

ELON MUSK'S MACHINE FOR FASCISM: A ONE- STOP SHOP FOR DISINFORMATION AND VIOLENCE

Just over a year ago, I described how Twitter had been used as a way to sow false claims in support of Trump in 2016 and 2020.

I described how, in 2016, trolls professionalized their efforts, with the early contribution of Daily Stormer webmaster Andrew "Weev" Auernheimer. I quoted testimony from Microchip, a key cooperating co-conspirator at Douglass Mackey's trial, describing how he took unoffensive content stolen from John Podesta and turned it into a controversy that would undermine Hillary Clinton's chances.

Q What was it about Podesta's emails that you were sharing?

A That's a good question.

So Podesta 's emails didn't, in my opinion, have anything in particularly weird or strange about them, but my talent is to make things weird and strange so that there is a controversy. So I would take those emails and spin off other stories about the emails for the sole purpose of disparaging Hillary Clinton.

T[y]ing John Podesta to those emails, coming up with stories that had nothing to do with the emails but, you know, maybe had something to do with conspiracies of the day, and then his reputation would bleed over to Hillary Clinton, and then, because he was working for a campaign, Hillary Clinton would be disparaged.

Q So you're essentially creating the appearance of some controversy or conspiracy associated with his emails and sharing that far and wide.

A That's right.

Q Did you believe that what you were tweeting was true?

A No, and I didn't care.

Q Did you fact-check any of it?

A No.

Q And so what was the ultimate purpose of that? What was your goal?

A To cause as much chaos as possible so that that would bleed over to Hillary Clinton and diminish her chance of winning.

After Trump won, the trolls turned immediately to replicating their efforts.

Microchip – a key part of professionalizing this effort – declared, “We are making history,” before he immediately started pitching the idea of flipping a European election (as far right trolls attempted with Emmanuel Macron’s race in 2017) and winning the 2020 election.

WAR ROOM

Group Message ID: 759914939335208960

November 9, 2016

WE ARE MAKING FUCKING HISTORY

WDFx2EU8 4:32am

Maybe an EU election is coming up we can flip or something

WDFx2EU8 6:03pm

i think im going to do this differently for 2020, I may start working on building a bigger bot army over the next 4 years

WDFx2EU8 6:28pm

better than this last minute stuff, we still have a lot of work to do in order to push Trump to the top and back his policies, but i never want to need to fight this hard again, it was good, but we can get more done with planning

WDFx2EU8 6:29pm

They did replicate the effort. That same post

described how, in 2020, Trump's role in the bullshit disinformation was overt.

Trump, his sons, and his top influencers were all among a list of the twenty most efficient disseminators of false claims about the election compiled by the Election Integrity Project after the fact.

Rank	Account	Verified	Incidents	Tweets w/ >1000 Retweets	Followers	Retweets in Incidents	Left or Right
1	RealJamesWoods	True	27	36	2,738,431	403,950	Right
2	gatewaypundit	True	25	45	424,431	200,782	Right
3	DonaldJTrumpJr	True	24	27	6,392,929	460,044	Right
4	realDonaldTrump	True	21	43	88,965,710	1,939,362	Right
4	TomFitton	True	21	29	1,328,746	193,794	Right
6	JackPosobiec	True	20	41	1,211,549	188,244	Right
7	catturd2	False	17	20	436,601	66,039	Right
8	EricTrump	True	16	25	4,580,170	484,425	Right
9	ChuckCallesto	True	15	17	311,517	117,281	Right
10	charliekirk11	True	13	18	1,915,729	232,967	Right
11	marklevinshow	True	12	10	2,790,699	90,157	Right
11	cjtruth	False	12	27	256,201	66,698	Right
11	JamesOKeefeIII	False	12	64	1,021,505	625,272	Right
11	prayingmedic	False	12	26	437,976	57,165	Right
15	RichardGrenell	True	11	12	691,441	143,363	Right
15	pnjaban	True	11	14	208,484	58,417	Right
17	BreitbartNews	True	10	11	1,647,070	38,405	Right
17	TheRightMelissa	False	10	31	497,635	73,932	Right
17	mikeroman	False	10	10	29,610	128,726	Right
17	robbystarbuck	True	10	15	204,355	65,651	Right
17	seanhannity	True	10	22	5,599,939	96,641	Right

While some of the false claims Trump and his supporters were *throttled* in real time, almost none of them were taken down.

