



Musk's "Twitter Files" repackage debunked claims to falsely allege crime, collusion, and conspiracy

Right-wing personalities insist content moderation proves a totalitarian agenda, invoking Musk as a hero for grabbing the reins

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Right-wing media have made and amplified numerous false claims surrounding the "Twitter Files," even though many of the revelations in the threads were already public or previously debunked.

In the last two weeks, a series of Twitter threads from various journalists, dubbed the "Twitter Files," have purported to reveal new information about censorship on the platform prior to Elon Musk's acquisition. Right-wing media have latched onto the files in a shallow attempt to try to substantiate allegations that conservative voices are unfairly suppressed on mainstream social media platforms.

In reality, these Twitter threads have revealed very little new information and largely show Twitter's internal conversations around content moderation. Perhaps one of the most alarming elements of the files is that Musk seems to have given certain right-wing journalists access to user data, which has already begun to raise eyebrows among privacy advocates, including Ireland's Data Protection Commission.

A self-described "free speech absolutist," Musk has used his own Twitter account to promote right-wing content and attack anything he deems "woke." Since taking over Twitter in October, he has reinstated extreme right-wing accounts; used the platform to attack Anthony Fauci, head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and Yoel Roth, former head of trust and safety at Twitter; and disbanded the platform's Trust and Safety Council.

Musk has characterized himself both as a victim of the censorship conspiracy theory, and as a savior against it. He has claimed both that he needs to increase his personal security, as well as that he purchased Twitter because his "biological neural net concluded" that "if Twitter was not bought and

steered in a good direction, that it would be a danger for the future of civilization.” He has amplified and celebrated the Twitter Files as a bombshell alongside right-wing figures. Despite the drama, many of the claims made by and in response to the Twitter Files have been made before and many have been debunked.

Below, we outline the four overarching claims made by and in response to Musk’s Twitter Files, demonstrating numerous ways right-wing figures have made these claims and highlighting why they’re false:

False claim: Twitter, the Biden campaign, and the FBI all violated the First Amendment by suppressing a Hunter Biden story

Right-wing media used the first installment of the Twitter Files, tweeted on December 2 by Substack journalist Matt Taibbi, to claim that Twitter’s decision to restrict distribution of an October 2020 New York Post story about Hunter Biden’s laptop constituted a violation of the First Amendment. Conservative figures have also baselessly claimed that former Twitter deputy general counsel Jim Baker withheld information around the Twitter Files and even suggested that he did so as an FBI asset.

In reality, Twitter restricted the Post story under its Hacked Materials policy. Former Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey has since said that blocking the story’s URL “was wrong.” Twitter has updated its policies in response to the incident.

Taibbi’s installment of the Twitter Files also included a supplemental thread which alleged that Baker, who previously served as general counsel at the FBI, had vetted the information prior to sharing it with Weiss and Taibbi. Shortly after this was discovered, Musk “acted quickly to ‘exit’ Baker,” according to Taibbi.

Predictably, right-wing media figures reacted to this series of tweets by claiming that Twitter, the Biden campaign, Baker, and even the FBI had all violated the First Amendment by removing content around the Hunter Biden story. Even Musk himself tweeted, “If this isn’t a violation of the Constitution’s First Amendment, what is?” These claims demonstrate a fundamental misunderstanding of the First Amendment, which only applies to government restrictions of speech or expression – not that of private companies. When users sign up for Twitter, they agree to abide by the platform policies and accept the stated repercussions for violating them. Additionally, Taibbi even acknowledged in his Twitter thread that “there’s no evidence - that I’ve seen - of any government involvement in the laptop story.” (Ironically, Twitter’s decision to restrict sharing the Post article about Hunter Biden may have greatly amplified the story, copies of which have always been available online or in-print.)

