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A “Social Media Summit” at the White House this week will offer a platform for supporters of President Trump who say they face censorship by left-tilting Big Tech—and a preview of a likely theme in Mr. Trump’s re-election campaign. Attendees include the [Claremont Institute think tank](#), media company Prager University and the Media Research Center, a nonprofit critical of national news organizations. Also expected to attend are more familiar Washington conservatives, including the Heritage Foundation.

Not on the guest list: social-media giant Facebook Inc., which said it didn’t get an invitation. Twitter Inc. and Alphabet Inc., which owns YouTube and Google, also weren’t invited, according to people familiar with the situation. The companies declined to comment on the event, but have said in the past that they seek to police harmful or fake content without regard to politics.

The invitation list for Thursday’s summit suggests the event is about Mr. Trump firing up his loudest social-media supporters, said Paul Gallant, a policy analyst for investment bank Cowen Inc. “It’s all about 2020,” Mr. Gallant said. He sees it as a stage for Mr. Trump to tell “the base that the media and internet companies are against us” as well as “pressuring Facebook, Twitter, and Google to tilt content in Trump’s direction.”

The event grew out of complaints the White House has received about bias online, a spokesman said. “Earlier this year the White House launched a tool to allow Americans, regardless of their political views, to share how they have been affected by bias online,” said the spokesman, Judd Deere. “After receiving thousands of responses, the President wants to engage directly with these digital leaders in a discussion on the power of social media.”

In May, the White House briefly opened an official website for the public to share information about “action against your account” by social-media platforms. Last month it described Thursday’s event as “a robust conversation on the opportunities and challenges of today’s online environment.” Charlie Kirk, who leads the student group Turning Point USA, said alleged bias by social-media companies resonates with the president’s supporters, calling it “one of the top, if not the top issue with people that I interact with on social media.”

Bill Mitchell, chief executive of YourVoice Inc., will be making his first official White House visit at the event. Like others invitees, he says he has seen anecdotal evidence that his pro-Trump videos and tweets should be reaching a larger audience. “We just want a level playing field so that everybody can have free speech,” he said. The event has brought more media attention to Prager University’s lawsuits alleging YouTube is restricting its advocacy videos on topics such as gun laws, said chief marketing officer Craig Strazzeri. (A federal court dismissed Prager University’s claims last year. The firm is appealing.)

Thursday’s event is being coordinated by Ory Rinat, chief digital officer at the White House, people familiar with the matter said. It isn’t known whether the event will lead to any concrete policy changes or directives. Mr. Trump has hinted he wants the government to take action against social-media companies, without being specific. “What they are doing is wrong and possibly illegal and a lot of things are being looked at right now,” he said in a July 1 Fox News interview.

A 1996 law protects internet services that host third-party speech from liability for content and proposals to remove that protection aren't likely to pass Congress soon. U.S. agencies are preparing for [potential antitrust investigations of large firms including Google](#), but it remains to be seen if bias concerns will be a factor in those possible probes. Mr. Trump "can't do much" to change the way social-media platforms operate, said Sam McGowan, an analyst at Beacon Policy Advisers, a research firm based in Washington, D.C. "What he can do is hold these sorts of summits. ...That in itself is a way to rally Trump's base."

The limited ability of Mr. Trump to change the way social-media works was reinforced Monday when [a federal appeals court ruled](#) that his practice of blocking some users on Twitter violates the free-speech protections of the First Amendment. At a June hearing hosted by the Federal Trade Commission, a Texas official said regulators should consider using laws against deceptive business practices to charge social-media platforms with making false statements about neutrality. "Are big tech companies misleading users about whether they are truly viewpoint neutral, as they have represented?" Texas First Assistant Attorney General Jeff Mateer asked in a presentation that quoted the CEOs of Google, Facebook and Twitter "Evidence suggests that [they] may not be living up to those representations."

Short of tangible action, calls to rein in tech firms could be a political winner on the campaign trail. In a March Wall Street Journal/NBC survey of 1,000 American adults, 54% said they weren't satisfied with federal government regulation and oversight of social-media companies, compared with 36% who were satisfied and 10% who weren't sure. — *Wall Street Journal*

As Walt Disney Co., AT&T Inc. 's WarnerMedia and Apple Inc. prepare to enter the crowded [streaming-entertainment market](#), they are racing to stand out with eye-catching shows that cost as much for a season as a big-budget movie. These new services are hoping their planned television epics will capture the cultural conversation, [like "Game of Thrones" did](#). They are also hoping to [convince subscribers](#) that their offerings are worth paying for in a market dominated by Netflix Inc., HBO and Hulu.

The competition is prompting newcomers to shell out between \$8 million and \$15 million an episode, significantly more than what the average TV show used to cost. For a single season, after including marketing and other expenses, the total can easily exceed \$150 million—or roughly what it costs to put a new "Spider-Man" movie in theaters nationwide.

