

The Fifth Wave: Twittermania

A twisted drama of faith, politics and media, in five acts

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Image Credit: Patric Sandri

ACT ONE: The Conversion of the Institutions

By the year 2020, every major institution of American culture had converted to the cult of identity. The virus of performative dogmatism, long incubated at the universities, suddenly spread with alarming rapidity, infecting news media in every format, social media like Facebook and Twitter, search engines like Google, the entertainment world including Hollywood and Broadway, professional sports, the scientific bureaucracy and the finance and investment sector. Even stodgy billion-dollar corporations like Coca-Cola and the supposedly disruptive

innovators of Silicon Valley fell in line. Churches and synagogues mutilated their traditional doctrines to make room for the new faith. As with every religious revolution, names were changed and old idols toppled from their pedestals. Nothing like it had transpired since the days of emperor Constantine.

With the improbable rise of Joe Biden to the presidency and Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress, identity became the established church of the United States. Strident dogmas of reparational justice, gender fluidity and ecological deindustrialization were now enforced by the power of the federal government, the governments of large states like California and New York and local governments and school boards in places like Loudoun County, Virginia. The message was uniform and inescapable. Every source of authority sang the same words from the same hymn book. If you were a CEO wishing to court investors, trillion-dollar investment houses like BlackRock demanded proof of “environmental, social, and corporate governance” (ESG). If you were Joe Nobody but donated to a website that criticized the gender or Covid-19 orthodoxy, PayPal froze you out.

Heretics were sought out and punished. Bonfires were lit. Unlike earlier inquisitions, actual persons weren't burned to death—but their jobs and reputations certainly were.

As I have noted elsewhere, the motive force behind the mass conversion of the elites was a longing for control. Identity is a minority sect that imposes itself by shaming and silencing contrary opinions, even among those it purports to protect. Most Blacks don't wish to defund the police. Most Hispanics don't believe in open borders. Most Democrats don't think government programs should discriminate based on race or sex. But old-fashioned liberalism is dying away with the boomer generation, and the elites, distrusted by the public, deprived of institutional authority, have gambled on riding the tiger of rule by internet mob.

The Democratic Party, political home of the American establishment, succumbed to the virus without putting up much of a fight. Since we only get a binary choice, Democratic voters who disagreed with identity held their noses and went that way anyhow. (Republicans did the same with Donald Trump.) In this regard, the doddering Biden, though a hilariously bad missionary of the true faith, was found to have some usefulness as a withered fig leaf of liberal moderation.

The question then became how to extend control to the idolaters on the other side of the partisan divide. The answer was to deny them a voice in any forum where their words might confuse the faithful. The elites own most of

the nation's institutions, but they have a lock on the institutions of communications and messaging. They can marginalize Republicans and conservatives simply by keeping them out of the shared spaces in the public sphere—by condemning their opinions as a threat to democracy and deriding their facts as wild conspiracy theories or “misinformation.” As in the medieval Jewish ghetto, a wall was built around conservative figures and media, making them inaudible to a wider public. Though many Republicans read The New York Times, Democrats caught perusing Fox News are in danger of losing their souls. It doesn't happen. As matters now stand in this country, the left speaks to everyone, but the right speaks only to itself.

The arrangement is inherently unstable: Identity, as I said, is unpopular, and the elites are hardly the most convincing advocates of an anti-establishment creed. But fear of losing political dominance is a powerful incentive. The established church can impeach, prosecute and hurl the Republican Trump into a digital netherworld—and can just as easily remove from public consideration a scandal touching the Democratic presidential candidate. That kind of control would have been envied by Joe McCarthy; the closest historical precedent is Woodrow Wilson's noxious wartime censorship.

ACT TWO: Elon Musk as a Breach in the Wall

Only yesterday, Elon Musk was a hero to progressives. He had made the electric car sexy and organized a migration to Mars to save humanity from the coming ecological apocalypse. Musk voted for Barack Obama twice and for Biden once. When, on April 14 of last year, he offered to purchase Twitter, he clearly believed he was reconnecting progressivism to its liberal roots. “For Twitter to deserve public trust it must be politically neutral, which effectively means upsetting the far right and the far left equally,” he said. Famously, Musk characterized himself as “a free speech absolutist.” The elites took that for a declaration of war and changed their tightly synchronized minds about the man.

