

Social Media

US justice department signals pursuit of tech giants

Attorney-general says he is exploring concerns over competition and free speech



Facebook's chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg, centre, arrives for the Senate intelligence committee hearing © Bloomberg

Hannah Kuchler and Richard Waters in San Francisco 7 HOURS AGO

The US justice department signalled that it intends to pursue technology companies over competition and free speech issues, after President Donald Trump warned last week that Google, Facebook and Twitter should be careful where they tread.

Just as Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer of Facebook, and Jack Dorsey, chief executive of Twitter, appeared to pass unscathed through a Senate Intelligence committee hearing about Russian interference on US elections, Jeff Sessions, the attorney-general, announced a new line of attack.

He said he would hold a meeting with state attorneys-general to discuss what he called the “growing concern” about whether [social media](#) platforms “may be hurting competition and intentionally stifling the free exchange of ideas”.

Last week, Mr Trump attacked big technology companies including Google, Facebook and Twitter for smothering rightwing views. All three deny any anti-conservative bias.

The president had said in July that he would investigate what he claimed was a “discriminatory and illegal practice” of limiting the visibility of some tweets. He added last week that Google, along

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with Facebook and Twitter, “are really treading on very, very troubled territory, and they have to be careful”.

In the Senate hearing, Facebook and Twitter pushed back against a suggestion that they should be legally liable if illegal drug dealers show off their wares on their websites.

The two companies are currently not liable for almost all user-generated content, under section 230 of the US Communications Decency Act.

But Congress passed legislation last year removing the exemption for content that promotes sex-trafficking and on Wednesday, Senator Joe Manchin asked the companies whether they would be “open” to a similar dilution of the legislation to fight against drug dealing.

Ms Sandberg and Mr Dorsey said in the committee hearing that their companies rely on the “safe harbour” of section 230.

Mr Dorsey argued that without section 230, Twitter would have to restrict free speech further. “The only reason we’re able to speculate we can increase more health in a public square is because of CDA 230 so we’d need to finely balance what those changes are and what that means,” said Mr Dorsey.

Ms Sandberg said that the rule enabled Facebook to “look for things [illegal content] proactively without increasing our liability and so we would want to work very closely on how this would be enacted”.

The final Senate Intelligence committee hearing on Russian interference in US elections was being closely watched for further clues about whether Washington will pursue tech regulation after a string of controversies.

Senator Mark Warner, the Democratic vice-chair of the committee, warned at the start of the session: “The era of the wild west in social media is coming to an end. I’m sceptical that ultimately you’ll be able to truly address this challenge on your own. I believe Congress is going to have to act.”

Mr Warner proposed a whole range of changes, from identifying bots on the platforms to questioning what he said was a “flawed” advertising model. But Republicans are reluctant to impose mandatory rules on the companies, pushing them instead to provide more context and clarity to users to help users make their own decisions.

Senator Richard Burr, the Republican chair of the committee, said the problem was a “first amendment challenge”. “We cannot regulate around the first amendment,” he said.

[Twitter](#)’s share price fell 4.64 per cent to \$33.23 in afternoon trading on Wednesday, while

[Facebook](#) was down 1.4 per cent to \$168.77. [Alphabet, Google's parent company](#), was down 1.65 per cent to \$1,177.25.

The committee criticised Alphabet after Larry Page, chief executive, declined an invitation to appear.

[Read Sheryl Sandberg's opening comments](#)

[Read Jack Dorsey's testimony](#)

The testimony came as a [new poll](#), conducted after the controversy over the use of Facebook data by Cambridge Analytica, showed that Americans might be spending significantly less time on the site, taking breaks of up to weeks at a time.

The poll from the Pew Research Center said 42 per cent of US adults who use Facebook have taken a break from the site in the past year, and that 54 per cent had adjusted their privacy settings.

The number of Facebook's US monthly active users held steady in the past quarter, but the company has not released recent figures for how long each user is spending on the site. If time spent is declining in the US, the world's largest advertising market, this could hit future revenue.

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