Yet right-wing media figures distorted the details of the story to perpetuate these false claims:

- **Fox host Tucker Carlson claimed that the Twitter Files reveal “systemic violation of the First Amendment, the largest example of that in modern history.”** On his prime-time Fox News program,

Carlson said that Taibbi has revealed “the unlawful, the illegal censorship of American citizens at the direction of the U.S. government.” [Fox News, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, 12/2/22 via Twitter]

- **Fox News host Jesse Watters claimed that “the Biden White House had a direct line to challenge and take down content they didn't like.”** Notably, Biden was not in office during the time in question. [Fox News, *Jesse Watters Primetime*, 12/2/22]
- **Pizzagate promoter Jack Posobiec called for Biden to face “an impeachment inquiry” over the files.** [Twitter, 12/2/22]
- **Posobiec also claimed without evidence that Baker “scrubbed the Twitter files before Matt Taibbi received them.”** [Twitter, 12/6/22]
- **Fox News host Pete Hegseth claimed that Baker was “part of suppressing the story intentionally.”** He went on to say “who knew that Joe Biden's gatekeeper in Jim Baker was still putting his thumb on the scale.” [Fox News, *The Faulkner Focus*, 12/7/22]
- **Turning Point USA founder Charlie Kirk claimed that the files show Democrats' “contempt for the 1st Amendment.”** [Twitter, 12/2/22]
- **Right-wing personalities the Hodgetwins said in a reply to a tweet from Musk that “It ~~100~~ % is, collusion between govt. and Big Tech to violate the First Amendment.”** [Twitter, 12/2/22]
- **Judicial Watch president Tom Fitton tweeted that the first thread in the Twitter Files “further confirm[s] Democratic Party opposition to the First Amendment.”** [Twitter, 12/2/22]

False claim: Twitter colluded with Democrats and the FBI to interfere in the 2020 election by suppressing right-wing accounts posting about Hunter Biden

Right-wing figures also falsely portrayed general warnings the FBI (which was run by a Trump appointee at that time) made to Twitter about possible foreign disinformation campaigns around Hunter Biden as proof of collusion and election interference.

Despite right-wing media figures' ongoing insistence that Trump would have won the 2020 election if even more people had been exposed to the New York Post's long-debunked conspiracy theories about Hunter Biden's business interests, an analysis by Washington Post columnist Philip Bump determined that Twitter's actions around the Hunter Biden story did not cost Donald Trump the 2020 election. As Bump explained, “There's no evidence that the restriction imposed by Twitter (or Facebook) actually kept interested people from learning about the story.” And as contributing writer at The Atlantic David French wrote, actions around the Hunter Biden story didn't suppress it, but rather “launched a national debate that's still not over.”

Right-wing figures' contributions to that national debate remain unhelpful, however, with many catastrophizing Twitter's actions as supposedly insurrectionary, illegal, and criminal:

