European Parliament

# Trump's disinformation 'magaphone'
## Consequences, first lessons and outlook

SUMMARY

The deadly insurrection at the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 was a significant cautionary example of the offline effects of online disinformation and conspiracy theories. The historic democratic crisis this has sparked – adding to a number of other historic crises the US is currently battling – provides valuable lessons not only for the United States, but also for Europe and the democratic world.

The US presidential election and its aftermath saw domestic disinformation emerging as a more visible immediate threat than disinformation by third countries. While political violence has been the most tangible physical effect of manipulative information, corrosive conspiracy theories have moved from the fringes to the heart of political debate, normalising extremist rhetoric.

At the same time, recent developments have confirmed that the lines between domestic and foreign attempts to undermine democracy are increasingly blurred. While the perceived weaknesses in democratic systems are – unsurprisingly – celebrated as a victory for authoritarian state actors, links between foreign interference and domestic terrorism are under growing scrutiny.

The question of how to depolarise US society – one of a long list of challenges facing the Biden Administration – is tied to the polarised media environment. The crackdown by major social media platforms on Donald Trump and his supporters has prompted far-right groups to abandon the established information ecosystem to join right-wing social media. This could further accelerate the ongoing fragmentation of the US infosphere, cementing the trend towards separate realities.

Ahead of the proposed Democracy Summit – a key objective of the Biden Administration – tempering the 'sword of democracy' has risen to the top of the agenda on both sides of the Atlantic. Against this backdrop, and in line with the EU-US Agenda for Global Change, EU initiatives to counter disinformation – including the recent democracy action plan and the Digital Services Act – may provide a basis for EU-US cooperation on boosting democracy at home and abroad.

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# Interference and disinformation in the 2020 election

## From the most secure election in US history …

Documentation of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election in the United States, as well as evidence of a growing number of state and non-state actors engaging in disinformation across the world, increased concern about foreign interference and disinformation ahead of the 2020 elections. The resulting US counter-measures appear to have been successful: the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in its preliminary findings and conclusions regarding the 3 November elections assessed that – despite reports of foreign interference having 'impacted public confidence' – 'a broad range of election stakeholders expressed overall confidence in the integrity of election infrastructure and efforts to mitigate cyber-security risks'. Confirming this, a 12 November statement from the US elections infrastructure government coordinating council and the election infrastructure sector coordinating executive committees called the 2020 election 'the most secure in American history', adding that while 'there are many unfounded claims and opportunities for misinformation about the process of our elections, we can assure you we have the utmost confidence in the security and integrity of our elections, and you should too'.

## … to domestic interference, incitement and an insurrection

However, a shift from external disinformation – with Russian bots and trolls at the centre of attention in and after 2016 – to domestic disruption has become very visible in the aftermath of the election. According to Kate Starbird, Associate Professor of Human Centered Design & Engineering at the University of Washington, the disinformation actors' landscape has changed significantly since the 2016 US presidential elections. In 2016, she confirms, there was an overwhelming focus on coordinated inauthentic foreign (pro-Kremlin) behaviour. In 2020, false information has been largely driven by authentic domestic actors, verified accounts, and top-down actors loosely coordinating to spread misleading information. The trend was well documented in the stoking of political and racial divisions in the context of the Black Lives Matter protests earlier in 2020.[1]

Former President Donald Trump and his strategists appear to have followed the Kremlin's authoritarian playbook in using information to fan divisions and undermine trust in the electoral processes and democracy as a system. Trump has consistently spread false information – including about the election process – echoing authoritarian anti-democratic narratives. The above-mentioned OSCE report on the US elections warned that 'baseless allegations of systematic deficiencies, notably by Trump, including on election night, harm public trust in democratic institutions'. Trump discouraged his supporters from voting by post, claiming in advance that the election would be rigged if he did not win, and – following election day, exploiting the absence of conclusive information[2] – spread unfounded claims that the Democrats had stolen the election ('Stop the Steal').

