

Reema Moussa 0:01

Hey everyone. Thanks for tuning in to this week of the Tech Policy Grind. We're excited to chat about some of the latest news in the tech policy world. And this week is pretty spicy. My name is Reema Moussa, and I'm here with the one and only Lama Mohammad.

Lama Mohammed 0:24

Hi everyone happy pre-Friday. As a reminder, the stories and opinions shared on this new segment do not reflect the beliefs or of our institutions or organizations. And sometimes even ourselves, as we are just two youngins trying to make sense of the frenzy that is tech policy. And with that, nothing screams mayhem more than the Elon Musk and Twitter saga. So if you didn't think this would happen, it did. Elon Musk, the CEO of Tesla is now the proud owner of Twitter as of last week. So Reema, what does this mean for the future of content moderation and social media in general? Take us to the facts.

Reema Moussa 1:04

Yeah. So there's some really interesting implications of the new chief twit, taking over Twitter. And there's a lot of interesting discussion, especially on the HR side of how Twitter is going to be composed in the future. But I think it might be helpful to take a step back first and just go through, like, what happened in this deal, and how it all unfolded. So back in April of this year, which feels like eons ago now. But also not that long ago, because COVID has made time just a figment of our imagination-

Lama Mohammed 1:51

Not real. Nothing is real.

Reema Moussa 1:54

But back on April 14, Elon Musk announced that he was going to buy Twitter, or offer to buy Twitter for \$54.20 per share. And just about 10 days later, on April 25, Twitter accepted that deal.

Lama Mohammed 2:18

Oh, and real quick. How much is that? In total? How many billions of dollars are we talking about? In total?

Reema Moussa 2:27

We're talking 44 billion. A lot of people have mentioned that Twitter, like valuing Twitter at 44 billion is unprecedented and kind of unheard of, especially because Twitter's actual technology isn't all that revolutionary. So Twitter is really known at this point for its platform and its community of users. So that I think will play really heavily into the content moderation discussion that this brings up. On July 8, Elon Musk said, "nope, nevermind, I want out." It went to the courts. And now as of October 27, Elon Musk owns Twitter. So a lot has happened in these past six-ish months. Lama, what's your take on all this?

Lama Mohammed 3:31

So my take, I have a lot of takes. But I think I give Elon Musk six months before he decides that he doesn't want Twitter anymore. I don't think he realizes just the amount of responsibility that comes with owning the social media site, because Twitter is not just a social media site. It's become the bulletin board for news. It's the way people communicate with their with their elected officials. It's become the staple tool, and the front and center, you know, movement of social protests and political dissent. I think he is toying with such a fragile part of modern democracy, that it's going to amount to something greater than what he thinks he is that he's going to want out. That's what I think. And on that similar note, I also think it happened at the worst timeline. I mean, we're in the middle of a US election season. And you know, not just in the US but all around the world. I mean, Indonesia is about to have their election and they are the country with the largest Muslim population in the world. Brazil just concluded their election, Mexico was in the middle of one and it's it's a fragile time right now. And so if content moderation decides to change or if he decides to fire his entire content moderation team God forbid, you know, this is really a test to what might happen to a very important part of Twitter: The fact check. That's what I'm really worried about. And what that might mean for hate speech. I mean, the Montclair State University, they published a study either a couple of days ago or last week that showed a very dramatic and very frightening increase in hate speech on Twitter since Elon Musk acquired the social media site. Unfortunately, the use of the N word went up by 500%. Not that Elon Musk has changed content moderation rules, but people think they can get away with it now. And those two things are very frightening. Is this the end of democracy as we know it? I don't really know. So those are my takes.

Reema Moussa 5:44

Yeah, and it's really interesting to see that Yoel Roth, who is the head of safety and integrity at Twitter, actually posted about the slew of accounts who have been posting a huge spike of derogatory tweets. And more than 50,000, tweets, repeating a particular hateful slur came from just 300 accounts.

Lama Mohammed 6:21

Right.

Reema Moussa 6:21

And he reports that nearly all of them are inauthentic. So it will be interesting to see the discussions within Twitter and from Twitter's public safety team, as far as a response to a spike in hateful content from bots, or from real humans.

