

The Future of Democracy Ep. 23 - English

[00:01:33] Afternoon. Welcome to The Future of Democracy. A show about the trends, ideas and disruptions changing the face of our democracy. I'm your host, Sam Gill, on this show. What we try to do is take a critical issue of debate or discussion happening in our democracy and open it up. Try to get into the factors that are driving that issue that may not be apparent or readily apparent in the surface level of public debate. And one of the thorniest issues that we're dealing with right now is the role of social media in our democracy from coded to the election. We are in a debate of unprecedented intensity about how these platforms, which connect billions of people, should be managed. What content and voices should they allow and who, if anyone, should they block? At the white hot center of this spotlight has been Twitter. In many ways, Twitter has adopted an aggressive stance. They have removed or corrected content from world leaders and pursued a hard line on authoritative health and election information. Recently, they even rolled out a read before you share feature to reduce the spread of potentially harmful or misleading content. Joining us today is one of the company's leads on this issue. Nick Pickles. Nick is the senior director for Public Policy Development at Twitter. So please welcome to the show, Nick Pickles.

[00:03:00] Hey, son. Hi, I'm good, how are you? I think you're still missing your video.

[00:03:05] Apparently, I can't show it because the outside world.

[00:03:07] So now that's a taste of your own medicine. I guess we will. We'll work on that. But why don't we. Why don't we dove in while we get that get that fixed. There we go. There we go. You're back. See? So, you know, the place I'd love to start is is is really in this moment, which is it certainly seems to me that there has been a real acceleration in the pace of policy change on Twitter in the covert era. And during this election, particularly around forms of misinformation. And so tell us a little bit about some of the changes that you've made, why you made them and what effects you've seen.

[00:03:52] Was thanks to be effective temptation to join you, and I can't think of a more critical time to be discussing this topic. I think. You know, Jack Dorsey, our CEO. Start talking about this concept of health and rather than looking at individual metrics, individual problems in isolation, to try and take a much more holistic approach to how we tackle some those issues. And then faced with the COVA pandemic, the literal and metaphorical priority to protect health became something that really crystallized a lot of our work in this area. So as you referenced, we'd already taken big decisions, things like banning political advertising. It's disclosing information operations, archives we removed, but with kov it, we really had to reimagine, I think, some of the boundaries that had perhaps sort of colored our thinking on these issues. And you do see us now taking action to make sure that harmful misinformation about the covered virus itself is spreading, providing extra context to our users, which is, I think, an increasingly critical part of how we make sure that tech companies balance the need to help their users navigate this information system themselves. And at the same time, taking action to protect from most harmful content. So really, for us, it's been a culmination of several years work combining people and technology. But I think, you know, there are a wide range of challenges that still are out there. Cauvery is changing. The conversation is changing. The challenges are changing. And so for us, the big challenge for me, my colleagues, is that we can't stop thinking about what comes next. And we have to keep thinking, how do we keep evolving to keep pace with everything that's happening around the world? Is it working? Well, we're definitely making progress. I'm never going to say that the job's done because for where we are

today, where we're going to be in a month, in six months depends on a whole range of factors, some of which are outside of our control. But certainly, I think, you know, taking a decision like banning political advertisements was not an easy one. It's not a simple one. We had to make sure that we protected the ability for people to run messages from, you know, nonpartisan official sources about voter registration, about telling people where the polling places are balancing the ability to advocate for something like climate change.

[00:06:13] So really striking those nuanced rules bound around cause based advertising with careful regulation of who can place those other times, but then taking a much bigger step, not just as Twitter to recognize that this was content that we didn't want on our service, but to actually I think this is something that I'm really proud the companies work in this area is to think bigger than just the Day-To-Day problem for us, microtargeting the way that I Amelle, combined with ever decreasing segmentation, is something that we felt was bigger than just our company. And so we made the decision in a societal framing, not just in its words, the framing. And that's how we're looking at Kovik, but we're making good progress. But I just keep changing their behavior, which is always something that we have to be aware of. And I think as the weeks and days proceed, both the U.S. election but also the Brazilian elections, the Indian elections that are happening this year, every election is different and we learn from them all.