Humor and proportion were lost early in the episode. Nobody thought, “Well, let them have Twitter.” The establishment treated Musk’s bid as an existential threat. Cardinals of the church read their various writs of excommunication. Twitter in the hands of Musk was “dangerous to our democracy,” said Democratic senator Elizabeth Warren. “I am frightened for society and politics if Elon Musk acquires Twitter,” quivered author Max Boot, adding: “For democracy to survive, we need more content moderation, not less.” The sleepy Biden White House briefly snapped awake to express concern

about “the power of large social media platforms ... over our everyday lives ... tech platforms must be held accountable for the harm they cause.”

Free speech was hate speech. Free speech was racism. Free speech, once the equivalent of motherhood and warm puppies, was now a dire and awful thing. The church demanded control—and the tone was hysterical to the point of self-parody. My favorite shriek of horror over the affair came from David Leavitt (who describes himself as “an award-winning multimedia journalist”): “If Elon Musk successfully purchases Twitter, it could result in World War 3 and the destruction of our planet.” While this was undoubtedly funny, the sad reality is that journalists filled the front ranks of those who clamored for power to supervise truth.



“Free speech absolutist” and punching bag. Elon Musk in 2018. Image Credit: The Royal Society

Anti-identity voices could not be allowed to escape their ghetto. A system of control based on an unpopular, rigidly enforced version of truth could not afford competition, any more than could the regimes of, say, China or Cuba. At stake was the ability to demonize the opposition and protect Democratic candidates from their own blunders, as the country turned the corner into the 2024 presidential season. The frequent appeals to “our democracy” should be understood to mean the rule of the elites in perpetuity and the eternal supremacy of the established church. The arc of history so ordained it.

Nevertheless, the spectacle of elite panic and the abrupt devaluation of Musk—from idol to Nazi—testified to the fragility of the system no less than its intolerance.

A pregnant pause ensued when Musk tried to back away from the sale. It was a moment of false hope. On October 22, the purchase of Twitter went through at the mind-numbing cost of \$44 billion. On November 28, after laying off 80% of the company’s workforce, [Musk tweeted](#) that documents revealing “free speech suppression” would “soon be published on Twitter itself. The public deserves to know what really happened ...” On December 2, Twitter Files hit the fan.

ACT THREE: Twitter Files and the Methods of Cultural Domination

Musk initially invited Matt Taibbi, Bari Weiss and Michael Shellenberger to examine the company's internal Slack messages and emails. Taibbi and Weiss are fierce critics of establishment media; Shellenberger is a strong anti-establishment voice on energy and homeless policy. All are, in Weiss' phrase, "politically homeless," neither right nor left, but tend to write about aspects of the struggle between the elites and the public.

I happen to know all three and I subscribe to their Substack newsletters. They are clear thinkers and good writers but two traits, in my opinion, separate them from the pack: independence and integrity. Musk could have bought himself a passel of hired hacks who would have churned out whatever spin he wished. With these three authors he gave up control over the Twitter Files output in exchange for their ironclad credibility.

An enormous volume of information was filtered down to patchwork Twitter style. Since the format tends to lose the forest for the trees, we should fix our attention on what truly matters. Anyone with eyes to see could tell that a thumb was being pressed to the scales of the public sphere. Progressive cultural domination was never a question of superior arguments but of shutting down the

other side. With Twitter Files, for the first time, we've gotten a glimpse into the byzantine machinery that makes such repression possible.

Although additional files continue to be made public, here, from my perspective, are the three most interesting revelations so far:

A company culture of control spawned tools and found targets to achieve that purpose. People didn't go to work at Twitter to provide a service for the public. They were a bastion of the church. The job was to silence evil, mainly in the form of Trumpism, and to guard the carriers of revealed truth, who were all Democrats. A parallel world to reality was presented—one disfigured by delusional additions and crude amputations. To this purpose, "Twitter employees build blacklists, prevent disfavored tweets from trending, and actively limit the visibility of entire accounts or even trending topics—all in secret, without informing users," Weiss learned. The targets were offenders against elite orthodoxy—a conservative activist, a right-wing talk show host, a Covid-dissenting doctor, among a host of others.

