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SOCIAL MEDIA

Ottawa professor in standoff with Twitter over 'tar and feather' post

POSTMEDIA NETWORK

University of Ottawa law professor Amir Attaran remains in a standoff with Twitter over a post he believes offered fair criticism of government delays in vaccinating children, but that the platform has labelled “abusive.”

Attaran was banned from the social media platform earlier this week after he suggested in a Tweet that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau should be “tarred and feathered” for the way his government had delayed the approval of a vaccine for young children in Canada.

Twitter initially said the account would not be reactivated because Attaran had violated its rule against “targeted abuse.”

It has since restored Attaran’s Twitter feed, but the account remains locked. In an email to the professor, Twitter said the account would remain locked until Attaran deleted the offending tweet as an acknowledgement that it violated Twitter’s rules against abuse and harassment.

“I find that very hard to acknowledge,” Attaran said Friday. “It doesn’t seem to me that, in any sensible person’s mind, that could be harassment. What astonishes me is that Twitter has doubled down, saying it is.”

He wants Twitter to admit that it’s wrong and overstepped.

Attaran also complained that it’s impossible to enter into a discussion about the issue with an official from the giant social media platform, which has not responded to any of his email. He contends political discourse is filled with violent, metaphorical language: “skewer the party leader,” “hold the mayor’s feet to the fire,” “roast the prime minister.” Politicians regularly “fight,” “battle,” “wrestle” and “beat” one another, he noted, in the pages of newspapers.

“Where does this end?” Attaran asked. “If Twitter forbids ‘tar and feather’ as political metaphor, are these prohibited, too?” Social media giants have become the arbiters of what is acceptable political discourse, he said, but provide no forum in which to debate the terms of those limits. “There is absolutely no mechanism to have a discussion with Twitter,” he said. “That’s a problem.”

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