- **Fox host Laura Ingraham called for Big Tech to be reined in, comparing Twitter's restriction of the unconfirmed story about Hunter Biden to Russian interference in U.S. elections.** In a December 2 tweet, Ingraham said, "Russian interference & meddling? Tonight we expose Twitter interference & meddling in the 2020 campaign. Sleazier than we thought—it's time to rein in Big Tech. GOP better do it." [Twitter, 12/2/22]
- **Students for Trump co-founder Ryan Fournier claimed that Twitter helped Joe Biden win in 2020, calling the report "damning."** Fournier tweeted on December 2, "The Twitter Files release is damning. Everything we believed is being confirmed true. Twitter colluded in the 2020 election and helped Biden win." [Twitter, 12/2/22]
- **Jack Posobiec asserted that Twitter's decision to restrict the distribution of the New York Post story amounted to a "digital insurrection."** [Twitter, 12/2/22]
- **Right-wing influencer Terrence K. Williams claimed that "Twitter interfered with the 2020 Election and those involved should be held accountable."** He added, "President Trump should be in the White House right now." [Twitter, 12/2/22]
- **In a Twitter Spaces Q&A, Musk accused Twitter of "doing one team's bidding," calling this "the very definition of election interference."** He went on to accuse Twitter of "acting like an arm of the Democratic National Committee." [YouTube, 12/3/22]
- **Fox host Dan Bongino praised Musk for exposing collusion that "potentially fleece[d] the election away from Donald Trump."** Bongino alleged "active collusion" between the FBI, other government officials, and "Twitter and Big Tech," telling viewers that they were successful in stealing "away your country," and that "Elon Musk is trying to help you get it back." [Fox News, *Hannity*, 12/8/22]
- **On Fox News, former Trump adviser Stephen Miller described the Twitter Files as showing "the single greatest, most sophisticated, far-reaching election interference effort, really, not just in the history of our country but in the history of our developed peer nations."** He went on to say, "What you're talking about here is a handful of hardened left activists, at a major global social media platform, secretly manipulating, altering, and changing the dialogue, making unpopular ideas appear popular, making very popular, very important, potentially life-saving ideas seem unpopular and inaccessible to alter, to change, to redirect the whole course of American history in secret." [Fox News, *Hannity*, 12/8/22]
- **Jeff Carlson, a writer for the Epoch Times, claimed that Baker started working at Twitter in June 2020, "just in time to help illegally influence the 2020 presidential election."** [Twitter, 12/6/22]
- **Trump praised Musk on Truth Social for supposedly proving that the 2020 election was stolen from him.** His post called the Twitter Files "a revelation in that they show, in a very powerful fashion, the FBI and 'Justice' illegally colluding, proving conclusively, in one more very powerful way, that the 2020 Presidential Election was Rigged & Stolen." [Truth Social, 12/9/22]

- **Charlie Kirk claimed that the Twitter Files revealed that his account “needed to be taken out to defeat Trump in 2020.”** He called it “unmistakable, that Twitter is critical to who is going to control the civilization,” later saying, “You can only wonder what the election results would have been if we could have spoke freely about ivermectin” and other topics. He also accused Twitter of cheating, saying that “this is the largest technology scandal in probably ever” and that “Twitter influenced and rigged the 2020 elections.” [*The Charlie Kirk Show*, 12/9/22]
- **Former Trump advisor Boris Epshteyn ranted in agreement with Musk that Twitter is a “crime scene.”** He also accused Twitter of colluding with the “deep state,” calling Twitter’s actions “a coup.” [*Real America’s Voice, War Room: Pandemic*, 12/12/22]
- **Fox Business host Stuart Varney alleged that “big government, big media, and Twitter executives” got together “to conspire, to deprive voters of political information right before an election.”** Fox News host Steve Doocy reacted by saying that “it’s very clear that behind the scenes at Twitter they were trying to figure out what to do before the election, and ultimately they used the warnings from the federal government as the reason why they would clamp down and banish the New York Post story about the Hunter Biden laptop.” [*Fox News, Fox & Friends*, 12/12/22]

False claim: Twitter took content moderation action against conservative accounts based on political ideology rather than policy and lied about it

In an additional installment of the Twitter Files, author Bari Weiss claimed that Twitter created secret “blacklists,” censoring the accounts of prominent figures including Fox News host Dan Bongino, Turning Point USA founder Charlie Kirk, and the anti-LGBTQ account Libs of TikTok among others, implying that their content was “disfavored” because they are conservatives. Musk and other right-wing figures responded by claiming that Weiss’ thread vindicated them for their long-espoused grievance that Twitter and Big Tech in general disproportionately and unfairly censor conservatives.

As *Intelligencer* senior writer Eric Levitz has explained, Weiss “doesn’t actually provide any information about the ideological breakdown of blacklisted accounts. She merely observes that some of the blacklisted accounts were conservative, then suggests that this proves that they were blacklisted for being conservative.”

