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EXCLUSIVE

TWITTER KEPT ENTIRE 'DATABASE' OF REPUBLICAN REQUESTS TO CENSOR POSTS

Elon Musk's "Twitter Files" focus on Democrats, but former administration officials and Twitter employees say Trump's team and other Republicans routinely demanded posts be taken down

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When the White House called up Twitter in the early morning hours of September 9, 2019, officials had what they believed was a serious issue to report: Famous model Chrissy Teigen had just called President **Donald Trump** “a pussy ass bitch” on Twitter — and the White House wanted the tweet to come down.

That exchange — revealed during Wednesday’s House Oversight Committee hearing on Twitter by Rep. Gerry Connolly — and others like it are nowhere to be found in **Elon Musk’s “Twitter Files”** releases, which have focused almost exclusively on requests from Democrats and the feds to the social media company. The newly empowered Republican majority in the House of Representatives is now devoting significant resources and time to investigating this supposed “collusion” between liberal politicians and Twitter. Some Republicans even believe the release of the “Twitter Files” is the “**tip of the spear**” of their crusade against the alleged liberal bias of Big Tech.

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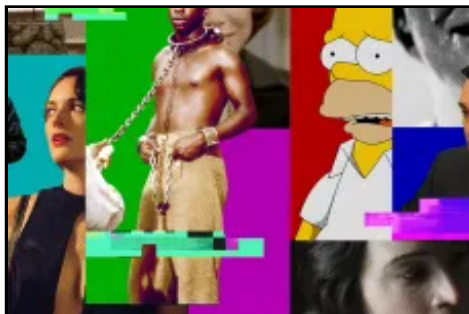


But former Trump administration officials and Twitter employees tell *Rolling Stone* that the White House’s Teigen tweet demand was hardly an isolated incident: The Trump administration and its allied Republicans in Congress routinely asked Twitter to take down posts they objected to — the exact behavior that they’re claiming makes President Biden, the Democrats, and Twitter complicit in an anti-free speech conspiracy to muzzle conservatives online.

“It was strange to me when all of these investigations were announced because it was all about the exact same stuff that we had done [when Donald Trump was in office],” one former top aide to a senior Trump administration official tells *Rolling Stone*. “It was normal.”

In interviews with former Twitter personnel, onetime Trump administration officials, and other people familiar with the matter, each source recalled what could be described as a “hotline,” “tipline,” or large Twitter “database” of moderation and removal requests that was frequently pinged by the offices of powerful Democrats and Republicans alike.

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The voluminous requests often came from high-ranking political appointees working in different departments, offices, and agencies in the Trump administration. But during both the Trump and Biden presidencies, these types of moderation requests or demands were routinely sent to Twitter by the staff of influential GOP lawmakers — ones with names like Kevin McCarthy and Elise Stefanik.

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Oftentimes, requests would demand Twitter stop “shadowbanning” certain conservative accounts, or that the company reinstate banned or suspended right-wing personas. Other times, offices of senior Trump administration officials would send emails seeking to remove tweets that they believed to be “hate speech” or death threats aimed at their principals. And over the years, the knowledgeable sources say, staffers for Republican officials would regularly flag to Twitter content that they believed violated the app’s terms of service or other policies, including on spreading “misinformation” or “disinformation.”

That sentiment was shared by those who’ve worked for Twitter. “Everybody worked the refs,” one source familiar with congressional requests to the social media company said. “Usually with the Republicans, most of the time rather than saying, ‘Why are you taking things down?’ it was, ‘You need to put things back up.’ It was, ‘Put me back, put me back.’”

In Teigen’s case, the White House’s attempt to get Twitter to remove criticism of the president was sparked by a late night exchange initiated by Trump. The then-president blasted musician “@johnlegend, and his filthy mouthed wife” for being insufficiently grateful to him for signing the criminal justice reform First Step Act. The White House’s removal request landed on the desk of Anika Collier Navaroli, who testified that her supervisors had informed her the White House wanted Twitter to evaluate the post. “They wanted it to come down because it was a derogatory statement,” told the House Oversight Committee on Wednesday.

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Despite their own past behavior, Republicans are using their newfound control of the House to probe Democrats' and federal law enforcement agencies' interaction with Twitter.

During the House Oversight Committee's hearing on Twitter's handling of the *New York Post's* Hunter Biden laptop story on Wednesday, Republicans thundered about what they claimed "collusion" between Twitter and supposedly hostile federal agencies like the FBI to suppress the distribution of the *Post's* trove of private files from then-candidate Biden's son.

The obvious irony here is, the sources note, that Republican leaders and elected officials have long been committing precisely the kind of "government interference" that they are now investigating, fundraising off of, and accusing Democrats and the so-called anti-Trump "Deep State" of perpetrating. Some of the loudest conservative and MAGA voices on Capitol Hill — who've been endlessly demanding taxpayer-funded, high-profile investigations into Big Tech "bias" and "collusion" — were themselves engaged in the behavior they now claim is colluding.

"This is one of the original concerns about content moderation and platform power, that they could be used by the government to take down speech that the government wants censored and that it couldn't get taken down through legal mechanisms," says Evelyn Douek, a professor of law who studies content moderation at Stanford Law School. "One of the things in the scholarship around this for a long time is a desire to make government and platform relationships more transparent and more formalized so that you can't just have random people calling random employees trying to get stuff removed or put back up."

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Facebook, at the urging of its independent oversight board, has already committed to publishing more data about requests from state actors to review content and establish a more formal channel for government officials to file them.

But despite Twitter’s apparent new concern about government pressure, the company’s leadership has blown off similar proposals. When Alex Stamos, Facebook’s former chief of security who now heads the Stanford University’s Internet Observatory proposed a similar mechanism to Elon Musk late last year, the new Twitter CEO blew up at him, writing: “You operate a propaganda platform.” 🗨

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