation, many experts agree that transparency is essential to maintain user trust and encourage freedom of expression and information online.¹⁵ Truth Social claims to be a haven for uncensored speech, however, their terms of service are so overly broad and ill-defined that they are effectively more restrictive than Twitter, their closest competitor.¹⁶ It is not inherently problematic that Truth Social moderates posts, but the lack of transparency could lead users to believe that they are engaging in an open forum when, in reality, they're in a curated echo chamber. Furthermore, Truth Social's seemingly frequent use of shadow banning leaves affected users with no recourse when a post that conforms with the terms of service is wrongfully blocked. Lastly, studies show that Americans want transparent content moderation policies on their social media platforms, suggesting that the mounting frustration among Truth Social users is likely to grow and continue to hinder the growth of the platform.¹⁷

¹⁴ Binder, M. (2022, February 24). Truth social already censoring content, bans user who made fun of Trump Media CEO. Mashable. From <https://mashable.com/article/trump-truth-social-free-speech-bans>.

¹⁵ MacCarthy, M. (2022, March 9). *How online platform transparency can improve content moderation and algorithmic performance*. Brookings. From <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2021/02/17/how-online-platform-transparency-can-improve-content-moderation-and-algorithmic-performance/>

¹⁶ Binder, M. (2022, February 24). Truth social already censoring content, bans user who made fun of Trump Media CEO. Mashable. From <https://mashable.com/article/trump-truth-social-free-speech-bans>.

¹⁷ The Future of Tech Policy: American views. Knight Foundation. (n.d.). Retrieved July 20, 2022, from <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/the-future-of-tech-policy-american-views/>