



Episode 996: Gab, the Social Media Platform Where You Can (Gasp!) Say What You Want

Guest: Andrew Torba

WOODS: All right, let's talk about Gab. It's a great service platform that I think a lot of my listeners are unfamiliar with, but it's doing important work. And then there have been some interesting developments with it I want to talk about, but let's start with your story. You're a young guy. Am I allowed to ask you your age on the air?

TORBA: Sure, I'm 26 years old.

WOODS: Okay, so technically, I could be your father. If I got started really young, I could actually be your father, which is a creepy part of this whole thing, that you're engaged in this whole, tremendous revolution. Yeah, but go ahead. Give us your background.

TORBA: Yeah, so I started a company called Automate Ads back in 2011, and originally, we were doing consulting and managing the ad campaigns for businesses while I was in college. And we originally started building some technology to automate a lot of the things that we were doing manually as consultants to make our lives easier and to obviously operate more at scale. So that software ended up getting me into Y Combinator, which is basically the Harvard of Silicon Valley accelerators, and I got to witness and experience and live in Silicon Valley, which had been really my dream since the eighth grade. I wanted to be a tech entrepreneur. I wanted to be like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates and change the world with technology as a tech entrepreneur in Silicon Valley.

And when I got out there, I became very disillusioned with this dream that I have had from a very young age. The people were not who I thought they were. They did not have the agendas that I thought they did, and I just felt like I did not fit in there at all, especially as someone who comes from a very conservative background. I'm a Christian. I would consider myself to be a classical liberal with a dash of libertarianism mixed in there as well. But I think overall, I just felt like I didn't fit in from the get-go.

And what I saw happening was this rise of censorship across every major platform. And if you look at Silicon Valley, you see this centralized control over everything from hardware to software in the hands of about four or five companies and, when it boils down to it, four or five individuals. This type of centralized control has now led to what we've seen over the past year, year and a half, which is mass censorship of dissenting opinions and I guess the homogenization of ideas and thoughts and discourse

on the web. So I saw this happening and I said, Why is there no alternative? Like, where do you go if you don't want to be on these mainstream platforms? There's really no alternative that says, You know what? We don't care about your political opinions. As long as you're following the law, we support free speech. You've got it under the First Amendment, period. Like, why is there no service like that on the Internet?

So I built one, and that's where Gab came into play. And we launched in August of 2016, and we spent about 10 months or so building in private beta. So originally, you actually needed to get an invite to even get into the service. And it's a social network. It's an ad-free social network, and our mission is to defend individual liberty and the freedom of speech and the free flow of information on the Internet. There's a 300 character limit. It is sort of like a Twitteresque micro-blogging site where we have 300 characters, although you can actually edit your posts and you see a log of what has been changed as well, a very simple feature that somehow other multibillion-dollar corporations can't figure out for 10 years. But other than that, we have Gab TV, which is a live-streaming video service as well, so that sort of competes with Periscope and YouTube and things of that nature. And then we have Gab News, which is powered by our community of people that is sharing links and information and breaking news as it's happening.

So it's a very interesting and diverse social platform that is very community oriented and, again, grounded in free but also lawful speech. I think a lot of people have mislabeled us as something that we're not and tried to make us out as this crazy anarchist website where anything goes, and that's just not the case. We have very clear user guidelines. It's basically: don't break the law, don't dox people, don't post their social security number. Things that are very I guess I would deem common sense, but, you know, I'm hesitant to say that with the Internet, right [laughing]? So that's kind of the broad overview of I guess my background and how I got started and really what our overall broad vision for Gab is.

WOODS: So in other words, any site is going to have some terms of service. There's almost no site that's going to say, "Please, if you find the social security numbers of all our members, make sure and post them immediately." No one's going to do that.

TORBA: [laughing] Right.

WOODS: But I guess the idea is that your terms of service are not intended to shut down legitimate discussion, which is what increasingly seems to be happening. In fact, it's not so much necessarily that people are having their entire sites shut down, but just for example, the other day — I mean, we all heard about what happened to — I guess it's Daily Stormer or a couple of other sites, where they had the whole site taken down. But what's more interesting, because most people don't visit sites like that, is increasingly mainstream sites, very, very rapidly — it's amazing how quickly it's happened — are seeing different Internet services taken from them.

TORBA: Correct.