### Framing the post-election debate

Trump framed the debate about the outcome of the presidential election – perhaps anticipating that he would lose – months, even years ago. During the 2020 campaign, Trump constantly repeated the narrative that the US election system was fraudulent and that anything other than a victory for him would mean that the election had been stolen from the American voters. This narrative was not new: Trump already planted the suspicion of voter fraud before the 2016 election against Hillary Clinton, when he – as did most pollsters – presumably anticipated that he would lose. He claimed that the 'election is going to be rigged', warning that 'the only way we can lose … is if cheating goes on'. After the 2016 election, such manipulative narratives could have served to incite political unrest in protest against a perceived conspiracy, with Trump encouraging citizens to 'help me stop Crooked Hillary from rigging this election!'. As Trump won in 2016, however, it was not necessary to mobilise the masses. But when he lost in 2020, he reheated the claims of voter fraud and appeared to encourage protests, including through slogans such as 'Stop the Steal', used by a massive campaign working to delegitimise the vote count.

The efforts of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) to counter viral false and manipulative information included the webpage rumor control, which was specifically created to 'prebunk' – pre-emptively debunk – potential areas for disinformation before, during and after the election. Some of these debunked rumours were spread by Trump himself, intensified as it became evident that Joe Biden had won the election. On 12 November, assistant director of CISA, Bryan Ware, resigned. CISA Director Christopher Krebs, who reportedly 'drew the ire of the Trump White House over efforts to debunk disinformation', including conspiracy theories spread by Trump since April alleging widespread voter fraud, was fired by Presidential tweet on 17 November.

The pro-Trump riots and deadly attacks on the Capitol on 6 January – just hours after Trump gave a speech to his supporters, in which he repeated his false claims that the election was 'stolen' and encouraged the crowds to 'walk down to the Capitol' and 'fight like hell' – can be seen as the hitherto most significant concrete, real-life effect of the disinformation and conspiracy theories that have spread in recent months. In stirring up and catalysing already existing fragmented anger, resentment and violent extremist tendencies, Trump appears to have temporarily unified heterogeneous groups with a joint appetite for disruption – the white-supremacist chauvinists Proud Boys, the civil war promoters Boogaloo Boys, the far-right militia group the 'Oath Keepers', QAnon conspiracy theory believers – who think Trump will save the world from a global paedophile Satanic conspiracy, known to have inspired shootings in Washington DC back in 2016, and deemed a terrorist threat by the Department of Homeland Security[3] – Christian fundamentalists and many more. Some protesters said they joined the protests upon the President's invitation or request. Five people – including one police offer – died as a result of the violence.

In addition to this, Trump appeared to attempt to interfere in the election results in a number of states. This became particularly obvious in the case of Georgia, where Trump in a 2 January telephone conversation pressured Georgia's secretary of state, Brad Raffensperger, to 'recalculate' the results and 'find' enough votes to overturn the Georgia election results, and threatening him with unspecified legal repercussions if he failed to comply. Moreover, Trump reportedly pressured the Justice Department to ask the Supreme Court to invalidate the election result.

# Consequences of Trump's disinformation campaigns

## Trump's second impeachment

Trump's role in allegedly inciting the Capitol assault led to his historic second impeachment, which also cites his attempts to interfere in the Georgia state elections. In addition, prosecutors in Georgia are reportedly likely to launch a criminal investigation of Trump over his interference attempts. Most experts consider that such offences would have been beyond his federal pardon power. However, at the same time, some – including former FBI Director James Comey – have warned that prolonged efforts to prosecute Trump could lend him a welcome platform, filling the void left by the suspension of his Twitter account – to continue to rally for his cause and propagate conspiracy theories and false claims of voter fraud, potentially further inciting his followers.

## *Cui bono* I: Financial and political incentives

Reasons for spreading disinformation can be manifold, and are often grouped into financial or political incentives. In Trump's case, both categories seem to apply. On the one hand, delaying certification of the election results allowed Trump and his campaign to insist that he could still win, thus justifying collecting money from supporters to pay for recounts. Trump has reportedly raised over US$200 million from supporters since the election as a result of his false claims. A large portion appears to have been used to cover campaign debts, fund future political activities and boost 'like-minded figures'.[4] At the same time, the narrative of a stolen election continues to fuel anger and resentment, with the potential to ensure Trump a receptive audience – perhaps increasing his chances of playing a prominent role in the right-wing US infosphere – after he leaves office. This – especially against the backdrop of an increasingly polarised and fragmented media landscape (a

trend that Trump may benefit from) – could help him retain an audible voice in the political debate and thus secure continued influence in the Republican Party or even in a new party of his own. This narrative could contribute to disrupting Biden's efforts to unify the country, further undermining domestic trust in democracy as well as the global credibility of the US as a beacon of liberal democracy; playing into the hands of foreign adversaries.