[00:07:16] One of the things you mentioned was rethinking the boundaries. And one of the boundaries that you all have been willing to cross that some of the other platforms have in is you have taken out or corrected content by elected world leaders, including in the United States. And I'd love to hear more about how you came to that decision.

[00:07:39] Sure, there's several factors at play in the decision around this. The first thing, and this is something we said two years ago, is that we recognize that Twitter is a place for geopolitics in many ways. What used to happen in a smoke filled room now happens with a mobile phone and tweets, which is an incredible responsibility for us to protect that conversation. But we also have to recognize that there's a very special nuance towards communication between world leaders, the geopolitical saber rattling that we do see, and that's different from the conversation we see. So crafting rules which protects against our users, taking action that may cause harm while protecting transparent public geopolitical conversation. So I think we struck a balance where we felt that this was informed in part by all users and people on Twitter telling us we don't want you to make decisions for us where the harm isn't pressing. We want you to give us more context. Help us understand. And so that's why in some cases you might see a warning message over a tweet that says this tweet broke our rules and we apply that. The world read a number of countries now. And I think actually Brazil and Venezuela, we took action in those countries before we did in the United States and giving people to the context that this breaks our rules. But we know it's a matter of public debate and public record. So we want to preserve its availability, but we'll limit the ability of you can't read, tweet, not tweet. You can't like that tweet. And then also in situations where the harm is lower, taking a situation and putting a find out more. Learn, for example, about COVID, about its transmission. In some countries around the world, we saw public figures talking about 5G, for example. So we had a dedicated information resource that we directed people to just say find out more about covered and 5G and then curating the authoritative sources from tweets, from researchers, government agencies, experts in the field, and getting our users that context through those information buttons.

[00:09:49] What do you it seems to me there's kind of a couple views about this. So one would say this is a kind of global public square and see, you need to balance the rights of

different speakers. But I think there's another version of the critique that you face, right. Which is Twitter is like a new afforded. It's a new tool in the tool can be used by autocrats in the U.K. tool can be used by authoritative, legitimate sources of information and guidance. And it seems to me the argument that some people make that you should be more aggressive in responding to world leaders in particular, is don't allow yourself to be the tool, you know, of their autocracy, to be the tool of their misinformation. Don't become a megaphone, a weapon they didn't even have access to before. How do you respond to that critique?

[00:10:37] Well, I think that something we see everyday around the world is that Twitter is one of the most powerful tools for people who are oppressed, for people who live in societies who in some cases don't even allow access to Twitter. Twitter is a tool for those people to challenge, to bring to attention some of that at the beginning of the Koven crisis video that was been smuggled out of China and being broadcast to the world through Twitter. So I think the nature of Twitter as a tool is something that is for politicians, but it's also for activists, for journalists, citizens. I think looking globally that the bigger challenge I see is a lot of the policy conversations we have. Look at Twitter or social media as a silo and don't look at how the wider information ecosystem plays. And so you do see differences between, for example, the role of state media, the role of corporate media that perhaps might have a franchise owner. You see the role of cultural institute missions and the whole web of information ecosystem has a very different depending which one lens you look it through has a very different problem. And so one of the things that we talk a lot about is we need to look at policy solutions that protect the whole media ecosystem. So we introduced the policy. We do not allow you to post hacked materials to Twitter. But what do we do when those materials on the front page of an international newspaper? And so I think that's where this tension arises between people looking to social media to solve problems that actually may exist far beyond our kind of control and our boundaries.