WOODS: So for instance, an online donation platform that was taken away from the Ruth Institute. The Ruth Institute was founded by Jennifer Roback Morse, who used to be an economist at George Mason University, just a traditional libertarian, and then

she went and started a pro-family group, which is — that's all it is. There's nothing crazy about it. There's nothing hateful about it. They don't wear hoods. None of this. But the Southern Poverty Law Center doesn't like them because, from the point of view of the Southern Poverty Law Center, the whole Catholic Church is a hate group, so they're going to peel off one group at a time. So payment systems are being taken away from that. I think PayPal may have banned JihadWatch.org, which is Robert Spencer's site on Islam. Now, maybe you don't like what Robert Spencer has to say about Islam, but do we think this is a good thing that there would be a chilling effect on all these sorts of groups? So is there any way that a service like Gab can help? Or is it that we need more web services across the Internet that are just going to be run by people who say, "I'm not here to be your mother. I'm just here to provide you a payment platform or web hosting or whatever."

TORBA: Correct, yeah, so that is the centralized problem right now, is again, the entire Internet has control, centralized control by these gatekeepers. And these gatekeepers include payment processors, as you mentioned, hosting providers, domain registrars. All of these things go into building and sustaining and growing a website. You can't just say, "I'm going to create a website and nobody's going to stop me from doing that." You have to partner with third-party services in order to build and grow and support that website. And what's become readily clear to me, especially over the past week, is that there needs to be a new free speech tech revolution.

And we've actually put out a call to action. We have a hundred engineers in Silicon Valley. We call this the Free Speech Tech Alliance, and these are high-level, senior-level, executive-level engineers, investors, product managers from across all of Silicon Valley and across all of the technology industry, who see what is happening, who see this censorship of, like you said, not only people on the extreme right or the extreme left, but also just average, everyday, normal people with different and diverse opinions that go against the progressive talking points. And that's incredibly scary. When you can't express yourself, when you can't speak freely, when you can't have open discourse and dialogue on the Internet, that's when people take the next level and go to the dark web, and there's all sorts of illegal activity and plots of violence and all this stuff happening there. So I think that free speech and speech itself is a much better alternative than violence or illegal activity. And what's happening is you're forcing all of these people off the Internet. It's just not going to work. You're censoring not only the extreme people, not only the influencers, but your aunts, your little cousin are being put in timeout by Twitter and Facebook for saying something or sharing a link. It's absurd.

WOODS: I think, by the way — I've already told people that there's going to be noise in the background. I think I'm here at the same time as some kind of a dog convention, so everybody's just walking around with their dogs yipping and yapping. But it creates realism and authenticity the podcast, I find.

TORBA: [laughing] Absolutely.

WOODS: Well, you and I have talked before, and you were telling me that there is something in the works whereby — or for all I know, it's been released — but whereby Gab is going to help solve this problem of people not being able to get payment processors.

TORBA: Right, absolutely. So I believe the ultimate solution to all of these problems — again, the core problem here is centralized control, centralized control by four or five companies in Silicon Valley. What needs to happen is decentralization, what needs to happen is radical transparency, and what needs to happen is the blockchain revolution. So with technology like the blockchain, posts become censorship proof. Content becomes censorship proof, and you don't have to worry about these massive transaction fees that these third-party processors charge, number one, and you're not going to be beholden to the terms of service from these third-party processors either. And by the way, even if you're not breaking them, they can just decide that, "Hey, guess what, we don't want to do business with you anymore. Goodbye."

So what Gab is going to do is actually mint our own cryptocurrency token, which we see as a utility. So you're going to actually be able to use this token on Gab to exchange value back and forth between content creators and their viewers, for example, or the ability to give tips or subscribe to creators for exclusive content, for example, purchase stuff in a marketplace. All these things become possible with cryptocurrency and with the blockchain. So I think whether that takes — the technology has obviously been in development for quite some time now, but whether the adoption takes 5 years or 10 years, I think that is ultimately what is going to solve this problem of centralized control and the politicization of the web and the censorship that we're seeing at scale from these very large corporations.

WOODS: What would you say to people who say Gab sounds like a great idea, but in practice, it's just a place for the alt-right to say nasty things about a lot of people?

TORBA: Right, so the media has tried preventing us with this for a very long time, and it's just absolutely, categorically false. We have users from around the world. We have an incredibly diverse team ourselves. So I think we've proven this wrong on a lot of levels. There are a lot of centrists and folks on the left that also feel disenfranchised. For example, Bernie Sanders voters after the last election, where we saw things like the Wikileaks information that was censored across the entire web, and they felt like they were being silenced and their political opinions and ideas were also being stifled out by the establishment. So we have a very diverse base.