What Weiss failed to unpack in her thread were the numerous, clear violations of Twitter’s policies that these accounts repeatedly committed. In March, Kirk was suspended from the platform after repeatedly deadnaming Assistant Secretary for Health Rachel Levine, which is a violation of Twitter’s policy on hateful conduct. Libs of TikTok has also been suspended multiple times for violating these policies in its attacks against LGBTQ people. Bongino (who has been permanently banned from YouTube and Google’s AdSense for spreading misinformation about COVID-19) was suspended from Twitter after sharing a video from Trump following the January 6 Capitol insurrection.

As a private company, Twitter not only has the right to moderate content on its platform, but it also has an

obligation to do so if it wants to remain in the Apple app store. What's more, Twitter's internal algorithms have already demonstrated a bias in favor of right-leaning accounts.

Right-wing media have nevertheless attempted to spin Twitter's content moderation decisions as politically motivated and nefarious. Conservative figures have even called for Jack Dorsey's arrest, claiming that he lied under oath in 2018 when during a hearing by the House Energy and Commerce Committee, he responded "no" to Rep. Mike Doyle (D-PA), who had asked if Twitter was "shadow-banning prominent Republicans."

But as former Twitter officials Vijaya Gadde and Kayvon Beykpour explained in a 2018 blog post, shadow-banning, which refers to "deliberately making someone's content undiscoverable to everyone except the person who posted it, unbeknownst to the original poster," is not something Twitter does. This has not stopped Weiss and those reacting to her thread from conflating "shadow-banning" with limiting the reach of accounts that violate Twitter's policies – a known practice at Twitter which Musk himself has endorsed, though misrepresented as "new policy."

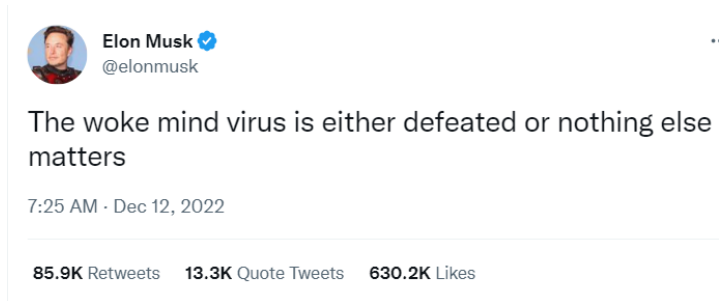
Similar to other claims being made around the Twitter Files, these interpretations of content moderation and free speech misunderstand the purpose of the First Amendment. Nevertheless, conservatives have continued to make claims about Twitter unfairly suppressing their content:

- **On Twitter, right-wing podcaster Steven Crowder posted, "This is fascism."** He also claimed that "#TwitterFiles shows that Twitter employees created blacklists in an effort to silence tweets and certain users whose viewpoints they disagreed with." [Twitter, 12/8/22]
- **The Daily Caller published and tweeted an article with the caption "Here's how Twitter gaslit the public about their shadow banning efforts and secret blacklists."** The article frames what seems to be normal content moderation practices as "shadow banning." [The Daily Caller, 12/8/22]
- **Fox News host Sean Duffy claimed that "Jack Dorsey came to Congress and lied."** He added: "It's a five-year prison sentence to lie if you Congress." [Fox News, *Outnumbered*, 12/9/22]
- **Fox News host Brian Kilmeade also implied that Dorsey should be charged, saying he lied to Congress.** "He [Jack Dorsey] also said it in front of congressional testimony. I mean, are they going to press charges on him? How dare you lie like this." [Fox News, *Fox & Friends*, 12/9/22]
- **QAnon-linked Trump loyalist Kash Patel suggested that Twitter executives should be prosecuted for shadow-banning conservatives.** "They all lied- dorsey, vijaya, roth, every twitter criminal, under oath, to congress... hey doj when are their prosecutions??? 2-tier system of justice rolls on #FWK." [Truth Social, 12/9/22]
- **Tom Fitton tweeted that the Twitter Files "confirm Twitter activist employees made up new rules on the fly to censor/ban Trump and conservatives."** He also claimed that they "show anti-Trump users protected from censorship/punishment for prohibited speech." [Twitter, 12/10/22]