Lama Mohammed 6:46

Yeah, that's a really, really good question. And I will Twitter even

have a lead of trust and safety yet in in a couple of weeks? I don't know. I mean, the the amount of layoffs that are going to come from this, he paid \$44 billion to buy Twitter. But now he has no money to actually run the the social media site, he wants to get rid of ads. So now people are going to pay \$8 To have a blue check. Really? So who knows if he has no money to even have a blue check on Twitter? Is he going to have enough money to pay for trust and safety developers? It's very frightening. So we'll just have to wait and see.

Reema Moussa 7:27

Indeed. So I want to switch gears really quick on what's coming in the Supreme Court, as far as hearing a lawsuit on section 230, which will be the first time that the Supreme Court really tackles this issue head on.

Lama Mohammed 7:47

So one of the reasons why this court case has been debated for so long was because many judges have ruled that Google is not liable, because it is protected under section 230. So for those who don't know, section 230 shields companies from two things one, it shields them from civil lawsuits arising out of illegal content posted by a website's users. You know, Google is a large conglomerate, they can't really control who say who's saying and who's doing what, who's posting who's doing what they can only use so much as they can, given a content moderation team. And second, it states that websites retain lawsuit immunity, even if they engage in content moderation, if something is posted or taken off off their site, so that helps companies when they decide to remove something hurtful that you know, it doesn't really go under the First Amendment. But what does this mean for society? Does some people think of this as the end of the internet? Is it going to change what we see what we don't see? There's a lot of question about, you know, the First Amendment question about you know, are we being silenced? Are we being restricted? And so it's, it's, it's a complicated and very messy topic, I would hate to be a First Amendment lawyer right now. And the second thing is, you know, if we do win this case, what's gonna happen about the future of algorithms? You know, is it a good thing? Or is it a bad thing? You know, algorithms impose a lot of significant harm in society. You know, some people say that the algorithms that you see on a social media site are the big reason for why people are radicalized, because the most crazy thing is gonna be at the top of your newsfeed. Well, if that changes and the algorithm changes, maybe we won't see the most radicalizing on top of our newsfeed and maybe we'll skewed a lot radicalization less. And so a video, like the one that we saw, or ISIS content that we saw in this case, maybe it'll reach fewer people. So it's very gray and it's a gray area. But those are my two cents. And we'll see what happens.

Reema Moussa 10:01

We will indeed this is a case to be watching for sure. And I think

questions around content moderation are only going to continue to grow. So for anyone listening, who is just starting to navigate the space, this might be an interesting field to keep your eye out for, do some research and maybe get involved. And with that, thanks so much Lama for joining for this segment. And now we'll turn to the core of the show a chat with Lena Ghamrawi, who is currently a Data Protection Officer and Privacy Counsel at Quora, and a former Foundry Fellow as well.

Hi, Lena.

Lena Ghamrawi 11:07

Hi, Reema.

Reema Moussa 11:08

How are you? Thanks for coming on to the show.

Lena Ghamrawi 11:12

Oh, thank you for inviting me. I'm doing well. Really excited to be here.

Reema Moussa 11:18

Yeah, excited to chat with you. So I want to dive right in. You've had an incredible career thus far in tech law and policy, and especially the privacy field. But I want to start from the beginning, what got you into this space?

Lena Ghamrawi 11:41

All right, so I'm gonna take you way back to September 11, 2001. And, actually, even prior, I'll take you further back. So my family is from Lebanon, and they, my dad immigrated to the US in the 70s. My mom came in the early 90s. And my dad was working for the federal government at the Veterans Hospital, as an IT guy, when 911 happened, and because you know, of his background, his name, his religion, and because he worked for the federal government and had access to some sensitive information, unfortunately, our family was targeted by the US government and the FBI, under the Patriot Act, and so, literally a month after 911, we had FBI agents come to our house, and we had people come ask about ourselves, we had agents ask our neighbors about our activities, and who was, you know, coming to our house, what we were like. So yeah the FBI agents, came to my dad's employer, and essentially, we were just being monitored. And we kind of knew we were being monitored, besides the obvious fact. But even for, I think, years afterwards, we would be on calls with family in Lebanon, and you'd hear like clicks on the phone. We'd had mail opened. At the time, I remember, an ACLU lawyer came to our house and just said, Hey, we're opening this big case against the government for invasion of privacy, essentially. Do you guys want to be some of the named plaintiffs? And my family said no, because they really wanted to cooperate with the US government, and they didn't. I think it's just a