And it's only natural for a free speech platform that says from day one that we welcome everybody, we are for everybody, we support free speech and individual liberty for everybody — it's only natural for the first wave of people in the door to be those who are completely blacklisted, completely shut up and banned entirely from other networks, because the reality is that they have nowhere else to go. So that was always the first wave, but we've grown way beyond that, and we have people from all over the world with different viewpoints. We have libertarians and folks on the left and folks on the right and folks in the center. So we have a very diverse community of 260-some-thousand people, and I totally disavow the fact that anybody who wants to paint us, as a neutral-technology piece of code, as political, because the base itself is politically neutral. It's a piece of technology. It doesn't have libertarian ideas. So to try to paint technology as that is really quite absurd, and we've said from day one that we welcome everybody and this is about free speech, and we've been very consistent with that statement and that mission.

WOODS: Now, tell me about this recent controversy I think we can't avoid. I did not see what the offending tweet was, but apparently — I don't know which third-party provider you were dealing with — basically said we're not going to support you if you let this kind of material out. And this underscores the problems that everybody's facing, but can you describe the situation?

TORBA: Yeah, so I got an email from our domain registrar on a Friday, and they said — the Friday before Labor Day weekend, right? So they said, You have to update your address information or we're going to seize your domain in a week. And I was like, Wow, that's incredibly aggressive. Like, just to update our information on our domain, okay. So I update the address, I update the information. I was like, Okay, fine. But I knew something was up. So three days later, two or three days later, I get another email from the registrar, and this time it's from their legal department. And they say, We have received a report on an individual post of an individual image on your site. It needs to be removed within 48 hours or we're going to take further action and potentially seize your domain.

Now, for those who don't understand the unprecedented level that this is at here, if they were to seize our domain, you would go to Gab.ai and you would get nothing. The site would just not exist anymore. So the magnitude of this outcome is huge, and to have such a short period of time, 48 hours, to react to it is also unprecedented, never mind you that it's during Labor Day weekend.

So I looked at the post, and the post was an image, and the image was a meme, and it was a very controversial meme. So it showed the woman from Charlottesville that passed away, and it showed the moment of impact. So you can assume that she had passed away in this image, and this is an image that breaks our guidelines. And it wasn't something that I would ban the user over; it wasn't something that I was going to make a big fuss about. However, it should have been tagged as not safe for work, because I felt that that image was not something — you know, you're not going to want to see something as grotesque and especially as controversial as that in the workplace. Like, this isn't an image that you would walk up to your boss and be like, "Here, look at this," or email to the entire workforce. So I felt that it should have been marked not safe for work. I asked the user to kindly remove it because it was breaking the guidelines.

And basically, the whole user base lost it. Like, everybody thought that we were going to start censoring and the whole community started freaking out. And I said, Whoa, whoa, wait a minute here, wait a minute here. Our domain registrar contacted us and said if this is not taken down, our entire domain is going to be seized. So the question became: do we ask this user to remove this one post, this one user to remove this one post, or do we have the entire site shut down for 260,000 people from around the world. So the user did understand this position that we were put in, and he did end up deleting the post.

But the nature of this is really unprecedented, because now we have domain registrars that are acting as speech police deciding who and who cannot be on a platform with their lawful and legal speech. This user was not breaking the law. It may have been an edgy post. It may have been something that a lot of people would not have wanted to see. But beyond that, it wasn't breaking the law. It wasn't like they were trying to

recruit for ISIS. They didn't post child porn or anything of this nature, because obviously that would be common sense. It's like, yeah, we're going to follow the law. This breaks our guidelines. This breaks the law. We're removing it. The end. It wouldn't have been an issue if it was that. And the fact that a domain registrar can tell us as a private individual corporation with our own set of standards and laws around who can be on the site and what they can post is really — I've never seen anything like it. I've never seen something like this happen before, and it's really scare me, and it scares me about the future of the free and open Internet.

The other scary thing is the way that Apple and Google have treated us. And I'm a big believer in the free market. You have a very libertarian audience, right? I myself self-identify as having libertarian principles. But when the market is no longer free, when the market is rigged by a duopoly, then I think it's time for government to step in and do something, and that is the case right now with the mobile marketplace. If you look at mobile hardware and also software distribution on that hardware, the entire market is owned, like 98% of the market, by Apple and Google. And that is it. And if they decide like they did in our case — in Apple's case, they would not allow our app in the app store because they said they found objectionable content. Now, I challenge anybody out there to not find objectionable content — whatever that means, by the way, because that's very subjective — on Twitter, on Reddit, on Facebook, on Tumblr. Anywhere on the Internet that you're going to go looking for it, you're going to find it. So that's Apple's situation.

