

The Fifth Estate

pirate wires #85 // summary and analysis of the twitter files, a dangerous alliance of powers, and technology's nature brings the industry home



Mike Solana ✓
19 hr ago

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Dangerous alliance. In 1787, Edmund Burke said there were “Three Estates in Parliament; but, in the Reporters' Gallery yonder, there [sits] [a Fourth Estate](#) more important than they all.” The notion of some vital power beyond our government was imported to the New World, and today constitutes a core belief of the American liberal: there is no free people, we're often told, without a free press independent of congress, the courts, and our president. But throughout the 20th Century thousands of media outlets gradually consolidated, and by the dawn of our internet era only a few giants remained. These giants largely shared a single perspective, and in rough agreement with the ruling class the Fourth Estate naturally came to serve, rather than critique, power. This relationship metastasized into something very close to authoritarianism during the Covid-19 pandemic, when a single state narrative was written by the press, and ruthlessly enforced by a fifth and final fount of power in the newly-dominant technology industry.

It was a dark alliance of estates, accurate descriptions of which were for years derided as delusional, paranoid, even dangerous. But today, on account of a single shitposting billionaire, the existence of the [One Party's](#) decentralized censorship apparatus is now beyond doubt.

A couple weeks back, alleging proof Twitter acted with gross political bias, and in a manner that influenced U.S. elections (!), Elon Musk opened his new company's internal communications to a small handful of journalists. They set immediately to

breaking a series of major stories that have rewritten the history of Trump-era tech. Long story short, Twitter leadership lied to the public, relentlessly, for years, and everything the most paranoid among us ever said about the platform was true. “Trust and safety” is a euphemism for political censorship, with “expert” teams comprised almost exclusively of the most radical, joyless grievance studies majors you ever met in college. Their goal is to reshape American politics by dominating the bounds of what the public is permitted to consider American politics. In these efforts, they have mostly been succeeding.

On December 2nd, [Matt Taibbi shared conversations](#) from the company’s “trust and safety” team that led to Twitter’s suppression of the New York Post’s infamous [Hunter Biden laptop story](#). While interesting, Taibbi’s most notable revelation came almost as a side: both major political parties, as well as the White House, maintained direct lines of communication with Twitter, which they used to formally request content be removed from the platform. The company responded enthusiastically to many of these requests, and the examples we have (for now) come from the Democratic Party. Critics have been quick to point out Trump was in the White House at the time, though less interested, for some reason, in what — if anything — he removed from the site.

On December 6th, Bari Weiss and her colleagues reported out proof of [Twitter’s secret blacklists](#), in which both specific topics and, more problematically, people were de-amplified by the “trust and safety” team. The blacklisting was done for a nebulous host of reasons that generally amounted to something like ‘this feels dangerous.’ Danger was, of course, defined by partisan operatives, and exclusively targeted right-coded positions. Skepticism of radical gender ideology, distrust of public Covid policy, and almost anything having to do with the integrity of our last election were at the top of the list.

Separate from any opinion concerning whether such topics, or the purveyors of such topics, should have been “shadow banned,” the revelation that they were is immensely important on account of Twitter’s censors, with their many supporters in the press, have denied the existence of these tools for years.

Finally, over the last few days, [Taibbi](#), [Michael Shellenberger](#), and [Bari](#) have all reported out pieces of Donald Trump’s deplatforming, which is easily the most famous

digital unpersoning in history. It is also the least compelling story in the series. While it's good to finally know exactly what happened, it really just was what everyone assumed: Trump was not banned for violating policy. Trump was banned because Twitter employees, who donated literally 99% of their political contributions [to the Democratic Party](#), demanded it be done regardless of their own rules.

Altogether, the Twitter Files — an ongoing story — paint a portrait of clear and inevitable partisan bias at one of the most dominant speech platforms in history. A small handful of very left-wing executives, who naturally perceived most opinion right of center as dangerous, worked tirelessly to limit those opinions from view. Empowered to censor “unsafe” content, and protected by a team of people who shared their political orientation, the executives produced, in a legal and decentralized manner, a key component of our defacto state censorship apparatus. While we don't know for sure this is also happening at Google, Meta, or TikTok (which is for some reason still allowed to operate in this country), I think it's a safe bet we're looking at an industry-wide affliction.

But I do have questions.

Where is the full list of shadow-banned accounts? Which political campaigns, specifically, communicated with Twitter, and what specifically was taken down? What about requests from foreign governments? What about requests from our own government? We need to know which of our government agencies, if any, had content removed from the platform, and we need to know the nature of this content. Taibbi alluded to Trump's White House — did someone from the Trump administration request a takedown? Who made the request? Who received the request? Was it answered? What, if anything, was removed?

The Trump line of questioning is, in particular, something you might assume attractive to the media, which has waged all-out war on the populist clown king for the last seven years. Alas, the press seems broadly disinterested. Is this because they don't believe the former president ever made such requests, or is their lack of interest rather stemming from a fear of validating a major story most of them are currently trying to frame — for their own obvious political reasons — as not worth reading?