Twitter's mission statement is "to give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly without barriers." That was the old idealism of the internet

speaking. After conversion to the church, building barriers became the mission. Twitter was made into a closed pen in which heretical opinions disappeared without a trace or explanation. Top to bottom, the staff labored with zeal to add another brick to the wall—there was a joy in discussions of what constituted “violative” behavior equal in fervor to Talmudic commentary. Tools were designed that left disgraced users muttering in solitude. “The worst mistake I made,” stated [Jack Dorsey](#), Twitter’s founder, “was in continuing to invest in *tools for us to manage* the public conversation, versus tools *for the people* using Twitter to manage it for themselves.” Because identity is a jealous God, Dorsey’s mistake was unavoidable.

Devotion to a higher truth overrode Twitter’s own rules and procedures, not to mention moral scruples, and made blatant lying necessary. Twitter executives expelled dangerous heretics from their digital congregation, then gave fraudulent pretexts for doing so. We know the pretexts were fraudulent because, after the fact, these executives spent inordinate amounts of time debating on Slack whether any of the company’s rules had actually been violated. Sometimes the federal government provided cover; more on this below. More often, management went with the grim Vietnam War axiom: “When in doubt, take them out.”



Under pressure. Twitter founder Jack Dorsey testifying before Congress in 2019, about two years before stepping down as the company's CEO. Image Credit: Mark Warner/Wikimedia Commons

During the 2020 presidential campaign, Twitter quickly “handled” multiple requests from the Biden camp to smother unfavorable content. Trump, however, was first red-flagged then “deamplified” in the run-up to the election. Following the January 6 madness in Washington, D.C., he

was banished from Twitter permanently, despite the painful inability of company leaders, manifested in internal messages, to find some reason in their copious rule book that would justify expulsion. “[I]n this specific case, we are changing our public interest approach for this account,” fudged Yoel Roth, a key player in the Trump affair who bore the ironic title of Head of Trust and Safety.

It should be understood that this was not a vast leftwing conspiracy but a striking instance of the elite hive mind at work and of the binding force of shared dogma: Trump, after all, was the Beelzebub of the established church. That force took the form of external pressure, as Democratic celebrities like Michelle Obama called for Trump to be evicted. It was also felt as internal pressure: 300 employees sent a letter to Dorsey, published by The Washington Post, demanding an end to Trump's "violent, hateful rhetoric." But the most potent pressure on Twitter executives was unquestionably psychological. Roth's dream was "to drive change in the world" and he was certain there were "actual Nazis in the White House." Action was redemption; when the ban was announced, employees fell into the Slack equivalent of a religious ecstasy.

Twitter management had gone on record as stating, "We do not shadow ban [i.e., secretly block users]. And we certainly don't shadow ban based on political viewpoints or ideology." We now know both claims were false—the melancholy question that lingers is whether the people making them possessed enough self-awareness to realize it. One peril in building a delusional world is that you may end up living there.

The Biden administration, and the federal law enforcement and intelligence bureaucracies, are deep in the business of controlling media content. Defenders of Twitter's political dogmatism argue that the company is a private entity and can do as it wishes: First Amendment protection of free speech applies only to government censorship. This argument, though technically correct, loses some of its validity when all major institutions promote the same orthodoxy using more or less the same words. It collapses when it becomes clear that the federal government has been acting the part of grand inquisitor and pushing content decisions on its "private sector partners."

The wall of obedience to power built around the Covid-19 crisis was the thickest and most formidable of all. The surgeon general proclaimed an "infodemic" on the subject and said of the digital platforms: "We can't wait for them longer to take aggressive action." Biden accused social media of "killing people" by tolerating dissident opinions on vaccines. Under direct guidance from the White House, Twitter suppressed factual but contrarian information on the pandemic. Doctors and researchers who proposed alternate policies or reported flaws in the vaccine development process were muted or expelled. The White House singled out specific accounts it wished to eliminate. Twitter saluted and complied. (One account holder later sued; Twitter settled.) At a time when an open exchange of

ideas was of existential importance, the administration chose to turn managing the pandemic into a department of the established church—and Twitter went along. The effects were literally incalculable.