The Google situation is they allowed us to be on their app store for months, and all of a sudden, this Google engineer comes out and he writes this manifesto. They fire him. We publicly go out there in the press and say, "We'll hire you. We support your freedom of speech. We support diversity of ideas and ideologies." And within the week, we get our app removed from the Google Play Store for "hate speech." Now, again, I challenge anybody out there to not find hateful speech on Twitter, Facebook, anywhere else on the Internet.

So what we're seeing is these two companies have colluded together in anti-competitive behavior, because Gab competes against YouTube with our Gab TV streaming product and video product, and we compete against obviously Google Plus, so these companies are deciding that we cannot compete in the free market, and they have shut us out completely. And what they're going to come back and say is, they're going to say, Well, people can still access Gab on their mobile device. They can go to a mobile browser and type in "Gab." Well, what I would say to that is: tell that to the hundreds of consumers who email us on a day-to-day basis asking us where our app is. The apps and the app stores have a dominance, again, on mobile distribution of software and on the use and I guess penetration of any company that wants to participate in the mobile marketplace.

So I think that it's time for the government to do something about this. At a minimum, you see anti-trust cases successfully being placed against Google. For example, in the EU where they just got sued for I think it was \$2.5 billion for anti-competitive, anti-trust behavior. And there are others as well that are forcing their hand. So we have actually started a legal fund, and we are pursuing all legal avenues against the Silicon Valley robber barons who have completely removed us and removed our ability to participate in the free market.

WOODS: Now, this is a whole other episode in itself —

TORBA: Right.

WOODS: — the what do we do about these behemoths. But I would say that when I look at the state of public opinion, particularly among younger folks, yeah, there are some who are clued in and understand the preposterousness of hate speech laws and all that, but a lot of them seem quite okay with it. So I think even the government would be only a short-term solution, because after a while, people would say, "Wait a minute. The government is implicitly protecting hate speech. We can't have that."

TORBA: Right.

WOODS: So I think the long-term solution has to be a much, much tougher slog, a much longer slog of just trying to build parallel institutions until such time as sanity is restored to the world. Now, along those lines, you just raised about a million dollars in a very short period of time. Tell us about that.

TORBA: Yeah, so we were approached over the past year by a lot of venture capital firms and all the traditional people that you would think that would invest in a startup. And we outright rejected all of this and actually bootstrapped completely for the first year on donations and on our business model, which is Gab Pro, a premium version that helps keep the site ad free and gives you some additional features that the free version doesn't have. And what we found is that we wanted to stick to our mission of putting people first and in involving our people in our community at every level at every stage of growth in this company's existence. So we actually opened up our very first funding round to the people. We did a titled-free equity crowdfunding campaign and raised that million dollars from our users on the site. They could have invested as little as, I believe it was \$199 or something like that, to buy actual shares and equity in our company. So that is something that I'm actually very proud of, and we raised this money in like 36 or 38 days or something like that.

And \$500,000 of it actually came in within like a 48-hour period after people found out that we were removed from the Google Play Store, because I think then it became very real. Because we've been saying these things. You know, like we've been saying, Listen, this censorship is happening. This double standard is happening. This anti-competitive behavior is happening. And then all of our users saw, whoa, wait a minute, now we have something empirical. This is actually impacting us. Their app is pulled from the app store for no reason and Twitter's allowed to stay and they have 10,000+ death threats to the president of the United States, which not only breaks their terms of service but breaks the law. Something is going on here. So I think that really energized the base and pushed us over the line of that million-dollar raise.

And where we're going next is we're going to be launching our own initial coin offering. Again, it's going to be a utility token that users will be able to use actually on the site to exchange value back and forth with one another and help keep the site ad free, because the ultimate vision here is the advertisers are really pulling a lot of the puppet strings with this censorship, because YouTube and Twitter and Facebook want to create "advertiser-friendly environments." And some of the problems that we have in this world require us to have very difficult conversations, and if we can't have those

conversations, we can't progress as a society. So I think that by blocking that stuff out just to appease advertisers, you're not only stifling innovation; you're stifling human progress.

