



## "Fool Me Once . . ." Why the Public is Not Buying the Latest Media Campaign Against Twitter

### Description

**USA: Below is my column on the media response to the "Twitter Files," including misleading narratives being repeated across various media platforms. The effort is to assure the public that there is "nothing to see here" but it may backfire. After Twitter employed one of the most extensive censorship systems in history to prevent people from reading opposing views on subjects from Covid to climate change, media figures are now insisting that the public should really not be interested.**

The public, however, is not buying it. They are buying Twitter. With users signing up to Twitter in record numbers, a majority supports Musk's efforts to restore free speech protections and to force greater transparency despite an unrelenting counter campaign in the media. Some of the media claims would meet the very definition of disinformation used by Twitter and its allies previously to censor information and discussions. Indeed, the Wall Street Journal has noted that the greatest purveyors of disinformation turned out to be former intelligence officials who worked to kill the story before the election as "Russian disinformation." The public seems to be following the old adage "Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me."

In the aftermath of the release of the "Twitter Files," the media and political establishment appear to be taking a lesson from Karl Marx who said, "history repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce."

The censoring of the Hunter Biden scandal before the 2020 election by Twitter and others was a tragedy for our democratic system. That tragedy was not in its potential impact on a close election, but the massive (and largely successful) effort to bury a story to protect the Biden campaign. It has now ended in farce as the same censorship apologists struggle to excuse the implications of this major story.

The Twitter Files confirmed that Twitter never had any evidence of a Russian disinformation campaign or hacking as the basis for its decision to censor the New York Post story. Indeed, some at Twitter expressed concern over preventing the sharing of the story. Former Twitter Vice President for Global Communications Brandon Borman asked if the company could "truthfully claim that this is part of the

policy” for barring posts and suspending users.

Those voices were few and quickly shouted down as the company barred the sharing of the story, including evidence of a multimillion-dollar influence peddling scheme by the Biden family. The back channel communications between Biden campaign and Democratic operatives show a willing use of the company to suppress political discussion of the scandal before the election. It was an all-hands-on-deck moment for the media and Twitter was eager to lend a hand.

Over a year ago, I discussed how the brilliance of the Biden campaign was to get the media to become invested in the suppression of the story. After two years, major media finally but reluctantly admitted that the laptop was authentic as well as the emails detailing massive transfers of money from foreign interests (including some with foreign intelligence links).

Many have responded by shrugging that influence peddling is not necessarily a crime, ignoring that it is still a massive corruption scandal with serious national security concerns. After all, as Heather Digby Parton argued in Salon on December 5, “There is nothing there other than a man making money by trading on his family name.”

After the release of the “Twitter Files,” many of these same figures have shifted to excuse the censorship done at the request of Biden campaign or Democratic operatives.

For some of us who come from long-standing liberal Democratic families, it has been chilling to see the Democratic Party embrace censorship and denounce free speech, including organizing foreign and corporate interests to prevent Musk from restoring free speech protections.

Beyond personally attacking Elon Musk and Matt Taibbi, many have resorted to two claims that are being widely repeated in the media to avoid discussing the coordinated censorship efforts between this company and Democratic operatives.

### **What Censorship?**

One of the old saws of censorship apologists is that without a government directing the suppression of free speech, it is not censorship.

That is clearly untrue. Many groups like the ACLU stress that “censorship can be carried out by the government as well as private pressure groups.”

The same figures insist that if, there is not a violation of the First Amendment (which only applies to the government), there is no free speech violation. The First Amendment was never the exclusive definition of free speech. Free speech is viewed by many of us as a human right; the First Amendment only deals with one source for limiting it. Free speech can be undermined by private corporations as well as government agencies.

Corporations clearly have free speech rights. Ironically, Democrats have long opposed such rights for companies, but they embrace such rights when it comes to censorship. It is also worth noting that this censorship (and these back channels) continued after the Biden campaign became the Biden administration — a classic example of censorship by a surrogate. Moreover, some of the pressure was coming from Democratic senators and House members to silence critics and bury the Hunter Biden influence peddling scandal.

To his credit, Democratic Rep. Ro Khanna of California reached out to Twitter's leading censor, Vijaya Gadde, and tried to get the company to reconsider this action even though he identified himself as a "total Biden partisan." He noted that "[t]his seems a violation of the First Amendment principles."

Rep. Ro Khanna, D-Calif., expressed concerns over Twitter's decision to censor the Hunter Biden laptop story. (Reuters)

It is a violation of *free speech* principles and Khanna was one of the few on the left unwilling to discard those principles for politics in this controversy.

### **"It is all about the Dirty Pictures"**

Another claim is that this was not an effort to censor the story but merely to block the vulgar images that Hunter took of himself having sex with prostitutes or exposing himself.

This claim adds the specter of propaganda to that of censorship. As the Twitter files reveal, Twitter officials discussed whether the whole story might be Russian disinformation or hacking. For former Deputy FBI General Counsel Jim Baker (who was hired by Twitter after the Russian collusion scandal) it is all about supporting others from sharing the story because "caution is warranted."

Even at the time of the suppression, it was clear to many on the left that the move was being justified by the false claim of a hack.

Rep. Khanna noted in his letter to Gadde that "a journalist should not be held accountable for the illegal actions of the source unless they actively aided the hack. So, to restrict the distribution of that material, especially regarding a presidential candidate, seems not in the keeping of [the Supreme Court case] *New York Times vs. Sullivan*."

More importantly, it was not lost on Twitter employees including one who said that "They just freelanced [the censorship]. . . hacking was the excuse, but within a few hours, pretty much everyone realized that wasn't going to hold. But no one had the guts to reverse it."

Moreover, Twitter later admitted that it was a mistake to suppress the story and allowed such sharing, including articles with the pictures. While the "Biden team" did want the company to censor any tweets containing references like "Hunter Biden porn," it was not the explicit pictures that caused the company to suppress the story before the election.

However, there is a brilliant, if counterintuitive, spin of this argument. As stated in Salon, “mostly what the Hunter Biden laptop ‘scandal’ is about is the dirty pictures.” If the scandal is all about dirty pictures, it is not about dirty politics or influence peddling. It is also not about censorship. End of discussion.

The effort to dismiss these disclosures will not work — any more than earlier efforts to suppress the story itself.

We are still expecting more files to be released. Moreover, the House is expected to investigate the use of these companies to carry out censorship for Democratic allies.

That investigation is important because there is always the risk that Twitter officials (who were long aware of the threat of such inquiries) may have avoided or even destroyed written communications.

Indeed, the increasingly shrill chorus that “there is nothing to see here” may only prompt a closer look from many skeptical citizens.

After all, nothing draws a crowd as much as a farce.

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### **Category**

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