

2021 Model Senate on Science and Technology

Journalist Articles

Students playing the role of Journalists at the Council's 2022 Model Senate on Science and Technology were tasked with writing articles that summarized and highlighted the program's committee proceedings. We invite you to learn more about the Model Senate program and the successes and challenges that the students playing Senators and Expert Witnesses experienced throughout the day by reading the articles below!



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The Dilemma of Free Speech Versus the Safety of People:

How Section 230 Creates Tension Between Big Technological Companies and Constitutional Rights

Section 230 states big tech companies are not reliable for the content their users' post. How companies and the government regulate this act calls into question the dilemma of free speech versus the protection of users.

Senators and expert witnesses from the Big Tech and Social Media Committee sought to tackle this dilemma at the World Affairs Council of Philadelphia on December 7th, 2021. Senators from both parties voiced their concerns for the privacy and safety of civilians' freedom of speech. The expert witness' ranged from the CEOs of the Big Tech companies to whistleblowers, researchers, and sociologists; all expert witness's testimonies played a crucial role in the outcome of the conference by allowing the senators to comprehend the severity of the issues at hand. The Big Tech CEOs exhibited some distress for the safety of their customers, but as the day went on, it became clear their worrisome remained focused on the possibility of losing money. The lower profile expert witness' expressed how more regulation needed to be enacted to better protect the users of the sites, no matter the cost.

After much discussion, senators and witnesses came to an agreement on the root of the problem. They decided to focus on the topics of enhancing access to small businesses to help them in terms of economic competition against billion-dollar enterprises. The committee members also chose to emphasize their attentions to the accountability for misinformation on platforms, the accountability for the effects of hate



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speech and stopping extremism in algorithms, fix the spread itself of misinformation, fix the methods in which fact-checking functions, and address concerns of companies self-preferencing their resources.

To fix these problems, both the expert witness' and senators worked collaboratively to find solutions. They disagreed on the issue of moderating all content versus only moderating flagged content, but they were able to come up with a resolution. They agreed to hold social media companies accountable for the review of all content, whether the media exists as flagged or not, under their own guidelines and regulations. To lessen the burden of the moderating, they added a clause stating the screening will be conducted by a company-produced algorithm. To address the senator's concern of bias in said algorithms, the technology would be evaluated and approved by the government. This segment of their bill also stated that every quarter, there will be a third-party open-source report and evaluation that is published to the government and the public. The report would assess the unbiased accuracy of the company's algorithm and propose ways in which it can be improved. The senator's and anti-Big Tech expert witnesses' also wanted to improve the equitable contention in the technological private industries as well as decrease Big Tech's monopolistic practices. They decided that, along with preexisting laws, dominant platforms with considerable control over a specific market or industry should be prohibited from self-preferencing or favoring their own products and services. Additionally, they integrated a passage for the consolidation of tech companies in private industry requiring further disincentivizing through a federal regulation of industry. Lastly, the committee desired to implement American policy directed toward American commerce and product advertising. They highlighted the need for more protections for online consumers and prevent platforms from selling personal data for financial benefit and ad revenue purposes.

It remains no secret money remains a necessity for bills to work. The committee settled on directing 5% of the FTC budget, or about \$5,000,000 U.S.D., toward the bill. They also allocated a segment of the proposal to allow government grants to be approved for companies, for fact-checking, after they have verified and approved their evaluation systems.

This bill primarily affects all internet companies and their users. With this in mind, the senators needed to vote on these proposals, and if they thought these resolutions were what remains best for the future of the country. By a vote of 10 yays, 0 nays, and 1 senator abstaining, the bill was successfully passed by the Big Tech and Social Media committee, therefore, concluding the proceedings.

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On Wednesday, December 8, 2021, students from all over the greater Philadelphia region came together to participate in the World Affairs Council of Philadelphia's Model Senate, taking place at the Community



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College of Philadelphia. This year our committees discussed two heavy issues, prevalent in current society, Big Tech & Social Media and Carbon Capture & Sequestration.