different mindset. When you're an immigrant, they just felt like, they would not go against the government. And they, you know, had nothing to hide. But I was really intrigued at what this ACLU lawyer was offering us. And I was really young at the time I was nine years old. But I remember asking my parents, you know, what, what's a lawyer? You know, what are lawyers? What are they do? And my parents said, you know, in some cases, they help people, and they help defend your civil rights. And so I grew up knowing I wanted to be some kind of civil rights lawyer. Fast forward to law school. And I got into law school, I knew I didn't want to do litigation. I knew I didn't want to do criminal law. I still liked the idea of being some kind of civil rights lawyer, but the reality was, you know, they just don't get paid well, and I took out a ton of student loans. So being pragmatic, I realized that maybe wasn't the best, best path forward for me. And I felt pretty lost. And it wasn't until my 3L year that I took a internet privacy law class and loved it and decided, okay, I want to be a privacy lawyer and that time in 2016, that wasn't even really a thing. And I just figured out, you know, this is what I want to do. Once I graduate, I'll figure out, you know, what kind of lawyer I'll be and how will actually implement this practice. And I got very lucky, because then I got connected with some folks who were lawyers providing privacy consultant, consulting to tech companies in the Bay Area. And that's kind of how I got started into the field. So long story short, basically, I personally have experience with what a lack of privacy could do to, you know, me as an individual, or to my family, or even just to my community. And I realized I wanted to get into a field that would help combat that.

Reema Moussa 15:53

From your sort of beginning of your career, what did you end up taking on out of law school?

Lena Ghamrawi 16:05

As I mentioned, I took that privacy law class, and during that the course of the class, I read an article by a woman named Kenisa Ahmad, who is an established privacy lawyer. And I just reached out to her at the time and told her I'm, you know, 3L, I'm going to graduate, do you know how I can get into the field? And we ended up meeting in person in San Francisco a few months later. And she just said, Well, I'm launching my own privacy consulting firm, do you want to come be our first associate. And I was so stoked, I took the opportunity. The pay was not good. But the experience was incredible. And so I started my career in consulting, but I knew that the end goal was always to eventually go in house and be privacy counsel.

Reema Moussa 17:02

So your educational roots and in sort of family roots as well, are in California. But now you're DC based? So how has being bicoastal sort of affected your perspective and work in this area? And how did you find that move to DC?

Lena Ghamrawi 17:27

Yeah, that's a great question. I never thought I would leave California to be honest, I, yeah, born and raised Bay Area. And I ended up meeting somebody who at the time was living out in DC, and we started dating, and we did long distance. And eventually one of us had to make the move. So I figured, why not? Let me try something new. And I'm really glad that I did. I think moving to DC really opened up so many opportunities for my career in a way that maybe being in the Bay Area wouldn't have. And it's been nice, because when I was in the Bay Area, and I was consulting, I was, you know, helping companies implement these new privacy laws at the time, it was really around the GDPR. We were helping a lot of our clients prepare for yeah, for the GDPR. So it was 2017. The GDPR was enacted in 2018. And we were just like really figuring out the basics of how to build a privacy program, both for more mature and established companies, but also just for like, really small, scrappy startups. And being in DC was nice, because I saw the other end of this, which is the policy aspect. And I saw how these laws were being considered and shaped and how different organizations influenced the policymaking? I think I wouldn't have really appreciated both sides, unless I've actually had the chance to be on both ends of this. I think it's really critical. I think, you know, if you're going to be shaping law and public policy, you should also figure out a way to create rules that can actually be implemented by the companies that you're going to be regulating. And I think, on the other end of it when I was helping implement these rules, you know, I didn't really appreciate how nuanced and how difficult it was even passed these laws. So it was nice to see both sides of this. The at the time, really privacy, it was really your you were going to have to be in the bay area or DC to be in the privacy field. And that's definitely changed especially post COVID. But it was also great because I got to meet a lot of people and I feel like right now, I have two really strong networks and it's really just afforded to me A lot of opportunities.

