

U.S. Sen. Johnson: Demands Twitter explain COVID-19 censorship policies

Posted on Friday, Sep 23, 2022

>> **WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)**

WASHINGTON – On Wednesday, U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson (R-Wis.), Ranking Member of the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, sent a letter to Twitter CEO Parag Agrawal demanding documents explaining the development and application of Twitter’s COVID-19 misinformation policies.

On January 3, 2022, Sen. Johnson tweeted a chart containing data pulled from the government-run vaccine adverse events reporting system (VAERS). The chart examined and compared government data on the number of adverse events reports associated with COVID-19 vaccines, medications used to treat both COVID-19, and non-COVID-19 medications. Twitter labeled the chart “misleading” and blocked all replies, shares or likes for the tweet.

At a Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee hearing on September 14, 2022, a Twitter executive [testified](#) that Twitter’s “COVID misinformation policy only looked at information that was demonstrably and widely believed” to be false. When Sen Johnson [asked](#) the executive why Twitter censored his tweet containing government data, the Twitter executive was unable to answer the question.

Read more about the letter in the [Post Millennial](#).

The full text of the letter can be found [here](#) and below.

September 21, 2022

Mr. Parag Agrawal

Chief Executive Officer

Twitter, Inc.

Dear Mr. Agrawal:

On September 14, 2022, Jay Sullivan, General Manager of Bluebird at Twitter testified before the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee (HSGAC) about social media's impact on homeland security. In the hearing, Mr. Sullivan testified that Twitter's "COVID misinformation policy only looked at information that was demonstrably and widely believed" to be false.^[1] I write to request information and material concerning the development and implementation of those policies.

Dr. Rochelle Walensky, Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) testified before a Senate Committee in November, 2021 that the United States has the "most robust vaccine safety system we have ever had in this country."^[2] In October 2020, before the vaccines for COVID-19 were approved, CDC's Dr. Tom Shimabukuro said, "VAERS [the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System] is the national passive surveillance or spontaneous reporting system that is co-managed by CDC and FDA. VAERS can rapidly detect safety signals and can detect rare adverse events."^[3] He added,

VAERS traditionally has provided the initial data on the safety profile of new vaccines when they are introduced. For COVID, vaccine reports will be processed within one to five business days, depending on the seriousness of the report. CDC and FDA receive updated datasets daily, and data mining runs are planned to be conducted every one to two weeks. So this is an example of the timeliness and responsiveness of VAERS going back to H1N1.^[4]

Given the fact that our public health officials have highlighted how VAERS could serve as a useful tool in tracking the safety profile of vaccines, I examined and compared government data on the number of adverse events reports associated with COVID-19 vaccines, medications used to treat both COVID-19, and non-COVID-19 medications. I combined the government data and put it into a chart. I tweeted the chart on January 3, 2022.^[5] Twitter labeled it "misleading" and blocked all replies, shares, or likes for the tweet.^[6] I have reproduced the censored tweet below.

[Tweet censored by Twitter in January 2022](#)^[7]

I asked Mr. Sullivan why Twitter censored this information. He replied, “I wasn’t at the company at the time, but what I can tell you is that we want robust discussion on the platform of any issue. A COVID misinformation policy was developed that seemed to me, and again I don’t develop it, but it seemed quite narrow to me.”^[8]

In light of Mr. Sullivan’s inability to articulate why Twitter censored government data from my Twitter account, I request the following information and material:

1. Has Twitter worked with U.S. health authorities in the development of its COVID-19 misinformation policies? If yes, please provide:
 - a. The complete list of U.S. health agencies Twitter worked with on the development of its COVID-19 misinformation policies;
 - b. The names and titles of each official at each of the federal health agencies that Twitter worked with on the development of its COVID-19 misinformation policies; and
 - c. All communications with any employee of a federal health agency referring or relating to the development, implementation, or application, of Twitter’s COVID-19 misinformation policies from January 2020 to the present.
2. Mr. Sullivan testified that Twitter’s “COVID misinformation policy only looked at information that was demonstrably and widely believed” to be false.^[9] Please explain what is “demonstrably” false about my tweet in January 2022 reproducing government data from our public health agencies?
3. Please provide all documents and communications, internal and external of Twitter, referring or relating to Twitter’s application of its COVID-19 misinformation policies to my Twitter page.

Thank you for your attention to this important request. Please produce all responsive material by October 5, 2022. I look forward to receiving a prompt and complete response.

Sincerely,