

Meta CEO Zuckerberg says US pressure on Covid-19 posts was 'wrong'

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Zuckerberg addressed a number of controversies centered on content moderation on his platforms.

Republicans cried victory on Tuesday after Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg said he now believes US government pressure on his social media

platforms to take down certain COVID-19 content in 2021 was "wrong," and would resist similar attempts in the future.

In a letter addressed to House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jim Jordan and released by Republicans on the committee on Monday, Zuckerberg addressed a number of controversies centered on content moderation on his platforms.

He also asserted that he did not plan on repeating funding efforts for US election infrastructure ahead of the country's presidential poll this year, donations that had drawn sharp criticism from Republicans and used to stoke conspiracy theories.

The letter was a submission to a committee led by the hard-charging Republican Jordan that over the past months has accused tech platforms of throttling conservative views and pushing a democratic agenda.

The submission comes just over two months out from a tightly contested US presidential election race, with the spotlight on widespread online misinformation about the candidates.

Regarding the pandemic, the Facebook founder said President Joe Biden's administration had in 2021 "repeatedly pressured our teams for months to censor certain COVID-19 content, including humor and satire."

"I believe the government pressure was wrong, and I regret that we were not more outspoken about it," Zuckerberg wrote.

"I feel strongly that we should not compromise our content standards due to pressure from any administration in either direction—and we're ready to push back if something like this happens again."

'Big win'

Republicans took the letter as a victory, with the Republicans' House Judiciary Committee account on social media platform X, formerly Twitter, labeling it a "big win for free speech."

The White House defended its actions during the pandemic, which killed more than a million people in the United States amid bitter political battles over vaccines and attempts to limit the spread of the virus.

"When confronted with a deadly pandemic, this administration encouraged responsible actions to protect public health and safety," a White House spokesman said Tuesday.

"We believe tech companies and other private actors should take into account the effects their actions have."

Zuckerberg also said he would not be repeating his COVID-era push to fund nonprofits working to support US electoral infrastructure due to such donations being seen by Republicans as being partisan.

"My goal is to be neutral and not play a role one way or another—or to even appear to be playing a role," he wrote.

The donations have been seized upon by former President Donald Trump, who has falsely alleged that the donations helped throw the 2020 vote by helping fund the organization of elections in swing state counties.

Trump has even opposed a potential US ban on Chinese-owned TikTok under the premise that it would only help the tech tycoon.

Seeing Zuckerberg regret his non-partisan personal donations under the

pressure of Congress is both ironic and "a little disturbing to see," author and misinformation expert Renee DiResta told AFP.

"Certain parts of the letter strike me as very much caving to right-wing pressure," she added.

Trump, who is seeking a return to power in November after losing his reelection fight to Biden in 2020, claimed that Zuckerberg's statement offered support for his conspiracy theory that the election was stolen.

"This is what everyone's been waiting for—THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION WAS RIGGED!" Trump wrote on his Truth Social platform.

The letter to Congress also touched on controversy regarding Facebook's handling of a story regarding US President Joe Biden's son Hunter that was published by the New York Post in 2020.

Zuckerberg said the story, which purported to expose corrupt dealings by the Biden family, was "temporarily demoted" while Facebook fact-checkers probed the possibility of it being "a potential Russian disinformation operation."

The Meta CEO said the story was ultimately found not to be part of such an operation and that the platform has changed its policy such that posts in the United States are no longer demoted while fact checkers investigate them.

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