Reema Moussa 20:04

Yeah, it's fascinating to hear about how the sort of geographic location that you're based in can influence the type of work you do. You know, especially with the, the policy presence in DC, and how that affects the opportunities and, you know, sort of conversations being had within the field over there. But I think you're right, that COVID has really decentralized and sort of created all of these nodes all over the world for, for those interested in privacy and in tech law and policy to engage and get involved. And, and that's exciting. So I want to dig into your current work a little bit. So you are privacy counsel, and Quora's data protection officer. So what does it mean to be privacy counsel? What does it mean to be a data protection officer? And how do you do both?

Lena Ghamrawi 21:22

So they, yeah, they're definitely distinct roles. But it's actually become more common practice now for companies to appoint an internal data protection officer or DPO. But when I first joined Quora, I was just their privacy counsel. And I also served as privacy counsel at my former employer, which was ViaSat. And essentially, the role of a privacy counsel is to interpret different privacy laws, figure out which laws apply to the business, and then find a way to actually ensure that the business is complying. And the role of privacy counsel was really interesting, I have a lot of other friends that are also in house counsel. And it's, at least in my experience, it's you know, 20%, actual, pure legal work. And the rest is really just figuring out how to build a privacy program, understanding the technology behind the business, that you're working for building relationships, because privacy counsel, again, is a really new function. And a lot of these companies have been operating without having to think about privacy. And now, you know, they have these new lawyers coming in and telling them what they can and can't do. And, you know, privacy counsel will face a lot of pushback. But depending on the organization, and the culture and the executive buy in, it's, you could do a lot in this role. And so as privacy counsel at Quora, I just make sure that all the personal information that we collect about our users, and your employees are handled responsibly, handled in accordance to law, and are used in a way that aligns with our users, reasonable expectations. You know, historically, a lot of tech companies would just collect troves of personal data about their users, and not have a clear purpose or not even have boundaries around how they can use that data. And that's definitely shifted, in part because of the new privacy laws, but also, because users have woken up and realize that their personal data is valuable, and that they want more control over it. And so, I mean, even just being in this field, for now, five years, I've seen a huge shift. When I first started in privacy, nobody knew what that was. My parents friends had asked them, you know, what is Lena doing these days, and my parents just like, had no idea, no way to explain it. And it wasn't until really around like 2018, 2019 that things started to shift. And now privacy is so mainstream, like my parents are always sending me different articles, different things. And they're like, Hey, look at this. And I use my parents as an example, because they're, you know, immigrants in their 70s who are not tech savvy, and they understand what privacy is now. And then, in terms of the second part of your question about, you know, data protection officers. Again, this role didn't really exist until a few years ago. And the role of a data protection officer or DPO, is to basically oversee the data processing activities that a business conducts, and also to kind of make sure that they're processing your data in a way that aligns with laws. There's some companies that hire external DPOs I think for smaller companies like Quora, it just made sense to hire to have somebody internal that already knew the business. So that was me. And it's, it's a great role to have, because it also just gives you more ability to make greater changes and have greater impact as well.

Reema Moussa 25:25

Really interesting. So you were a Fellow with the Foundry in the third class of fellows. So tell us a little bit about your experience with the Foundry and what's changed since then.

Lena Ghamrawi 25:44

The Foundry is great. I had not heard of it until I moved out to DC. And I remember I got to DC and it was my first month out there. And I didn't really know a lot of people. And I had a few friends who were in San Francisco who said, Hey, we have this Foundry, it's a group of like minded professionals, we have a branch out in DC, why don't you apply? It's just a great way to meet people. And so I applied and got in and attended a few of the in person events, pre COVID. And it was just so inspiring to meet folks who, you know, in one way, we were all kind of on the same page. But also everybody was doing their own thing. And it was so interesting, especially being out in DC, where it was very policy based. I met a lot of people who are working for different senators, or different branches of government, people working at think tanks. So it for me was really new experience because I was coming from the Bay Area where it was all just tech focused. So it was it was great, I made a lot of great friends connections. And then you know, COVID hit, so it was a little hard for people to meet up. And then this new class of fellows, that Reema you're a part of have been super active. And so it's been nice to see some of the older activities getting revived. You know, events, podcasts, hackathons. So it's really exciting to see what the Foundry is evolving into. But I think it's only going to continue to grow and improve from here.