The overall set up of the event gave students assigned roles as co-chairs, senators, expert witnesses, and journalists. The overall event was entirely student led, with the Committee Co-Chairs helping to conduct the program through extensive preparation. The senators prepared questions for witnesses and proposed potential policies based on their senator's background. The witnesses prepared statements and assumed the role of their designated person in order to best answer the questions asked to them by senators. The senators and expert witnesses then worked together to create a bipartisan policy proposal. Finally, the senators vote on the policy proposals they created in their committees to see if it would pass. In the end, all four committees did pass their proposals.

Big Tech & Social Media focused on important issues such as Consumer Protection, Product Safety, and Data Security, specifically taking into account Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act which regarding censorship and free speech. Many senators and witnesses agreed that it would be best to revise Section 230 to include expectations of the 1st amendment. The "Big Tech" that these committees revolved around were Google, Facebook, and Twitter, with attending CEOs as expert witnesses from all three companies. These CEOs spoke about the inner workings of their companies, as well as their consistent views on transparency between company and users, protection of user data, and lack of liability of the company for events occurring on their applications.

One senator said in a heated discussion regarding censorship and limiting the power of big tech companies, "Monopolies of big tech companies prevent new companies from growing".

Following the affairs, the two committees of Big Tech ended up creating very similar policy proposals. Specifically, both wanted to revise and amend Section 230. The committees wanted to increase transparency regarding AI and their code, which had a major effect on the mental health of youth. Committee 1 wanted to create bi-partisan committees to review reports of Big Tech to further investigate and pass through Congress. Large tech companies would be monitored by the FTC, and fined if they do not comply with the standards set. Committee 2 also wanted to make companies liable for the content on their site and in an effort to increase transparency and commitment to their users by opening companies up to lawsuits. They also developed a strike system where the CEOs and people that regulate the content must be held to a certain standard and every time that is not kept, the companies would receive a strike, with a max of three. After three strikes, the companies power will be limited and there will be incentives for companies to be more transparent with users regarding their algorithms and actions. Both committees want to mend Section 230 so companies can remove content for users' safety.

In committees discussing the second issue, Carbon Capture & Sequestration, members focused on the crucial concepts of Clean Air, Climate, and Nuclear Safety. These two committees mainly discussed sources

of clean energy, such as carbon capture green energy. Some of the expert witnesses included CEOs of Chevron and Exxon Mobil, and the majority of their questioning was related to jobs . Many senators were concerned about the switch to green energy and the way it would affect the workforce and economy. The CEOs answered this reassuring training implementation on the new systems as well as a way to increase jobs by adding research positions.

Subsequent to the proceedings, the committees created and voted on policy proposals. For Committee 1 of Carbon Capture & Sequestration, their main points regarding tax breaks for companies using CCS (Carbon Capture and Storage) technologies, as well as mandatory training for all employees whose jobs would be affected by the switch to clean energy. Certain areas of land, such as endangered forests and land of indigenous people are to be protected and preserved. There is also an emphasis on revitalizing carbon sinks in order to reduce the concentration of carbon in the atmosphere. Committee 2 of Carbon Capture & Sequestration also wants an implementation of CCS technologies. They focused more on tax incentives for businesses who could prove the technology was implemented. In addition, there would be increased taxes for those companies who chose to opt out, with smaller companies' costs offset due to their size. Taxes would be reduced by the amount of carbon dioxide removal a company has made, with a total goal of net zero emissions by 2030. Lastly, the whole process of incentives would be funded by the taxes of the companies that do not comply, creating a cycle which would be easier to maintain, rather than needing an additional budget for government funding.

Overall, this was an excellent simulation, as it modeled the general proceedings of the United States Senate. Students from schools around the area were able to interact with one other for a common goal while discussing relevant issues in the spirit of bipartisanship.

Sara Frankel, Committee Co-chair Senator Blumenthal for Big-Tech & Social Media, commented, "Today has been such an engaging and thought provoking experience that I am so grateful to have had an opportunity to be a part of."