Government surveillance and intervention took place under the pretense of blocking foreign influence. The FBI fronted a liaison process that included the Justice Department, Homeland Security and CIA. No crimes were said to be committed, no investigations had been authorized, but nonetheless, in a “constant and pervasive” series of meetings and messages with Twitter management, the FBI pushed for action on content and asked for “emergency disclosure” on users—essentially, solicitations for a warrantless search. A one-way platform, Teleporter, was set up at Twitter to receive such requests and at one point FBI reportedly deployed 80 people to work on social media-related issues. Given that the missions seemed increasingly to converge, it isn’t surprising that FBI personnel migrated to Twitter in large numbers. Among them was James Baker, who played a leading role in driving the investigation of Trump while at the FBI and became a strong advocate of expelling Trump after he moved to Twitter. Money changed hands, too: The FBI paid Twitter \$3.4 million.

The overall purpose of the system was plain enough: to protect the Biden campaign and administration. I won't repeat the sordid details surrounding the Hunter Biden laptop. It's enough to say that the FBI lied to Twitter, Twitter lied to the public and the lies were blessed by 52 retired intelligence luminaries, most of them from CIA. In the parallel reality of the elites, the laptop story became a Russian disinformation hack. A potential scandal six weeks before a presidential election was repressed by both mainstream and digital media. I can't recall an equal perversion of the truth in my long lifetime. But the system worked.

In secret, while posing as an independent platform, Twitter had allowed itself to become an instrument of control by the state and the party in power. The protection of democracy somehow entailed Chinese methods of handling information—and the lone poignant moment in Twitter Files came when an unnamed employee recognized the trend. “Maybe because I’m from China, I deeply understand how censorship can destroy the public conversation,” the employee worried. The concern was met with a volley of refutations and promptly dismissed as wrong-think.

ACT FOUR: The Establishment Ponders a Counterattack

The institutional elites dealt with the avalanche of revelations by pretending that nothing had happened. Musk's antics, previously the cause of so much fear and loathing, now elicited elaborate yawns. Twitter Files were "old news," "a distraction," "a nothingburger"—mere sound and fury to titillate the public. This strategy relied on the principle that scandals, like fairies, will disappear if we deny their existence. That certainly had been the case with the laptop story.

Outside the conservative ghetto, the news media covered the content of Twitter Files obliquely or not at all. The episode was treated as an irrational craze that had suddenly swept over the nation, like the hula hoop. Nothing of substance was reported—it was the rule of omertà, the vow of silence. In a remarkable display of virtuosity, Ezra Klein published a long tirade about Twitter and social media on the "front page" of The New York Times without once mentioning the Files. But why was Klein so full of venom? Faithful readers of The Times, and of elite media generally, lacked the information to grasp what the fuss with Twitter was about.

The princelings of the federal bureaucracy found it harder to keep their cool. Shortly after being outed by Taibbi, the FBI struck back with an angry public statement. The relationship with Twitter, the statement claimed, was part of “our traditional, longstanding and ongoing federal government and private sector engagements, which involve numerous companies over multiple sectors and industries.” The purpose of this activity was to provide “critical information to the private sector in an effort to allow them to protect themselves and their customers.”

This was alarming enough. When did this “tradition” of law enforcement “engagement” begin? What are the actual names of the “numerous” companies involved? From what—and whom—are they being protected? If the engagements also aim to protect the public, as the statement implied, why isn’t the information made public—what is the point of the top-down, secretive approach? That’s a formula for sowing distrust.

By the end of the statement, the FBI had truly lost its temper: “It is unfortunate,” it growled, “that conspiracy theorists and others are feeding the American public misinformation with the sole purpose of attempting to discredit the agency.” But Matt Taibbi has a track record. If you accuse him of conspiracy-mongering and misinformation, you’d better put your evidence on the

table. Simply to call him names will rebound suspicion back on you. The FBI statement was a disgusting smear attempt: itself evidence of a debased government institution.