A brief selection of positions from our cherished Fourth Estate: This entire story is a “dud” ([The Washington Post](#)) — no bombshells here! ([Forbes](#)). The Twitter Files, in which a handful of committed partisans enthusiastically censor large swaths of the conservative base, including a former president, actually prove the company was *not* politically biased. It is, however, now biased against Democrats ([New York Magazine](#)). Elon’s exposé is a flop that doesn’t matter. It has also placed multiple “trust and safety experts” in mortal danger ([The Verge](#), predictably). Then, my favorite: it is good to finally see the blacklist tools I have been curious about for many years, which we have by the way always known existed, and therefore don’t matter ([The Atlantic](#)).

The charge of shadow banning evoked uniquely loud jeering from the press, including Charlie Warzel in particular, a man formerly of the position “Twitter [isn’t shadow banning](#) Republicans.” Now, in the face of evidence the company absolutely shadow banned Republicans, the official position is we are using the term “shadow ban” [incorrectly](#).

It’s a game of semantics, in which the public is dragged through the exhausting, useless question of how much invisible speech suppression, precisely, constitutes a “real” shadow ban, rather than the glaringly important questions of both ethics and, frankly, safety. In the first place, is it right to run a decentralized censorship apparatus, and to make your rules invisible? In the second, what happens to a free country when the bounds of acceptable speech are set by a small cabal of unelected partisan cops? Because my sense is the answer isn’t “freedom.”

There have been a few notable, if cautiously dissenting opinions from prominent voices in media. BuzzFeed’s [Katie Notopoulos](#), the Los Angeles Times’ [Jeff Bercovici](#), and the New York Times’ [Mike Isaac](#) all took somewhat risky positions in favor of transparency, apparently no longer in vogue among journalists, with Jeff explicitly acknowledging the important nature of the revelations. But I’ve only seen one actual piece, drafted and published by a reasonably mainstream media entity, embrace any aspect of the Twitter Files.

Anthony Fisher, an opinion editor at the Daily Beast, [danced around the subject](#), and awkwardly tried to obscure his overall agreement the story mattered behind many

paragraphs demonstrating his conservative-hating bonafides. But in addressing Twitter's censorship he did include the following important line:

And that lesson is "Don't trust (or demand) billionaire tech bros to be the arbiters of truth and news."

It was a flashback to the position most journalists and activists shared in the days before Donald Trump. Unfortunately, it wasn't long before they realized they had a political ally in tech industry hall monitors, and set about a national power grab. In any case, if you were to strip the above position from all its obnoxious tribal language, it would really just be: no few people should control the bounds of acceptable discourse. I agree. But narrowly focused on the "tech bro," the point not only betrays a bias, but misses a defining aspect of technology.

The Fifth Estate is a fundamentally different kind of power. It's more difficult to consolidate than media, and more difficult to control than even our government divided by design. Its impact is also far more difficult to predict. This is because technology is above all things defined in terms of newness, which not only makes it disruptive of pre-existing power, but destructive of itself — a sort of anti-power that only guarantees change. The true failsafe. Our ultimate reset. Tremendously empowering of tyranny in times of stagnation, technology is also our most powerful weapon against tyranny in times of innovation.

While many tech giants have gone the way of media in consolidating power, centralizing, and aligning with the state, the future of technology is always change. From encrypted chats and blockchain to artificially intelligent search, every tech giant that amassed power over the last two decades will be facing existential threats in the years to come — not only from the government, but from the industry.