When Netflix began making "House of Cards" in 2013 at \$4.5 million an episode, it looked like a costly bet. Now, Disney has built intergalactic-desert landscapes for the "Star Wars" spinoff "The Mandalorian," whose cost for an episode approaches \$15 million, according to people familiar with the matter. Amazon.com Inc. spent \$250 million just for the rights to develop a "Lord of the Rings" series. Apple signed up "Aquaman" star Jason Momoa for its fantasy series "See," while Showtime has the videogame adaptation "Halo" and Warner Bros. prepares Frank Herbert's "Dune."

With massive casts, exotic filming locations and copious special effects, budgets have ballooned to amounts once considered unfathomable for a TV show. One driving factor, executives say, is that high-profile TV shows are offered up next to theatrical films available to stream on the same service, so original programming can't risk looking like B-material next to the movies.

In the case of Apple's "See," the cost has neared \$15 million for each roughly 60-minute episode, according to a person familiar with the matter. That is more than the cost of a typical independent feature film. "See," set centuries in the future after a virus has wiped out much of Earth's population and left survivors blind, appears to be taking cues from the "Game of Thrones" playbook of cinematic world-building. Footage shown at Apple's programming event featured Mr. Momoa ready-set for battle alongside dozens of actors in sweeping vistas filmed in the fields and forests of British Columbia.

In the prestreaming era, the highest-budget television shows often owed their costs to rising actor salaries, as when the stars of "Friends" and "ER" collected more than \$1 million apiece for each episode in later seasons. In the latest sign of intensifying rivalry among streamers for those old hits, reruns of "Friends" will only be available on WarnerMedia's new direct-to-consumer service, called HBO Max, the company said Tuesday.

The costs associated with traditional network-television episodes could be immediately compared with the ad revenue that came in from their broadcasts, whereas the return for producing a mega-show for a streaming service is somewhat intangible. In 2005, HBO and BBC hit a new high-water mark with their \$100 million production "Rome," a 12-part series about the ancient capital that was one of the first major cable productions.

A-list names creeping into television helped send costs soaring. Six years after "Rome," Steven Spielberg produced the dinosaur flop "Terra Nova" for \$4 million an episode, around the same time Martin Scorsese spent \$18 million on the pilot of HBO's "Boardwalk Empire." In pursuing shows where each episode is a high-level production, streaming services are learning some of the same lessons as Hollywood studios in the past decade. As the global box office has grown, film companies have focused on big-budget "tentpole" franchises like "Fast & Furious" or Marvel Studios comic-book adaptations—movies that cost hundreds of millions of dollars to produce but sell tickets in foreign territories and generate ancillary revenue in sequels and consumer products.

Since every new major streaming service is eyeing the international market, they also need programming that will play in any language or culture. Fantasy shows, taking place in an imaginary world, are easier to sell to foreign audiences. "Big, expensive Marvel movies cross borders in a way parlor dramas do not," said Michael Lombardo, a veteran television executive who was president of programming at HBO until 2016.

Netflix has already made advances in markets like India and Europe, while Disney's forthcoming service, set to launch in the U.S. in November, will expand to foreign markets after its domestic debut. In addition to "The Mandalorian," Disney also has pricey shows in the

Marvel Studios spinoffs it is producing for its streaming service, called Disney+. Netflix, hoping to fend off the new competition, last month signed a deal to adapt Neil Gaiman's comic-book series "The Sandman." Later this year, it will debut "The Witcher," yet another fantasy epic, starring Henry Cavill as a monster hunter.

Amazon's big bet is its adaptation of "The Lord of the Rings," the J.R.R. Tolkien saga that has already produced three hit movie adaptations for WarnerMedia, which is also launching a streaming service with its own epic fantasy—this one is based on the science-fiction classic "Dune." And HBO, also part of WarnerMedia, is considering staying in the big-budget fantasy game with a potential "Game of Thrones" spinoff. Behind much of the cost: the special effects required to construct the fantasy worlds—an onerous demand for networks, cautioned one longtime television executive. "How do you keep that quality up every single week?" this person said.

Breaking the bank doesn't necessarily result in record ratings. The 2016 Netflix show "The Get Down"—a Baz Luhrmann-directed spectacle about the 1970s music scene—lasted only one season and cost \$7.5 million an episode, then the service's costliest. With "The Mandalorian" or "Lord of the Rings," Disney and Amazon are banking on shows based on beloved characters and franchises, said Daniel Salmon, a managing director at BMO Capital Markets. "The risk profile is a little bit different when you know there are millions of people who love 'Star Wars' and 'Lord of the Rings,'" he said. In the case of TV series that for now don't have an easily recognized brand name, like "See," the power can come with signing an A-list actor like Mr. Momoa, he added, who signals to other top actors and directors that Apple is committed to writing big checks for its top shows. — *Wall Street Journal*