- **Newsmax contributor Dick Morris referred to Twitter’s content moderation practices shown in the Twitter Files as “Illegal Political Bias.”** He also claimed that “the internal decision-making history of Trump’s ban shows a clear ideological bias.” [Newsmax, 12/11/22]

False claim: Big Tech is colluding with government entities and the Democratic Party to “control your brain”

Right-wing figures have used Weiss’ thread and the broader Twitter Files project to insist that Big Tech is colluding with numerous government entities and the Democrats to unjustly censor conservatives in order to control public opinion – not just about Hunter Biden but about a range of topics. Musk himself continues to insist that his purchase of Twitter was about “the future of civilization,” on December 12 tweeting, “The woke mind virus is either defeated or nothing else matters.”



Right-wing figures have a long history of baselessly claiming that Big Tech is working to manipulate public opinion in a way that disfavors them, be it around the pandemic or LGBTQ rights. Media Matters and others have repeatedly debunked claims that platforms are censoring conservatives.

Musk's Twitter Files have nevertheless provided right-wing figures with the opportunity to continue insisting that they are being targeted by a greater, organized enemy, when in truth they're just being held to established platform policies:

- **Musk claimed during a Twitter Spaces Q&A that Silicon Valley is exporting the "moral framework" of San Francisco "to earth," calling this "a big deal and problematic" because San Francisco is "far far left."** He later tweeted that by virtue of Twitter being "co-located with San Francisco, which is far left," the "far left gained control of an incredibly powerful info weapon." He later claimed that Bari Weiss's December 8 thread "clearly describes" that Twitter's rules "were enforced against the right, but not against the left." [YouTube, 12/3/22; Twitter, 12/8/22, 12/8/22]
- **Tucker Carlson told his viewers that the Twitter Files revealed that the FBI "was working secretly with Twitter and the Biden campaign to control your brain."** He also claimed that they revealed that "Big Tech works aggressively and in secret with government agencies to subvert the outcome of what the rest of us assumed were free and fair elections." [Fox News, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, 12/5/22]
- **Dan Bongino claimed to have a "big target on my back" for being "a unique danger" to Big Tech, given that he has a large audience and was an early investor in alternative platforms like Parler and Rumble.** He went on to allege collusion between Twitter and various government agencies in suppressing his speech, adding, "This is what communists and fascists do. They believe in hierarchy and totalitarianism and the brutal exerting of power over others and subjugating them." [Fox News, *Fox & Friends*, 12/9/22]
- **Pete Hegseth claimed that Michael Shellenberger's December 10 thread suggests that Jack Dorsey was "over time ... worn down by ideologues," allowing Twitter to become the headquarters of "the elites who wanted to control the conversation."** Contributor Lisa Boothe agreed, claiming that Americans are being persuaded to give up their freedoms to elites under the guise of user safety and that "the endgame is control." [Fox News, *Fox & Friends Sunday*, 12/11/22]
- **Charlie Kirk theorized that the Centers for Disease Control, the Food and Drug Administration, the FBI, the Department of Justice or Tony Fauci may have threatened Dorsey and Twitter into censoring him and Bongino.** He told Bongino, "Your podcast is huge; you reach millions of people. You also have been incredibly successful in the parallel economy with Rumble and other things. And I think — I'd venture a guess that they also targeted me because of Turning Point USA, because of the work that we're doing on college campuses and high school campuses, the millions and millions of young people that we are reaching and with persuasive and compelling messaging. You add those two things together, that equals 'do not amplify.'" [Fox News, *Unfiltered w/ Dan Bongino*, 12/11/22]

- **Fox News contributor Tammy Bruce cautioned that people “shouldn't think this is just about Twitter,” but rather “the nature of government and its attitude, what we have been facing, and what has been controlling the country.”** Fox News host Will Cain agreed, predicting that the next installment of the Twitter Files will feature “the extent they went to control our minds when it came to COVID.” [Fox News, *Fox & Friends*, 12/13/22]