The ugly mood at the FBI suggests that the inquisitors of the church haven't quite settled on a counterattack. The silence is provisional. Twitter Files, in the end, isn't nothing. It can't be waved off into oblivion. An adequately lurid tale must be concocted to distract attention: about sexual misconduct, say, or financial scandal. Everyone associated with the Files, from Musk to the cleaning persons at Weiss' home, would do well to keep their ears open and their eyes peeled, because the hounds are surely on the hunt.

ACT FIVE: The Damage and the Fix

The absorption of the information sphere into the realm of politics could only be an unmitigated disaster. Forcing political considerations on every shared description of reality must lead to massive distortions and the erection of a parallel reality, one in which truth and falsehood perpetually shift and dance as in a fever dream. Successful action under such a regime becomes less important than a favorable political outcome. The appalling real-world incompetence of our government institutions is due in large part to this mindset.

The rise of an intolerant minority cult to the status of established church could only poison and degrade the practices on which American democracy has historically rested. “Established church” is a metaphor, but I find it all too apt: Identity preaches the fear of free speech, the persecution and silencing of discordant opinions and disdain of debate in any forum. As in Catholic Spain and Calvinist Geneva, our established church provides the means for a class of virtuous elites to retain control over politics and society. Eruption from below by a resentful public, when it comes, will likely smash at our institutions without regard for their usefulness.

That Twitter, a social media platform, became the theater of revelation for the sins of our progressive establishment is not entirely accidental. The digital, to the elites, has always been a darkling plain of perversion and lies. Access to the internet by the public has been the chief cause of a calamitous loss of control. The reaction, we have now learned, was government intervention in digital media—and it wasn’t restricted to Twitter. The FBI statement spoke of “numerous” companies, and [Twitter Files](#) mentioned Facebook, Microsoft, Verizon, Reddit, Pinterest, among others. The obvious goal was to bully the media into submission. The information sphere, where we conduct all our shared business, including politics, has in consequence suffered a traumatic (and justifiable) hemorrhage of trust.

What is to be done?

There's no room for an established clergy in American politics or culture. We are too fractured, too multifarious: Imposing a faith from above will invite disorder and revolt. Believers in identity should be free to worship in peace but can't be allowed to wield their power and money to force the rest of us into the pews. Disestablishing the church is political work—I will have more to say about this in coming months.

The internet must be made over into a frontier of freedom. For all his weirdness and large ego, Musk did us a favor by reminding us of what pluralism in information looks like. At the moment, liberating the web means a struggle against the mindless attack mobs of identity, who would give us a monolithic media and a culture of obedience. Ideological controls now in place must be torn down to the ground.

Eventually, the digital world, and social media especially, must be retooled on principles and algorithms that sustain behavior consistent with an open society. As Dorsey, the remorseful founder, has indicated, “Social media must be resilient to corporate and government control.” Dorsey proposes a guiding principle: “Only the original author may remove content they produce.” User-owned networks could get there without asking anyone's permission. Sriram

Krishnan, one of the most perceptive minds in Silicon Valley, has made a powerful case for “transparent platform moderation,” a process whereby “social media platforms commit to publishing details of every account and content moderation decision.” Transparency is crucial for the public to decode, and pass judgment on, the tangled algorithmic matrix imposed by digital corporations.

None of this is hard if the will is there—but that is precisely our dilemma. At present we can’t agree on what is broken in the digital information sphere, or even whether anything is broken at all. Mighty institutions and shallow, short-sighted individuals crave control and are willing to shatter every norm of democratic sociopolitical life to obtain it.

Those of us who see the need for radical reform will encounter nothing but toil and trouble ahead. The conflict, which has already begun, will play out in a ruthless, shameless and bewildering manner. Because I am by nature a long-term optimist and have faith in the common sense of the American people, I’m betting that many of the needed changes will be put in place. But it won’t be easy.