## Feeding the fringes: Political violence and domestic terrorism

Political violence in the US is, as already noted, perhaps the most visible offline effect of online conspiracy theories and manipulative information. Trump's long track record of encouraging and/or downplaying right-wing political violence includes his defending a teenager who shot three people (two of them fatally) at a Black Lives Matter protest; his continued verbal attacks against Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer after a far-right group had tried to kidnap her; his call on the militant white supremacy group Proud Boys to 'stand back and stand by'; his public assessment that QAnon devotees are 'people that love our country'. After the 6 January insurrection, Trump told the rioters to go home, assuring them that he 'loved them' and thought they were 'very special'.

At the same time, prominent Trump supporters have – in a seeming attempt to downplay the role of right-wing groups in the insurrection – repeated false claims that it was Black Lives Matter or far-left antifa activists who initiated the insurrection. Conspiracy theories seem to have moved from the fringes to the centre of the political debate, with some newly elected members of Congress openly promoting such narratives. Many of Trump's supporters genuinely believe his false claims of voter fraud: a poll conducted by *Politico* on 6-9 November indicated that 70 % of Republicans said they did not believe the 2020 election was free and fair. This was a significant increase from the 35 % of Republican voters who held such beliefs before the election. By contrast, trust in the election system increased for Democrats: 90 % of Democrats say the election was free and fair, up from 52 % before election day. Among Republicans who believed that the election was not free and fair, 78 % believed that mail-in voting led to widespread voter fraud, 72 % that ballots were tampered with, in line with claims that made 'a constant appearance on the President's Twitter thread', and 84 % that the election benefited Biden, also in line with Trump's tweets.

## *Cui bono* II: Anti-democratic state and non-state actors

By sowing doubt about the legitimacy of the election process and the result, Trump has accelerated the spread of the consistent anti-democracy narrative that the West is in decay and that democracy is not working. Trump's narratives benefit foreign authoritarian adversaries, whose goal it is to undermine confidence in US democracy as the traditional beacon of liberal democracy, increase already existing polarisation and divisions, and amplify looming tension and readiness for violence. There is broad consensus among experts that Russian state media seized this chance, echoing claims of election fraud and ridiculing the chaos. Chinese state media outlets' slightly more cautious approach was seen as in part reflecting optimism that Biden could stabilise US-China ties.

Trump's victory claims and accusations of election fraud – including rumours about 'mysterious' ballot dumps – were consistently amplified by Russian state-backed media. Russian media outlets pushed 'democracy in decay' narratives such as 'if this makes it to the Supreme Court, and the election is decided in favour of Trump, it will further exacerbate the violence and civic unrest'. At the same time, Russian state media also accused Trump of undermining trust in democracy. The FBI is reportedly investigating the potential role of foreign governments, organisations or individuals in providing financial support for the violent groups involved in the 6 January insurrection.

A January joint threat assessment by the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security as well as other agencies assessed that 'Russian, Iranian, and Chinese influence actors have seized the opportunity to amplify narratives in furtherance of their policy interest amid the presidential transition'. Indeed, reactions to the insurrection from state and non-state anti-democratic actors – as analysed by BBC Monitoring – confirmed that (perceived) deficiencies of Western democracies are being used to undermine the credibility of democratic actors and of democracy as a system of governance:

> Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova said Moscow 'draws your attention to the US electoral system being archaic and not corresponding to modern democratic standards'. Russian state broadcaster Rossiya 1 showed Iranian President Hassan Rouhani saying the events showed 'how weak and fragile Western democracy is', and the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson questioning the US approach to protesters in Hong Kong.
> The Alliance for Securing Democracy notes that Russian broadcaster RT's narrative emphasises that the big tech companies' actions 'portend further purges of alternative viewpoints', a message that supports RT's own slogan 'Question more', and is in line with RT's #LeaveTwitterJoinTelegram hashtag campaign (it uses the slogan 'Leave censorship – find freedom'; hinting that the Russian app Telegram equals 'freedom').
> Echoing Chinese state media, several key Chinese diplomats slammed America's 'double standards' over domestic dissent, political violence and media control.
> In an 8 January televised speech, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei questioned US values and the state of human rights: 'You see the current state of America – the state of the grand idol, their democracy, their election mess, their human rights. ... The same human rights that sees a black person killed on the street without cause every few hours or at least every few days, and the killers and murderers are not pursued.'
> Referring to the US as 'the so-called cradle of democracy', Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called the insurrection a 'disgrace for democracy', and slammed Washington's 'silence' during the 2016 failed coup attempt in Turkey.
> The Islamic State group (IS) seems to see the riots and the crisis as long-term opportunities for jihadists. IS argues that the political crisis will keep the US preoccupied with internal problems in the long term, allowing jihadists to make significant gains in Muslim countries.