[00:12:11] I want to push on this a little bit, though, because I know it certainly seems to me to be at least partially an evolution in our whole thinking about social media. I mean, I had a chance a few weeks ago to talk to a former CEO of Twitter, Dick Costolo, and an ad about a quote that I think is attributed to him, but actually belongs to your original council, which is your Twitter is the of free speech wing of the of the free speech party. And you know, that that sentiment was espoused, you know, at the same time that, you know, your predecessors at Twitter were getting calls from the State Department saying if you take the service off line to do maintenance, you will have a tangible impact on the green revolution happening in Iraq. So there certainly was a real moment in which I think your point about the power of the tool to liberate people really validated this idea that we had these sort of new this new space for expression and activism and ideas. It seems to me, though, you know, the question we started with is covered in the election are raising real questions about, you know, how in the real world to what extent is the tool effective for that kind of positive discourse and to what extent does the tool really enabling harmful content? I mean, has your as your guy's view changed about. About the kinds of the real in real life, the risks versus the theoretical rewards?

[00:13:35] I mean, I think about quotes and untruths attributed to so many people at this point in this period of free speech. Everyone said anyone is free to claim it, free of intellectual property rights, which, you know, I think, you know, suddenly and I think, you know, looking back at the Arab Spring, I think one of the reflections that some people have shared is we focus too much on the technology and not enough on the people and actually the activists who are putting their lives in danger every day. They were doing that work and the technology enabled the technology shed the message. But without those activists on

the ground, the technology wouldn't have had the impact it had. So I think, you know, I do think that sometimes it's it's easy to give the credit or in some cases the blames the technology company rather than looking at the social conditions that exist. But I think your point is absolutely right. The the way that we understand how public conversation happens now has evolved in part because the companies have matured the research. You know, one of the things that the Twitter from its beginning, the phrase was the tweets must flow. Well, one of the things about the tweets must flow as they've always flowed through an open API to researchers and to academics. And so we see studies around the world every day where people are looking at how is Twitter being used, whether it's in the context of religious and social issues, and actually particularly for kov it. We opened up a dedicated research point with no cost attached for researchers wanting to specifically study tweets about code. So I think one of the challenges is, does the public open Internet and Twitter being public and open by definition? And then there are walled gardens that exist, whether because of actions of a company that depends on a government. And so understanding what's happening between those two spaces is something I think that's becoming increasingly hard. But our view is that particularly with Cove, it the risk of harm significantly increases when you have information telling you masks, for example, called health side effects or social distancing isn't required when broadly recognized by the scientific community. Both are essential. And so I was taking action. Whether it's to remove content, to provide context is reflective also of the world we're now living in. And so, you know, that's why we focused on policy on three key areas, covered civic integrity to protect elections. And also sometimes you can manipulate the media. And those three policy areas, having the greatest potential for harm are where we focused our efforts. But I think the shift that has happened in thinking is also that the world isn't just about do you take content down or you leave content up? I think for me, that's one of the biggest shifts that's happened in the past year or so is now there are a range of interventions. The work we've done on Cubin on, for example, to amplify, we are allowing we allow people to speak, but we're not going to allow the amplification through the product verses in some situations, putting a label to context while always maintaining that for issues like promotion of terrorism. We take a zero tolerance approach on removing that content. That I think is the biggest shift is that the world of 10 years ago is was just leave up take. And now we have this range of interventions, each of which appropriate to different homes, different risks.

[00:16:52] So I guess. So this to me, one feels like a very profound shift. I mean, it feels like a shift from in less than five years from a world view that seemed to suggest that innovation, openness will always be at least net beneficial. That sort of in the language of tech, the affordance is will somehow outweigh the vulnerabilities to a view that says there's real harm and we have to be actively engaged in harm prevention and harm reduction, even if that has some innovation cost. But I guess the question would be, is that enough? Right. I mean, even this we know the story of this week is that there is that sort of thanks to the affordance is of thanks to what technology can do trumps sort of it however you want. The way Trump responded to the question about. Repudiating white supremacists. It's sort of seeded a viral campaign among the proud boys. Among this white supremacist group, the proud boys that they were actually able to promote themselves in. And I you know, I take your point that that's a mainstream media moment that gives birth to that. That's a that's an elected official on live national broadcast television. But certainly the ensuing campaign took advantage of what technology allows people to do. Can you get ahead of the way that these actors, whether it's a foreign government, an extremist group or someone just interested in creating foreground health information, their ability to move and adapt even as you make policy?