But the effort to throttle generally ended after the election, and Stop the Steal groups on Facebook proliferated in advance of January 6.

To this day, I'm not sure what would have happened had not the social media companies shut down Donald Trump.

And then, shortly thereafter, the idea was born for the richest man in the world to buy Twitter. Even his early discussions focused on eliminating the kind of moderation that served as a break in 2020. During that process, someone suspected of being Stephen Miller started pitching Elon Musk on how to bring back the far right, including "the boss," understood to be Trump.

2022-04-04 08:52:30 (CDT)	Congratulations!! The above article was laying out some of the things that might happen: Step 1: Blame the platform for its users Step 2. Coordinated pressure campaign Step 3: Exodus of the Bluechecks Step 4: Deplatforming "But it will not be easy. It will be a war. Let the battle begin."
2022-04-04 09:07:32 (CDT)	It will be a delicate game of letting right wingers back on Twitter and how to navigate that (especially the boss himself, if you're up for that) I would also lay out the standards early but have someone who has a savvy cultural/political view to be the VP of actual enforcement
2022-04-04 09:08:17 (CDT)	A Blake Masters type

Musk started dumping money into Miller's xeno- and transphobic political efforts.

Once Musk did take over Xitter, NGOs run by far right operatives, Republicans in Congress, and useful idiots coordinated to undercut any kind of systematic moderation.

As I laid out last year, the end result seemed to leave us with the professionalization and reach of 2020 but without the moderation. Allies of Donald Trump made a concerted effort to ensure there was little to hold back a flood of false claims undermining democracy.

Meanwhile, the far right, including Elon, started using the Nazi bar that Elon cultivated to stoke right wing violence here on my side of the pond, first with targeted Irish anti-migrant actions, then with the riots that started in Southport. I've been tracing those efforts for some time, but Rolling Stone put a new report on it out, yesterday.

Throughout, the main forum where right-wing pundits and influencers stoked public anger was X. But a key driver of the unrest was the platform's owner himself, Elon Musk. He would link the riots to mass immigration, at one point posting that "civil war" in the U.K. was inevitable. He trolled the newly elected British prime minister, Keir Starmer – whose Labour Party won power in July after 14 years of Conservative rule – for supposedly being biased against right-wing "protesters." After Nigel Farage, the leader of radical-right party Reform U.K. and Trump ally, posted on X that, "Keir Starmer poses the biggest threat to free speech we've seen in our history," Musk replied: "True."

Anything Musk even slightly interacted with during the days of violence received a huge boost, due to the way he has reportedly tinkered with X's algorithm and thanks to his 200 million

followers, the largest following on X. “He’s the curator-in-chief – he’s the man with the Midas touch,” says Marc Owen Jones, an expert on far-right disinformation and associate professor at Northwestern University in Qatar. “He boosted accounts that were contributing to the narratives of disinformation and anti-Muslim hate speech that were fueling these riots.”

Elon Musk, the richest man in the world, one of Trump’s most gleeful supporters, someone with troubling links to both China and Russia, has set up a one-stop shop: Joining false claims about the election with networks of fascists who’ll take to the streets.

With that in mind, I want to point to a number of reports on how disinformation has run rampant on Xitter.

The Center for Countering Digital Hate (one of the groups that Elon unsuccessfully sued) released a report showing that even where volunteers mark disinformation on Xitter, those Community Notes often never get shown to users.

Despite a dedicated group of X users producing accurate, well-sourced notes, a significant portion never reaches public view. In this report we found that 74% of accurate Community Notes on false or misleading claims about US elections never get shown to users. This allows misleading posts about voter fraud, election integrity, and political candidates to spread and be viewed millions of times. Posts without Community Notes promoting false narratives about US politics have garnered billions of views, outpacing the reach of their fact-checked counterparts by 13 times.

NBC described Elon’s personal role in magnifying

false claims.

In three instances in the last month, Musk's posts highlighting election misinformation have been viewed over 200 times more than fact-checking posts correcting those claims that have been published on X by government officials or accounts.