And I think what we want to do and I think what people get who are on our site and hear what we're talking about and what we're demonstrating is we want to defend the free and open web that we all grew up — at least I did — knowing and loving. And I think that is really in jeopardy today, and if we need to rebuild the entire Internet from the ground up to defend that, then that's what we're going to do. So I think a lot of people are inspired by our story, and I've been talking with a lot of engineers who are starting other alternative projects that are free-speech friendly. So domain registrars, payment processing, hosting, all of these things, all of the infrastructure stuff that most normal people don't understand that's required to run and operate a website needs to have services in place, third-party vendors in place, that say, No, we will defend free speech. As long as your speech is lawful and follows the First Amendment of the United States, then we'll allow it. And that's really what our mission has been from day one too.

And you would think that we're like ISIS or something, the way that the media has reacted to us. I have never seen such disdain for freedom of speech and for individual liberty and for the free flow of information in my life, and the reason for that is because they're losing their control of the narrative and they know it. People are taking control of the narrative on a worldwide scale, and these elites and these establishment companies and businesses are freaking out because they can no longer control it, and the people are waking up and realizing that this censorship is happening at scale, again, not just to influencers or edgy, extremist people on the left or the right or trolls or whatever. It's like average, everyday, normal people now.

Facebook is banning over 1 million accounts every single day. And they claim it's spam or it's scammers, and then they lump it in at the end and they say, "or hate speech." And I'd be willing to bet that a great majority of those are actually people that are just aunts and uncles and grandmas and cousins that are expressing their political opinion that Facebook as a corporation doesn't agree with. Facebook has 3,000+ content moderators that decide who gets to speak and who doesn't, and I'd be willing to be, being that they're based in San Francisco, which is one of the most liberally biased cities in the world, that they are heavily censoring and suppressing conservatives, as they have demonstrated in the past. For example, in May of 2016, they had a whistleblower come forward and say, We are actively suppressing conservative news topics and sources from our trending topics product, which is used by billions of people every single month, in what they see as news on the platform. It's absurd.

So I think these things are going to continue to happen. Silicon Valley is going to continue to double down on their censorship. And the reason for it is all of this is really stemming out of Germany and out of the EU with these hate speech laws that have recently been passed. So if Facebook, if Google, if Apple, if they don't remove what the EU, what the German government sees as "hate speech" within 24 hours, they can face fines of up to 55 million euros or something ridiculous, right? So this is arguably extortion by the EU and forcing the hand of these American companies to not only suppress speech in the EU, in Germany, but also apply these same standards to

United States citizens who have the protection of the First Amendment. So we not only have an anti-trust case issue here, we not only have an anti-competitive issue here; we also have a First Amendment issue here, because you're having U.S. users that have, again, the protection of the First Amendment being taken away from them by these online giants, which arguably — very arguably and very empirically can be called utilities, public utilities.

So I think we have a lot of very complex issues here. And again, like I said, we have a legal fund. We've already raised about \$20,000 in about two weeks on top of the million dollars that we just raised last month as well. We're exploring all legal options possible here to continue to call out these Silicon Valley robber barons for what they're doing.

WOODS: Well, I've had a number of my listeners make the argument that some of these companies have rather incestuous relationships with government, such that it makes it hard to think of them as traditional private companies. Now, whatever the merits of those arguments are, what Gab is doing is extremely important and valuable. I'm on it, so people — first of all, what's the website? How do people get there?

TORBA: It's Gab.ai, and you can sign up right on the front page, create and claim your username instantly.

WOODS: All right, so then you can go to Gab.ai/tomwoods, and there I am, and I would love to have you follow what I do. And that'll give me a kick in the behind to get on there more and post more stuff, which I need to get in the habit of doing. Anyway, I'm really glad about what you're doing, because the easiest thing in the world is just to sit around lamenting how terrible things are, but the much, much, much more difficult thing is to get out and do something active to try to change it. And you are one of the — well, I'll say you are the 1% in that respect, the person who actually says, "Maybe I can do something good that counteracts this." So I'm glad you're — maybe it's one-tenth of 1%, people who actually do something. I have an email list on entrepreneurial topics, and my law that I always am reminding people of is Woods' Law: nobody ever does anything. Oh, they talk a good game. I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that, or wouldn't it be great if somebody did X, or someday I'm going to build up another income stream. But they never do it. They talk and talk and talk. You actually did it, and so I really appreciate it. I'm glad to hear it.

TORBA: Thank you. I'm very humbled by that, and I appreciate you having me on as well.

WOODS: Pleasure was mine. Best of luck with it.

TORBA: Thank you.