## Big tech clampdown and the migration of far-right users

The 6 January insurrection appears to have been the last straw for major social media companies, who had long been grappling with finding an adequate response to Trump's tweets as well as to the QAnon and 'Stop the Steal' groups.[5] Following the Capitol attacks, Twitter first announced a 12-hour suspension, while Facebook and Instagram banned the President's profile for the rest of his term. TikTok removed content violations and redirected hashtags like #stormthecapitol and #patriotparty to its community guidelines. YouTube said it would restrict accounts that post videos containing false information about the election. On 8 January, Twitter permanently deleted Trump's account 'due to the risk of further incitement of violence'. The loss of Trump's Twitter account is deemed to add significantly to the former President's reported financial problems, as the lack of followers translates directly into a loss of ad revenue. Other online services have 'deplatformed' and disenabled Trump: for example, Shopify closed two online stores linked to Trump – his organisation and his campaign's merchandise sites – for violating its policies on supporting violence.

A tweet by Marjorie Taylor Greene – a Republican Representative from Georgia – in which she urged Trump supporters to 'mobilize and make your voices heard in opposition to these attacks on our liberties', prompted Twitter to suspend her from using Twitter for 12 hours on 17 January. In a press release, Greene channelled the prevailing pro-Trump attitude towards 'big tech', accusing the 'Silicon Valley Cartel' of conducting a 'multi-front attack to chill free speech in America by deplatforming President Donald Trump and purging an unknown number of conservatives'.

Indeed, the responses from Twitter, Facebook and co to prevent the spread of false information and incitement to violence also seem to have been the last straw for right-wing users who have long been accusing the major online platforms for being biased against them. The increased crackdowns on mis- and disinformation by major online platforms in recent months had already increased the attraction of new conservative 'alternate platforms' such as Parler, Gab, MeWe and Locals (co-founded by the creator of comic strip Dilbert, Scott Adam), as they promise not to censor behaviour that could violate the policies of their more established rivals. The 'alternative Reddit' site thedonald.win is also thriving. The largest of these platforms, Parler, stated in its community

guidelines of 7 November it would not decide what content would be 'removed or filtered, or whose account will be removed, on the basis of the opinion expressed within the content'.[6]

Following election day and the crackdown on 'Stop the steal' campaigns and groups, many far-right groups banned from Twitter and Facebook encouraged their members and followers to migrate to Parler and Gab. Millions of new users flocked to Parler, which was downloaded nearly 1 million times within five days and became the top new app download on Apple's App Store. 'Stop the steal' campaigns have continued on Parler without restrictions. Discussions included threats that anything other than Congress overturning the results would lead to 'patriots' having to rescue the country from alleged traitors, Satanists and paedophiles. Parler became the key forum for encouraging pro-Trump 'patriots' to march on Washington DC with weapons ahead of Biden's inauguration, and reportedly played a central role in the coordination of the protests on 6 January.

Reacting to this, Amazon – which originally hosted Parler on its service – suspended Parler, effectively disenabling it. Amazon argued that the calls for violence spreading on Parler violated its terms of service, citing the risk to public safety. At the same time, Google Play Store and Apple's App Store removed Parler's app. Parler reacted by suing Amazon. On 17 January, Parler appeared to be operational again, with the direct support of a Russia-based host. At the same time, Gab – founded in 2016 and launched in 2017 as a 'free speech'-alternative to Twitter and Facebook – quickly filled the temporary gap left by Parler. Since the insurrection, Gab's users reportedly more than doubled to around 3.4 million. It also saw an 800 % jump in traffic to its website, prompting CEO Andrew Torba to add emergency servers to cope with the surge in activity. On 21 January, the head of the House Oversight Committee asked the FBI to review the role of Parler on 6 January. On the same day, a group of Congress members sent letters to the CEOs of Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, urging them to address the effect of algorithms that enable the spread of extreme, radicalising content.