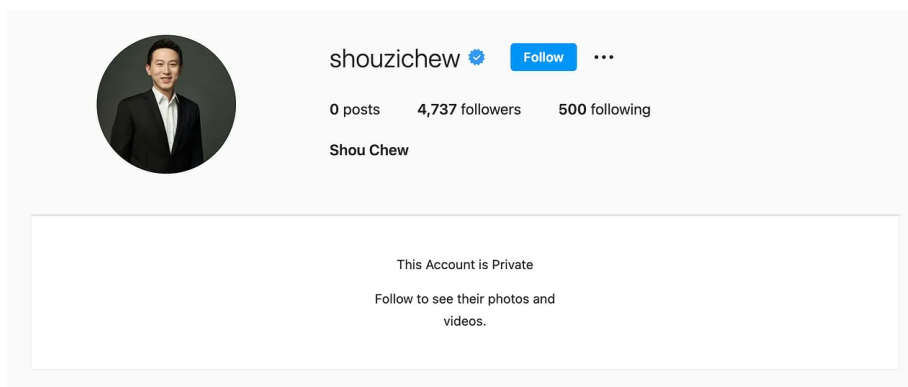
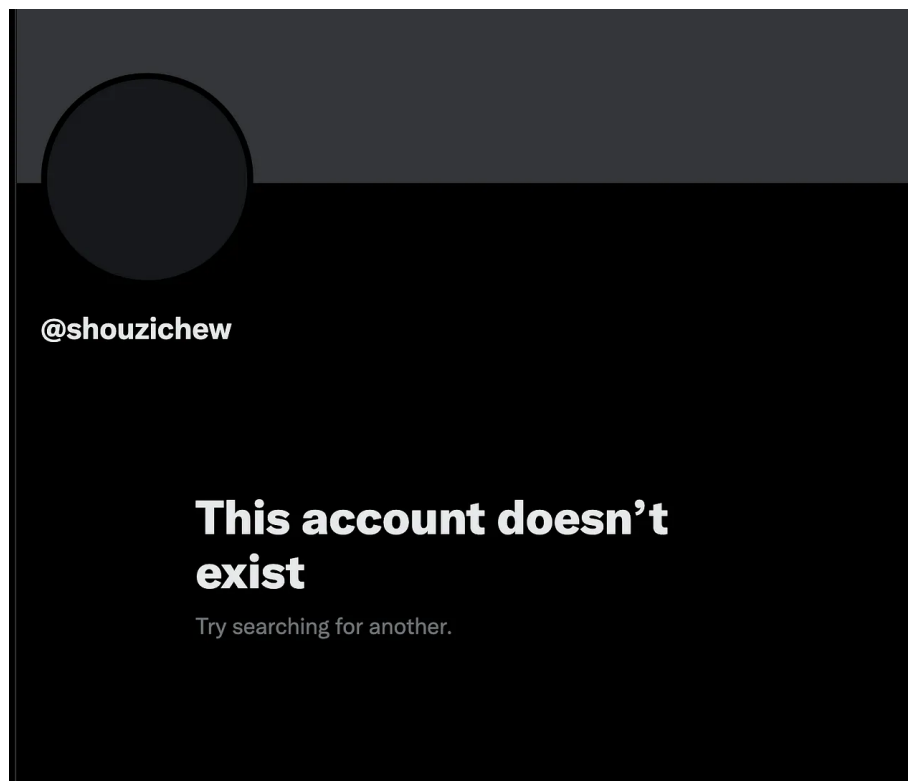
In terms of Twitter, Elon is already leveraging Fifth Estate properties, and not by employing current tools to amplify his own opinions (an emerging conspiracy). He is iterating product more rapidly than we've seen from any major, consumer-facing tech company in years. The trial and error here has largely been ridiculed by people who have never built a technology company. But while detractors are obsessed with his censorship abilities, Elon's platform experiments are the things actually capable of

root-changing the national discourse. The medium is the message, and the medium is evolving. Whatever works on Twitter will be cloned. The bounds of acceptable discourse will change, and none of this will have anything to do with Elon's spicy tweets.

But about those spicy tweets —

As the former lords of Twitter descend into hysterics with outlandish comments declaring Elon a Nazi, or a proponent of the QAnon conspiracy, or whatever other bit of unhinged loser bullshit, he faces two significant threats. First, he's clearly made an enemy of every other major fount of power, including in particular the Fourth Estate. This will impact all of Elon's companies, as they all require support from the government and public, and the opinions of our government and public are still shaped, to a large extent, by the media. It's no coincidence most powerful tech executives, from Mark Zuckerberg and Jeff Bezos to Jack Dorsey, share a carefully-crafted language of neutrality. This air of neutrality is how a king behaves, because the air of neutrality is how a king survives. In flaunting his power, rather than obscuring it, Elon is asking to be attacked, and his enemies are happy to oblige, even while more dominant platforms go unbothered.

Something like 80 million Americans are using TikTok, a company hopelessly compromised by the Chinese Communist Party. Do you even know the name of its CEO?



For a man who controls the bounds of acceptable speech for a third of the country's adults, he sure doesn't seem especially interested in speaking.

Elon's second danger is the far more formidable danger of himself. What the Twitter Files prove beyond doubt is censorship in the age of social media is power — a real and dangerous power that corrupts.

Last year, Dorsey [appeared before Congress](#), and declared neither he nor anyone else, and certainly not anyone in government, should be allowed to set the bounds of acceptable speech for the entire country. But with no viable alternative, someone does need to bear the ring. In leaked texts from the recent Twitter legal saga, it's clear Jack

believed Elon a worthy steward of this tremendous power, and, for what it's worth, I agree. But provided the nation remains free, the rules of the Fifth Estate are immutable. Power comes in dramatic upward swings, and resets the status quo. It will not — it can not — last forever. So change the world, but be mindful of temptation, and make good use of your god mode powers while you have them. Because they never last forever.

-SOLANA

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9 Comments



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BadSnoopy Writes The Anonymous Report 18 hr ago

Can't believe how well written this post was. I wrote today on the Vindman posts where he made the Musk Gorbachev comparison you alluded to and it is exactly me how they work

made the Musk-Geordies comparison you alluded to and it is crazy to me now they aren't called out more for their bullshit. But it's a method they use too well. They have to rile up their followers, get em mad, and sick them on the problem. The oppressor. Musk is the bad guy who is chipping away at the power grab these influencers have had for years. And as the Twitter files continue to reveal truth, I hope it goes way deeper and that we are 1.) aware of what can happen with this corrupted power and 2.) do as much good as we can when the pendulum swings our way.

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Brian Katz 17 hr ago

Great essay Mike !

I like the focus on Big Tech and just how volatile it really is.

Scary stuff.

♡ 17 Reply Collapse

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