Reema Moussa 27:20

Absolutely, yeah, I definitely agree. It's been a ton of fun to be a part of, and to get to know the tech law and policy community. Because it is really a community. Honestly, there's, there's not so many of us. In this field, it feels like everyone kind of knows each other. And so it's great to start to get that interpersonal connection through the different Foundry activities and whatnot.

Lena Ghamrawi 27:57

Exactly. I have to say, like, you know, you you by the way, I've done an incredible job single handedly. So thank you.

Reema Moussa 28:05

Definitely not single handedly. Wonderful team over here. And it's been such a joy to to work with people, you know, much smarter than I am on a bunch of really, really exciting projects. So a lot of fun. And you're also involved with WISP, Women in Security and Privacy. Tell us a little bit about it and how you initially got involved.

Unknown Speaker 28:40

Yes, I love WISP. So happy to talk about it. So WISP for anyone

listening is a nonprofit organization aimed at getting women really into the privacy and security fields. And WISP has been around since 2014. It was launched in San Francisco. And funny enough, earlier in the conversation I mentioned a woman named Kenesa Ahmad so her along with her friends also launched WISP. And just by getting to know Kenesa when I was consulting at her firm, I also got involved in WISP. And WIPS posts you know different events, they have mentorship program. They provide scholarships to industry conferences. There's a lot of just information sharing and networking to be had. And when I moved out to DC, essentially Kenesa and the other was founders reached out to me and just said, Hey, we know you're in DC we're trying to actually expand nationwide. Would you be interested in kind of launching the DC affiliate? And I was pretty nervous because I was still so new to DC. And I said sure I'll I'll go ahead and launch it and I didn't know if there really was a need for it. But I was proven wrong, thankfully, because we hosted a launch party, and to 2019, at the Future of Privacy Forum. And we sent out a few invites. And I think about 100 people showed up. And I think even more RSVP'd and it just kind of really signaled that there was a big need in the community in DC to have something like this. So many women came and just said, Yes, I'm trying to get into the field, or you know, I'm already in the field, but I just never had a forum for which I can come and meet other people in the field. And so we, I created a team. And I was the founder and the lead for two years. And during that time, we launched our own version of a mentorship program out in DC. We had study groups for those studying to take industry certifications. We had different events, we created a women's speaker's bureau so that, you know, if someone was looking to for women to speak at their event, we would already already have a list ready to go. So yeah, we did it. We did a bunch and the current leads, have, you know, taken the torch, and they're continuing the legacy and they're doing great. So if you're in DC, if you're in San Francisco, and you're interested in getting involved in WISP, please feel free to reach out to me or anyone else. And membership is free. And there's just so much benefits. I really can't speak anything but great things about it.

Reema Moussa 31:42

Yeah, there's so much value, I think to getting involved with affinity groups like WISP, and others that really drive home the the importance of connecting with people who have shared and different experiences. You're from your own and so that's fantastic. So now you're a fellow of information privacy with IAPP. Tell us a little bit about what that looks like, what IAPP is, and how you came across that opportunity.