Musk frequently boosts false claims about voting in the U.S., and rarely, if ever, offers corrections when caught sharing them. False claims he has posted this month routinely receive tens of millions of views, by X's metrics, while rebuttals from election officials usually receive only tens or hundreds of thousands.

Musk, who declared his full-throated support for Donald Trump's presidential campaign in July, is facing at least 11 lawsuits and regulatory battles under the Biden administration related to his various companies.

And CNN described how efforts from election administrators to counter this flood of disinformation have been overwhelmed.

Elon Musk's misinformation megaphone has created a "huge problem" for election officials in key battleground states who told CNN they're struggling to combat the wave of falsehoods coming from the tech billionaire and spreading wildly on his X platform.

Election officials in pivotal battleground states including Pennsylvania, Michigan and Arizona have all tried – and largely failed – to fact-check Musk in real time. At least one has tried passing along personal notes asking he stop spreading baseless claims likely to mislead voters.

“I’ve had my friends hand-deliver stuff to him,” said Stephen Richer, a top election official in Arizona’s Maricopa County, a Republican who has faced violent threats for saying the 2020 election was secure.

“We’ve pulled out more stops than most people have available to try to put accurate information in front of (Musk),” Richer added. “It has been unsuccessful.”

Ever since former President Donald Trump and his allies trumpeted bogus claims of election fraud to try to overturn his loss to Joe Biden in 2020, debunking election misinformation has become akin to a second full-time job for election officials, alongside administering actual elections. But Musk – with his ownership of the X platform, prominent backing of Trump and penchant for spreading false claims – has presented a unique challenge.

“The bottom line is it’s really disappointing that someone with as many resources and as big of a platform as he clearly has would use those resources and allow that platform to be misused to spread misinformation,” Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson told CNN, “when he could help us restore and ensure people can have rightly placed faith in our election outcomes, whatever they may be.”

Finally, Wired explained how, last week, Elon’s PAC made it worse, by setting up a group of 50,000 people stoking conspiracy theories.

For months, billionaire and X owner Elon Musk has used his platform to share election conspiracy theories that could undermine faith in the outcome of the 2024 election. Last week, the political

action committee (PAC) Musk backs took it a step further, launching a group on X called the Election Integrity Community. The group has nearly 50,000 members and says that it is meant to be a place where users can “share potential incidents of voter fraud or irregularities you see while voting in the 2024 election.”

In practice, it is a cesspool of election conspiracy theories, alleging everything from unauthorized immigrants voting to misspelled candidate names on ballots. “It’s just an election denier jamboree,” says Paul Barrett, deputy director of the Center for Business and Human Rights at New York University, who authored a recent report on how social media facilitates political violence.

[snip]

Inside the group, multiple accounts shared a viral video of a person ripping up ballots, allegedly from Bucks County, Pennsylvania, which US intelligence agencies have said is fake. Another account shared a video from conspiracy theorist Alex Jones alleging that unauthorized immigrants were being bussed to polling locations to vote. One video shared multiple times, and also purportedly from Buck County, shows a voter confronting a woman with a “voter protection” tag on a lanyard who tells the woman filming that she is there for “early vote monitoring” and asks not to be recorded. Text in the accompanying post says that there were “long lines and early cut offs” and alleges election interference. That post has been viewed more than 1 million times.

Some accounts merely retweet local news stories, or right-wing influencers like Lara Loomer and Jack Posobiec, rather than sharing their own personal

experiences.

One account merely reshared a post from Sidney Powell, the disgraced lawyer who attempted to help Trump overturn the 2020 election, in which she says that voting machines in Wisconsin connect to the internet, and therefore could be tampered with. In actuality, voting machines are difficult to hack. Many of the accounts reference issues in swing states like Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin.

This latter network includes all the same elements we saw behind the riots in the UK – Alex Jones, Trump’s fascist trolls, Russian spies (except Tommy Robinson, who just got jailed on contempt charges).

Now, in my piece last year, I suggested that Elon has diminished the effectiveness of this machine for fascism by driving so many people off of it.

The one thing that may save us is that this Machine for Fascism has destroyed Xitter’s core value to aspiring fascists: it has destroyed Xitter’s role as a public square, from which normal people might find valuable news. In the process, Elmo has destroyed Twitter’s key role in bridging from the far right to mainstream readers.

