

Social Media Suspensions and Shadow Banning: Political Bias or Genuine Disinformation Control?

Tauhid Zaman

Associate Professor

School of Management

Yale University

New Haven, CT, USA

Abstract: Social media platforms like Twitter wield significant influence over the visibility and reach of content. This power prompts critical questions: Are some voices marginalized based on political leanings? Or are platform interventions primarily aimed at mitigating the spread of misinformation? Recent discussions spotlight allegations of political bias in "shadow banning," a subtle mechanism where certain content is less visible to users, often without their knowledge. Drawing from a field study on Twitter, we evaluate these claims, finding that while there are instances that may appear as bias, there is equally strong evidence suggesting that these are strategic actions to counter the spread of disinformation. Moreover, through simulations on large social network topologies, we show that if shadow banning was indeed driven by partisanship, its implementation could be so subtle that overt political biases remain undetected. This underscores the imperative for rigorous transparency and oversight for the actions of social media platforms.

Bio: Tauhid is an Associate Professor of Operations Management at the Yale School of Management. He received his BS, MEng, and PhD degrees in electrical engineering and computer science from MIT. His research focuses on solving operational problems involving social network data using probabilistic models, network algorithms, and modern statistical methods. Some of the topics he studies in the social networks space include combating online extremists and assessing the impact of bots. His broader interests cover data driven approaches to investing in startup companies, algorithmic sports betting, and biometric data. His work has been featured in the Wall Street Journal, Wired, Mashable, the LA Times, and Time Magazine.