[00:18:23] I think this is exactly as you say, that the big shift that's happened and perhaps even since adequacy of Twitter is the shift from being reactive to proactive. So if you take something like state media two years ago or three years ago now, we just have a decision for Russia and split Russia today and Sputnik to remove them from ability to advertise, which we've now brought in to any state controlled media. That's a reactive change. It stops an advertising. We're also proactively now applying labels. So if you see a tweet from Russia today and Sputnik from Chinese state controlled media, you actually, in your timeline and real time, are notified. This is coming from a government. So we've also taken that action for government accounts because one of the things that we recognized and particularly looking at protests around the world, the interplay between state controlled media and government is incredibly important. So by being proactive and applying those labels, we give people more context. I think that's the big shift that has happened. Last year, about half of the content that Twitter took down was taken down surface biotechnology reviewed by people and removed rather than waiting for a user report. So that to me is the big shift is rather being reactive, waiting for the problem and then trying to deal with it on a case by case basis. It's how do you take much more systematic approaches, ideally leveraging technology so that you can get ahead of these problems. But I think the challenge is that balance is always evolve. So there's always an element of reactivity. And how do you how do you build resilience? And so one of the things that we decided to do not to empower Twitter, but to empower the research community, to empower governments, the public was every time we now take down an information operation that we attribute to a forum, states that concept isn't available for anybody. And so what we are now doing is making that archive available to researchers. Not so they can just look at how he tweets was until a certain day. But look at the narratives. Look at the tactics, which through then having wider social discussion of as you may have seen yesterday, we took down some Iranian accounts, thanks. In partnership with the FBI. Educating people about the tactics of the is about the narratives they are using. It's part of building resilience and empowering the public to be better protected. So, yeah, I think the industry is far more proactive than it has been. And for us, that use of technology and people going forward is can be critical to how we protect the public conversation.

[00:20:49] So what are the questions, speaking of proactive we're getting from the audience, is what are you what are you starting to plan for the aftermath of the U.S. election, where there's obviously a lot of anxiety about kind of calling the election content that there was, you know, some electoral administration problem that you'd cast. The cast, the results in doubt. Are you already thinking about how you respond to that?

[00:21:10] Yeah, and I think that's why I chose this. Just looking at my mug, I have a very broad and Twitter mug, but it's I'm from the UK General Election 2015 and the number of elections have happened around the world. Every year is an election year on Twitter. So we learned tomorrow that previous experiences. So in some cases take the Indian election. Actually, the polling process takes place out of Sova several weeks. So you're thinking, how do you protect against those kind of cascading effects of results from previous regions? So that our approach on this is is, again, a combination of taking down content where there's the highest risk of harm. So a simple level. They're telling someone to vote on the wrong day and we're going to remove that under our civic integrity policy, where we're going to take a look at content that perhaps might be confusing and risk being misleading when there's no call to action and there's no specific issue there. That's what we can provide, extra context. So that might be linking people through a label to information that's coming from credible authorities at the state level. And so it might be that if you're in a certain state, how do you find out what's happening? Well, often those state election boards, those state attorneys general were tweeting in real time and the latest

information. So we want to make sure people can find the information quickly. And we've already banned political adverts. And I think what you're now seeing actually is a recognition that political ads aren't just about campaigning. They're about setting a narrative and spreading a message far beyond organic reach. And so by limiting the advertising already, I think we closed down the risk. And then we're going to make sure that, you know, that the news organizations that we partner with, that that credible information is prominent for all of our users so that when people do start to make statements, if it's within our rules, we can provide context. But if people do start to make statements and I'd urge everyone who is watching to go and read also book integrity policy. We have updated it specifically to cover questions of undermining confidence in the election and also claiming victory early. Politics is always gonna be fluid. So we've got to have flexibility in our policies. But this is something that I think we and with our partners in government and in civil society are looking very carefully at how we make sure we get the best information and the most accurate information to the most number of people quickly.