Maybe that’s true? Or maybe by driving off so many journalists Elon has only ensured that journalists have to go look to find this stuff – and to be utterly clear, this kind of journalism is some of the most important work being done right now.

But with successful tests runs stoking far right violence in Ireland and the UK, that may not matter. Effectively, Elon has made Xitter a massive version of Gab, a one-stop shop from which he can both sow disinformation and stoke

violence.

On a near daily basis, DOJ issues warnings that *some of this* – not the false claims about fraud and not much of the violent rhetoric, but definitely those who try to confuse voters about how or when to vote – is illegal.



U.S. Department of Justice ✓
@TheJusticeDept

...

Spreading false information about voting times or locations is a serious offense. The Justice Department is vigilant in prosecuting those who try to mislead voters. [#KnowYourRights](#)



7:20 PM · Oct 31, 2024 · 695.4K Views

NBC describes that election officials are keeping records of the corrections they've issued, which would be useful in case of legal cases later. What we don't know is whether DOJ is issuing notices of illegal speech to Xitter (they certainly did in 2020 – it's one of the things Matt Taibbi wildly misrepresented), and if so, what they're doing about it.

I am, as I have been for some time, gravely alarmed by all this. The US has far fewer protections against this kind of incitement than the UK or the EU. *Much of this is not illegal.*

Kamala Harris does have – and is using – one important tool against this. Her campaign has made a record number of contacts directly with voters. She is, effectively, sidestepping this wash of disinformation by using her massive network of volunteers to speak directly to people.

If that works, if Harris can continue to do what she seems to be doing in key swing states (though maybe not Nevada): getting more of her

voters to the polls, then all this will come to a head in the aftermath, as I suspect other things may come to a head in the transition period, assuming Harris can win this thing. In a period when DOJ can and might act, the big question is whether American democracy can take action to shut down a machine that has been fine-tuned for years for this moment.

American law and years of effort to privilege Nazi speech have created the opportunity to build a machine for fascism. And I really don't know how it'll work out.

Update: Thus far there have been three known Russian disinformation attempts: a false claim of sexual abuse targeted at Tim Walz, a fake video showing votes in Bucks County being destroyed, and now a false claim that a Haitian migrant was voting illegally in Georgia.



GA Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger ✓
@GaSecofState

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Secretary Raffensperger made the following statement on Thursday night:

"Earlier today, our office became aware of a video purporting to show a Haitian immigrant with multiple Georgia ID's claiming to have voted multiple times.

This is false and is an example of targeted disinformation we've seen in this and other elections. It is likely foreign interference attempting to sow discord and chaos on the eve of the 2024 Presidential election.

We are working to combat this and identify the origin of it with our state and federal partners. CISA is currently investigating. In the meantime, we ask Elon Musk and the leadership of other social media platforms to take this down. This is obviously fake and part of a disinformation effort. Likely it is a production of Russian troll farms.

As Americans we can't let our enemies use lies to divide us and undermine our faith in our institutions - or each other."

This statement from Raffensperger, publicly asking Musk to take it down, may provide some kind of legal basis to take further steps. That's the kind of thing that is needed to get this under control.

Update: I meant to include the Atlantic's contribution to the reporting on Musk's "Election Integrity Community;" it's a good thing so many people are focused on Elon's efforts.

Nothing better encapsulates X's ability to sow informational chaos than the Election Integrity Community—a feed on the platform where users are instructed

to subscribe and “share potential incidents of voter fraud or irregularities you see while voting in the 2024 election.” The community, which was launched last week by Musk’s America PAC, has more than 34,000 members; roughly 20,000 have joined since Musk **promoted** the feed last night. It is jammed with examples of terrified speculation and clearly false rumors about fraud. Its top **post** yesterday morning was a long rant from a “Q Patriot.” His complaint was that when he went to vote early in Philadelphia, election workers directed him to fill out a mail-in ballot and place it in a secure drop box, a process he described as “VERY SKETCHY!” But this is, in fact, just how things work: Pennsylvania’s early-voting system functions via on-demand mail-in ballots, which are filled in at polling locations. The Q Patriot’s post, which has been viewed more than 62,000 times, is representative of the type of fearmongering present in the feed and a sterling example of a phenomenon recently **articulated** by the technology writer Mike Masnick, where “everything is a conspiracy theory when you don’t bother to educate yourself.”