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Twitter suspends N.J. lawmaker for questioning vaccine mandates. He wants an apology.

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A New Jersey lawmaker wants Twitter to apologize after the social media giant suspended his account Saturday for a Tweet questioning whether governments should force residents to be vaccinated.

State Sen. Declan O'Scanlon, R-Monmouth, said his account was reinstated last night only after he agreed to take down the offending message.

The June 25 Tweet read, "Given that we have crushed Covid with combination of natural immunity and voluntary uptake there is no reason anyone should be compelled to take the vaccine. Restrictions/mandates/vaccine passports all uncalled for."

In an interview with NJ Advance Media, O'Scanlon said the message expressed a "reasonable opinion."

"I'm not Tweeting crazy crap," he added.

The suspension highlighted the power social media companies have over online debate at a time when officials and business leaders nationwide are weighing vaccine mandates.

In New Jersey, Hackensack Meridian Health recently said it would require employees to be vaccinated amid increased transmission rates, although local hospitalizations and deaths have recently hit record lows. Nearly 70% of New Jersey adults are fully vaccinated against the coronavirus and the state has one of the highest vaccination rates in the country, according to federal data.

Republicans blasted Twitter over the senator's suspension. The state's GOP wrote online that the move signaled an "ongoing and worsening suppression of free speech."

The company does not appear to have taken recent action against others in New Jersey, such as 101.5 radio host Bill Spadea, who have more directly challenged vaccines, which experts agree are safe and effective.

Twitter spokeswoman Nikki Kria wrote in an email that O'Scanlon's Tweet violated their "misleading information policy," which bans "false or misleading information about COVID-19 which may lead to harm."

At the same time, she said a recent Tweet from Spadea — which said, "The vaccine does not stop covid. Prove me wrong." — did not violate the same rules.

On O'Scanlon's timeline, the message is currently blocked with a disclaimer saying, "This Tweet is no longer available because it violated the Twitter Rules."

Twitter and other platforms are essentially town squares, O'Scanlon believes. "That they could so randomly choose to censor relatively innocuous communication — that's a scary thing."

O'Scanlon wants Twitter to reinstate his message, but he's hesitant about how to challenge them online lest they punish him further.

He said he has not been suspended before.

The senator said he was notified of the suspension around 10 a.m. Saturday. After he agreed to delete the message, his account was taken offline for 12 hours. He said he declined an opportunity at the time to appeal the decision in case that process dragged out his suspension.

He said he and his family are vaccinated and he's worked to expand vaccine access in Monmouth County, especially for teachers.

Until hospitals become overwhelmed, people hesitant to get the shot should be free to make their own choices, O'Scanlon said.

"Unless they're impacting the rest of us, it's none of government's business what these people want to do," he said. "They want to take that risk, and their action puts nobody else at risk, then government should shut up."

O'Scanlon's Tweet also linked to an article on The Daily Mail that questioned whether teens should be forced to receive vaccinations, but that story noted that "COVID-19 vaccines made by Pfizer and Moderna reduce the risk of getting sick."

The senator has been involved in vaccine controversies before.

Last year, he endorsed a bill to eliminate religion as a recognized reason for children to avoid getting other vaccinations before they attend school. Hundreds of parents opposed to vaccines in general angrily chanted his name during protests at the Statehouse.

That proposal ultimately failed.