[00:23:29] One question that often comes up around and around policy is for platforms of the scale of Twitter is is the enforcement question. You know, can the computational tools or human moderation, whatever, or hybrid actually keep up with the level of content that might be violating the policy? How do you assess the ability for Twitter to especially given the frenzy of content around these issues, to actually be able to enforce at a level that you think it's going to have a beneficial effect?

[00:24:00] And this is something that when we're thinking about carefully as well. So the way that Twitter works, obviously there are accounts who have prominent followings. There are small new accounts. And we said when we updated our policy that we would be focusing on the most harmful content with the widest audience. And so that's our focus is on. And again, this, I think, is a recognition that the study, when we talk to regulators globally, that all pieces of content are not the same. And so if you try and have a standard approach where every piece of content must be reviewed in the same period of time, well, that risks is is that you're not not focusing your resources on the areas of highest impact. And so we're focusing on whether it's the the the verified accounts that you will see on Twitter, whether it's those accounts with the highest engagement, but also working with partners. And so, again, this is something, whether it's our partners in government partners within political parties and our partners in civil society, trusting their expertise to say this might be something that's building momentum. Really pressing problem for us is the idea that people are organizing on other platforms. And so actually working with partners who are saying, hey, you might have seen this conversation happening, they're thinking of coming onto Twitter, be aware those kind of conversations where we can be proactive and prepare to things that are being organized off. Twitter is also a big part of how we make sure we stay ahead of this challenge.

[00:25:22] What? So one thing I want to be sure to ask you about before we wrap. Is how it's being made in the last couple of weeks. Basically nudging people to actually read something before they share it, which I thought was sort of an interesting admission of something I think we all suspected, which is that the ease of sharing, which is obviously one of the great, fantastic elements of social media, that those of us who use it take advantage of can be an incentive to pass along content that an individual may not have fully digested. And obviously, you know, by definition leads to the proliferation of that content. What? Tell us a little bit about how this came about and how it's going.

[00:26:07] Well, I think the simplicity of the intervention. I think it speaks to the benefits of taking an approach that isn't just Kontum moderation. So in the case of digital literacy,

which is something that is a societal need, it's going to come from schools. It's going to come from parents. It's going to come from non-profits and civil society. But there are things that we can do. And this isn't a company expressing a view on the content. It's not a company trying to tell you to take one view or the other is just making sure that people are. David, run. I might. He's done some great work about looking at how do you trigger a mindset of critical thinking. And I think this is a this intervention. And so that the data we saw was that by prompting people to say, you haven't read this, are you sure you want to share it? We actually saw a 40 percent reduction in the number of people who were retreating that content without having read it. So I think that's a really simple example. We have a great long standing partnership with you. Next, go to spread digital digital digital literacy skills. And I think this is that this intervention is a really good example of how often with content moderation, you're all focused on making a judgment of the content. And actually, this is something where you can use behavioral signals to say, actually, just by nudging somebody, you say, would you like to read this? We can improve critical thinking, improve digital literacy, and then hopefully improve the wider quality of information that's being shared across Twitter.

[00:27:34] You know, one of the sort of generalized arguments about social media, particularly social media, that includes that that that mix, there is revenue and advertising. Is that the phenomenon that you identified and are intervening is exactly the thing that's trying to be generated, right? That what we what the systems are designed. I'm not saying Twitter specifically, but it's sort of a general argument that social media is that the systems are designed to get you not to read. Right. To get you to just engage with as much content as possible, share it with as many people as possible. That's the network effect that makes the platform valuable. So to what extent is this? Is this against interest? Do you think to what extent is this going to?

[00:28:17] Is this kind of intervention going to run aground on the just the the the economic physics of the way that a lot of social media works?

[00:28:27] Well, I think this is a really good example of when Jack Dorsey, your CEO, testified to Congress and he spoke about this is something about rethinking the fundamental incentives of services like Twitter. And so I think this is a good example of how, you know, people may focus on the business model that we have. But actually in an intervention like this, taking decisions to understand why do people on Twitter behave the way they do? Can we help improve the quality of information on Twitter? This is a good example of how actually rethinking those incentives is something that we can make meaningful progress on an improved Twitter. And I think then this goes to the question of how we improve the health of Twitter is our view that improving health is pretty critical thinking is it is a supporter of our business model and that the healthier Twitterers. That's healthy for all the people on Twitter. It's healthy for the conversation and it's healthy for our business. So I think actually what you're seeing, as you can, the so the cynical assessment, maybe those two things were intention. But actually, from a point of view of looking at the health of Twitter, we think they're actually very complementary.