## Growing fragmentation of the infosphere

Drawing on research on extremist movements, as well as on previous bans of far-right or conspiracy theorist influencers, some argue that such takedowns by key online platforms – which have been under mounting pressure to curb false information, including conspiracy theories, before and after the 2020 presidential election – can limit far-right influencers' impact. Indeed, research confirms the immediate dampening effect: false claims about electoral fraud misinformation decreased by 73 % after Twitter suspended Trump's account. However, deplatforming does not solve the root causes of radicalisation. And there is concern that stricter rules from established social media, pushing more users into shadowy corners of the internet, could accelerate the fragmentation of the US infosphere. Segregated infospheres could pave the way for more one-sided influence by more extreme groups, increasing the risk of radicalisation. Moreover, lessons from other fringe groups who are banned from major platforms point to risks that potential radicalisation of members of far-right groups who disappear into encrypted messaging services – including Signal and Telegram – may go unnoticed.

The clampdown on Trump and far-right groups has unleashed a political backlash against the big platforms over mounting freedom of speech concerns. German Chancellor Angela Merkel called the decision to permanently suspend President Donald Trump's account 'problematic', arguing that the 'right to freedom of opinion is of fundamental importance'. Russian anti-Kremlin political activist Alexei Navalny called the ban 'an unacceptable act of censorship', saying that 'this precedent will be exploited by the enemies of freedom of speech around the world'. EU Commissioner for the Internal Market, Thierry Breton, argued that the 'dogma anchored in section 230 – the US legislation that provides social media companies with immunity from civil liability for content posted by their users – has collapsed', arguing that public authorities should have more enforcement powers to ensure that all users' fundamental rights are safeguarded, in line with the EU's Digital Services Act.

## Trump and the US infosphere(s)

Any hope that Donald Trump will just 'fade away' after the elections appear may be wishful thinking. In the coming four years, Trump and his followers could continue to attempt to undermine US

democracy and potentially incite violence, including through manipulative information campaigns. Trump's media savvy and instinct for connecting with and inciting the wrath of his followers-– combined with his craving for attention and his flair for monetising his brand – could earn him a prominent role in the right-wing media ecosystem, perhaps further accelerating the fragmentation of the US and, consequently, the global infosphere. US online platforms remain the backbone of the public space for debate in Europe, and US social media culture – as the export of the QAnon conspiracy theory cult exemplifies – inevitably spills over to the rest of the world, including Europe.

US online services and platforms currently form the backbone of the EU's information ecosystem, and US (social) media culture influences media consumers worldwide. The rapid growth of the evolving far-right infosphere may encourage users across the world to join, and the demand for alternate platforms will likely prompt investors to supply the necessary alternative infrastructure. Growing fragmentation could contribute to further increasing polarisation of US society, as there would be even less contact between Trump followers – who, egged on by Trump's anti-media rhetoric, shun 'mainstream media' and are now abandoning established social media platforms – on the one side, and Democrats on the other. Deeper divides between 'liberal' and conservative information ecosystems spark the question on which platforms the 2024 election campaigns will be fought out. Upcoming national elections in Europe, as well as the 2024 European Parliament election campaigns, could be used as testing grounds for the new platforms' impact beyond the US.

## Outlook: A three-dimensional challenge to democracy

The lines between foreign and domestic interference are increasingly blurred; the visibility of threats from domestic actors attempting to undermine democracy is growing. Just as US far-right groups seem to have learned from authoritarian actors in other parts of the world, domestic actors beyond the US are learning from the tactics like-minded groups have used in the US. The aftermath of the election will likely further sharpen the focus on how to counter both foreign and domestic election interference, as well as how to boost collective cognitive resilience to disinformation and conspiracy theories. The urgency is highlighted by concern over growing vaccine hesitancy – a known wedge issue than can be weaponised by malign actors – as inoculation is being rolled out across the world.

