

Written Statement
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“Hearing on the Weaponization of the Federal Government on the Twitter Files”

Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government
Committee on the Judiciary
United States House of Representatives

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Chairman Jordan, ranking member Plaskett, members of the Select Committee,

My name is Matt Taibbi. I’ve been a reporter for over 30 years, and a staunch advocate for the First Amendment. Much of my three decades have been spent at *Rolling Stone* magazine. Over my career, I have had the good fortune to be recognized for the work I love. I’ve won the National Magazine Award, the I.F. Stone Award for independent journalism, and written ten books, including four *New York Times* bestsellers. I’m now the editor of the online magazine *Racket*, on the independent platform Substack.

Today, I’m here because of a series of events that began late last year, when I received a note from a source online.

It read: *“Are you interested in doing a deep dive into what censorship and manipulation... was going on at Twitter?”*

A week later, the first of what became known as the “Twitter Files” reports came out. To say these attracted intense public interest would be an understatement. My computer looked like a slot machine as just the first tweet about the blockage of the Hunter Biden laptop story registered 143 million impressions and 30 million engagements.

But it wasn't until a week after the first report, after Michael Shellenberger, Bari Weiss, and other researchers joined the search of the "Files," that we started to grasp the significance of this story.

The original promise of the Internet was that it might democratize the exchange of information globally. A free internet would overwhelm all attempts to control information flow, its very existence a threat to anti-democratic forms of government everywhere.

What we found in the Files was a sweeping effort to reverse that promise and use machine learning and other tools to turn the internet into an instrument of censorship and social control. Unfortunately, our own government appears to be playing a lead role.

We saw the first hints in communications between Twitter executives about tweets before the 2020 election, where we read things like:

Hi team, can we get your opinion on this? This was flagged by DHS:

Or: Please see attached report from the FBI for potential misinformation. This would be attached to excel spreadsheet with a long list of names, whose accounts were often suspended shortly after.

Following the trail of communications between Twitter and the federal government across tens of thousands of emails led to a series of revelations. Mr. Chairman, we've summarized these and submitted them to the committee in the form of a new Twitter Files thread, which is also being released to the public now, on Twitter at @ShellenbergerMD, and @mtaibbi.

We learned Twitter, Facebook, Google, and other companies developed a formal system for taking in moderation "requests" from every corner of government: the FBI, DHS, HHS, DOD, the Global Engagement Center at State, even the CIA. For every government agency scanning Twitter, there were perhaps 20 quasi-private entities doing the same, including Stanford's Election Integrity Project, Newsguard, the Global Disinformation Index, and others, many taxpayer-funded.

A focus of this growing network is making lists of people whose opinions, beliefs, associations, or sympathies are deemed to be misinformation, disinformation, or malinformation. The latter term is just a euphemism for “true but inconvenient.”

Plain and simple, the making of such lists is a form of digital McCarthyism.

Ordinary Americans are not just being reported to Twitter for “deamplification” or de-platforming, but to firms like PayPal, digital advertisers like Xandr, and crowdfunding sites like GoFundMe. These companies can and do refuse service to law-abiding people and businesses whose only crime is falling afoul of a faceless, unaccountable, algorithmic judge.

As someone who grew up a traditional ACLU liberal, this sinister mechanism for punishment without due process is horrifying.

Another troubling aspect is the role of the press, which should be the people’s last line of defense in such cases.

But instead of investigating these groups, journalists partnered with them. If Twitter declined to remove an account right away, government agencies and NGOs would call reporters for the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and other outlets, who in turn would call Twitter demanding to know why action had not been taken.

Wittingly or not, news media became an arm of a state-sponsored thought-policing system.

Some will say, “So what? Why shouldn’t we eliminate disinformation?”

To begin with, you cannot have a state-sponsored system targeting “disinformation” without striking at the essence of the right to free speech. The two ideas are in direct conflict.

Many of the fears driving what Michael calls the “Censorship-Industrial Complex” also inspired the infamous “Alien and Sedition Laws of 1798,” which outlawed “any false, scandalous, and malicious writing against Congress or the president.” Here is something that will sound familiar: supporters of that law were quick to

denounce their critics as sympathizers with a hostile foreign power, at the time France. Alexander Hamilton said Thomas Jefferson and his supporters were “more Frenchmen than Americans.”

Jefferson in vehemently opposing these laws said democracy cannot survive in a country where power is given to people “whose suspicions may be the evidence.” He added:

It would be a dangerous delusion were a confidence in the men of our choice to silence our fears for the safety of our rights: that confidence is everywhere the parent of despotism.

Jefferson was saying something that was true then and still true today. In a free society we don't mandate truth, we arrive at it through discussion and debate. Any group that claims the “confidence” to decide fact and fiction, even in the name of protecting democracy, is always, itself, the real threat to democracy. This is why “anti-disinformation” just doesn't work. Any experienced journalist knows experts are often initially wrong, and sometimes they even lie. In fact, when elite opinion is too much in sync, this itself can be a red flag.

We just saw this with the Covid lab-leak theory. Many of the institutions we're now investigating initially labeled the idea that Covid came from a lab “disinformation” and conspiracy theory. Now apparently even the FBI takes it seriously.

It's not possible to instantly arrive at truth. It is however becoming technologically possible to instantly define and enforce a political consensus online, which I believe is what we're looking at.

This is a grave threat to people of all political persuasions.

For hundreds of years, the thing that's distinguished Americans from all other people around the world is the way we don't let anyone tell us what to think, certainly not the government.

The First Amendment, and an American population accustomed to the right to speak, is the best defense left against the Censorship-Industrial Complex. If it can

knock over the first and most important constitutional guarantee, it will have no serious opponent left anywhere.

If there's anything the Twitter Files show, it's that we're in danger of losing this most precious right, without which all other democratic rights are impossible.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you and I would be happy to answer any questions from the Committee.