[00:29:38] So last question. You've used the word health a lot. And I know it. It refers in part to a specific way that you've defined what a healthy Twitter is. But let me ask you a bigger question: What is the healthy relationship between social media and democracy?

[00:29:55] Social media is making democracy healthier. What's it doing for democracy?

[00:30:00] Well, I think maybe the whole other conversation. I'm not sure how much time I got left, but I think for me, as someone who you know, I live in a different country from my family and where I grew up, and I'm someone who is deeply passionate about issues of politics and how society and technology interact. The transparency that a platform like Twitter brings were things that used to be written in diaries, things that used to be shared in small circles of advisers and only years later brought to life. We now have real time open public conversation between elected officials, across state lines, across national lines, across continental and political divides. And that's something that I think is still transformative. And so progress is never linear and there's always gonna be challenges. And we have to be deeply and acutely aware of the responsibility. We have to make sure that conversation is healthy. But I think that the net benefit that we spoke about earlier, the value of being able to speak as an individual to people directly in public office and actually hear back from them, have conversations, certainly with some great research that the Knight Foundation actually published, looking at people who used platforms like Twitter, saw a broader range of information sources than people who were not digitally connected. So I think you're seeing people accessing more information, having more conversations with people from different backgrounds and different cultures. That, to me, is a still a absolute. Underpinning benefits of democracy. I think one of the challenges as we evolve through elections around the world is the role of social media in providing quality information and context to people, both platforms, but also that the responsibility of both policymakers, the candidates in elections and the wider media ecosystem, each playing their part. And I think that's where we're now seeing an awareness of The Washington Post recently publishing principles that would underpin how it would cover certain challenging issues during the election. And so I think we're we're incredibly invested in making sure that the health of Twitter improves. We think that is a support, that's a democracy. And actually, as a company advocating for the open Internet, which we believe drives societal and democratic value, is something that is far bigger than just Twitter, but also speaks of the fact that we believe the open Internet does go hand-in-hand with democracy and those places where the open Internet isn't available. Well, we think actually that by advocating for the open Internet and protecting the open Internet, we're also advocating for and protecting democracy.

[00:32:38] Well, if you want to get deeper on these topics, you can follow Nick on Twitter at Nick Pickles. You can also follow Twitter is public policy team at policy to learn more about some of these developments and decisions as they precipitate. Nick, thank you so much for joining us.

[00:32:52] Thanks very much.

[00:32:54] All right, folks, we've got some incredible shows coming up in the in the weeks to follow on October eight for a very different view than I think you heard today. We'll hear from Rashad Robinson from Color of Change, was a lead architect of the Facebook ad moratorium by a number of advertisers this summer. The stop paid for profit campaign on October 15th. We'll hear from Steven Hawkins, director of research at Warren Common, which has been putting out field leading research on polarization and division in United States politics. And on October 22nd, we'll hear from Zeta Fetching, an associate professor at the University of North Carolina and who has emerged as a kind of contemporary Nostradamus about topics ranging from social media and its role in our democracy. We talked about today to the Kovik crisis and how we should be responding as a reminder, this episode will be up on the Web site later today. You can see this episode in any episode on demand and KFC dot org slash after your show. You can also subscribe to the Future of Democracy podcast on Apple, Google, Spotify or wherever you

go for podcast. E-mail us at F.D., show at KF dot ORG. or if you have questions for me, just send me a note on Twitter at the Sam Guille. Please stay for a few seconds after the show to take a two questions survey that as always, we'll end the show. To the sounds of Miami singer songwriter Nick County. You can check out his music and follow him on Spotify until next week. Thank you for joining us. And stay safe.