Lena Ghamrawi 32:27

So the IAPP stands for the International Association of Privacy Professionals. And it's really just the, the world's leading professional group for anyone in privacy. And they're the ones that issue certifications, and host events and host huge conferences. They

have chapters, I think, at this point in every country. And they've grown tremendously in the past. They've been around for 20 years, but I think they've really grown in the past five to seven years. And I in 2017 after I took the California bar exam, a month later, I took the one of the IAPP certifications. Looking back, it was crazy of me I was like so burned out and tired but did it anyways. And through there just got involved with the IAPP, I attended a few local events here in the Bay Area before I moved. And then when I got to Washington, DC, again, like I said I didn't really know a lot, a lot of people I just went to a few of their events and started to grow my network and meet my friends. And then, in 2019, I applied to be the Washington DC, like IAPP young privacy professional, which basically that role made or the requirements of the role was just to host social events for that chapter. And so, which was fun, I got to host a bunch of happy hours. And again, just network and meet people through that. And then I also helped organize more substantive events and knowledge nets. And so to become a fellow of information privacy, you essentially have to work in the field full time for a few years and hold two of the certifications. And so last year, I met that threshold and applied and became designated as a fellow. I don't think anything special happens after that. I think it just means that I've amassed enough knowledge that I can hold myself out to be a fellow. But again, if anyone is listening and they're interested in joining the IAPP in any capacity, we're happy to chat with them about it.

Reema Moussa 34:56

Yeah, the IAPP has so much going on in so many different programs and conferences, and events, and so to anyone interested in the privacy space, definitely a great organization to be aware of.

Lena Ghamrawi 35:14

And one thing I'll add too with the IAPP is, it's, it's like so well known now that if you're applying to a privacy job, whether it's legal or not a lot of companies now require you or expect you to have an IAPP certification. So I think it's, it's becoming very mainstream. And it's definitely, you know, the place to start if you're trying to get into privacy.

Reema Moussa 35:39

So, what are you looking forward to now? Are there any exciting career plans or opportunities on the horizon? Not career related?

Lena Ghamrawi 35:52

Hmm. Let's see, I'm career wise, you know, my goal was always to become in house counsel and I, I reached that goal. And so it's been nice. And I, I've taken the past few months kind of to, I guess, recover just from everything that's happened over the past few years. So taking it slow, but excited to kind of ramp back up and get back into everything. I think, I guess, career wise, I've now been at Quora for about six months. And so I'm at a good place. And I've helped kind

of enhance the foundations of their privacy program. And now I'm excited to take that step further. See, non-career wise, but kind of related i've just been really toying around this idea of building a community college to law school pipeline program, because I started at community college. And I'm a huge community college, believer and advocate and fan. And I just think I've met so many people now in my career, who also started at community college and ended up in law school. But, you know, the path for us at the time was not clear. And growing up, I didn't know any lawyers. I didn't even know what different careers in the legal field look like. I didn't even know that you could be in house counsel until I went into law school. So I would love to set up a program where we match community college students with with lawyers and provides mentorship there. So the goal is to have that kind of up and running in the next six months. We'll see how that goes.

Reema Moussa 37:43

That's incredibly exciting. I think there's so much impact that that type of program could have as far as really evangelizing the law school experience and making it more accessible to, you know, those from like a first generation background. Whether it's, you know, first to attend college at all, or first in your family to attend law school. I think there's so much value to be gained from the mentorship that you can get from learning from others experiences. Well, Lena, before I let you go, I want to know, what are you reading or listening to right now?

Lena Ghamrawi 38:40

Oh, so I have recently been really interested in personal finance. And I, I've been reading more just about, you know, how to build wealth, how to build generational wealth. And it's like, you know, not related at all to my day to day job. But I just finished reading Rich Dad, Poor Dad for the second time. And I'd actually read this book about five years ago, but I don't think I actually really processed it the way that I'm doing now. But yeah, lately just sitting to finance podcasts. There's one that's the Feminist Financial Podcast, which is great. But that's kind of what I've been doing in my free time.

Reema Moussa 39:45

Well, thank you so much for coming onto the show. This was really a pleasure.

Lena Ghamrawi 39:52

Oh, thank you for having me. These are great questions and keep up the great work.

Reema Moussa 39:57

Thanks, Lena. Cheers.

Thank you so much for tuning into this episode of The Tech policy

Grind. I'm Reema Moussa, and I'm the producer, host and editor of the show and really glad that you could join us. Huge thank you to Lama Mohammed, our Social Coordinator, and Allyson McReynolds, our Accessibility Coordinator for all their help in making the show possible as well as our whole team over at the Internet Law and Policy Foundry. Have a good one y'all.

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