The coronavirus pandemic could – not only in the US, but also in and beyond Europe – further exacerbate already existing trends that provide fertile ground for extremism, emotional manipulation and, ultimately, susceptibility to authoritarianism. Joseph S. Nye argues that 'mass unemployment, increased inequality, and community disruption from pandemic-related economic changes create hospitable conditions for authoritarian politics', warning that 'there is no shortage of political entrepreneurs willing to use nationalist populism to gain power. Nativism and protectionism increase.' At the same time, as outlined above, authoritarian states – most of which are struggling to contain both the virus and public criticism – are seeking to shift blame and distract from their own failures. Thus, they have a special interest in fuelling anti-democratic forces and contributing to the undermining the credibility of democracy as a system. The juxtaposition of democracy versus authoritarianism and the ongoing polarisation of US society pose overarching challenges for the new President and the new Congress. Whereas both the EU and the US have, for a long time, focused most visibly on countering foreign interference and third-country disinformation, it has become increasingly clear that domestic disinformation and domestic interference pose a grave threat, and play into the hands of anti-democratic actors, including authoritarian states. The corrosive effect on traditional beacons of liberal democracy such as the US erodes the credibility of democracy as a system, hampering global efforts to promote democracy – a high priority for the EU and the European Parliament.

Against this backdrop, while the need to boost democracy across the world is acute, the pressure for democracies to deliver at home is also growing. At the same time, the focus on defending democracy against attacks – and information manipulation in particular – also increases the calls on both sides of the Atlantic to regulate the 'enablers'. The EU's response to online disinformation includes efforts to strengthen democracy, in line with the 2020 European democracy action plan, as

well as to demand fairness and responsibility from online platforms in the Digital Markets Act and the Digital Services Act. Among proposed areas for transatlantic cooperation, the EU-US agenda for global change – published by the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in December 2020 – aims to boost cooperation at the interface between technology and democracy. It notes 'growing consensus on both sides of the Atlantic that online platforms and Big Tech raise issues which threaten our societies and democracies', including through 'algorithm-fuelled propagation of hate speech and disinformation.' With the insurrection fresh in mind and the impeachment trial of Trump likely to start in February, a 'new transatlantic dialogue on the responsibility of online platforms', as the agenda suggests, seems particularly timely.

Underlining the calls for tech accountability, the European Parliament is mulling sanctions against major tech firms, following reports that their CEOs may skip an important February hearing. Parliament has consistently pushed fighting disinformation to the top of the EU's agenda. In September 2020, it set up a 12-month temporary special committee on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the EU, including disinformation (INGE). It is expected to suggest action for tackling hybrid threats and foreign information campaigns that are harmful to the EU. The first INGE working document, published in January 2021, lamented that 'Europe has long acted as if it had no reason to fear and nothing to protect', noting 'loopholes, lack of coordination, lack of sufficient resources, lack of legislation, and even a certain lack of imagination'. The Transatlantic Legislators' Dialogue (TLD) put tech platforms' accountability on its agenda in 2019. This and other themes linked to democratic resilience will likely be more present in future parliamentary dialogue.

## ENDNOTES

[1] Pro-Kremlin actors used racial issues to stoke tensions in the 2016 presidential election and the 2018 mid-term elections.

[2] A period with no clear information can generally be seen as a window of opportunity for malign actors. The longer it takes, the bigger the room to exploit the uncertainty, confusion and vulnerability of both Democrats and Republicans.

[3] The QAnon conspiracy theory emerged in 2017 and was identified as a potential domestic terrorism threat by the FBI in 2019 because of its potential to incite extremist violence. QAnon-related conspiracy theories have been exported to Latin America and Europe, contributing to anti-lockdown protests in the UK and Germany.

[4] The 'Trump effect' has seen a financial backlash since 6 January, adding pressure on the Republican Party to abandon Trump, with *Fortune* 500 firms (including Disney, American Express and MasterCard) withholding donations over the violence.

[5] After the elections, Facebook and Google banned political and social issue ads with a view to preventing abuse of their platforms, disinformation and confusion about the results. Twitter obscured Trump's false accusations of voter fraud and permanently suspended an account linked to former Trump strategist Steve Bannon over a video message in which he suggested that Dr Anthony Fauci and FBI Director Christopher Wray be beheaded. YouTube and Facebook took down this clip, while MailChimp – a newsletter platform used by Bannon's podcast to contact supporters – closed his account.

[6] Parler was founded by John Matze, Jared Thomson and Rebekah Mercer – the daughter of Robert Mercer, a hedge fund manager and co-founder of the now-defunct political data-analysis firm Cambridge Analytica – in 2018.

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