



Q&A

# FREE SPEECH?

Journalist **Matt Taibbi** tells **John Hinderaker** why the First Amendment is under threat from Big Government and Big Tech.



**M**att Taibbi is an award-winning journalist, author, and staunch defender of free speech. He recently testified in front of Congress regarding the sweeping effort of government agencies and Big Tech to control and censor information. He is the publisher and editor of the online magazine *Racket News*, and host of the popular podcast *America This Week*.

**John Hinderaker: Tell us about your background. You're a journalist by profession?**

Matt Taibbi: I am, yes. And I'm from a family of journalists. My father was a news reporter for a long time on NBC, and my stepmother was also a business anchor at CNN. *Rolling Stone* is the main publication that I wrote for. I worked for them for a little over 15 years covering presidential campaigns. That was the beat made famous by Hunter S. Thompson. But I've also written for various publications here and abroad. I lived in the former Soviet Union for about 10 years at the start of my career and wrote in both English and Russian for a number of publications, including the *Moscow Times*, which is an expat paper. And then I had my own paper called *The Exile*.

**At some point toward the end of 2022, you got involved in what has become known as the Twitter Files in your capacity as a journalist. How did that happen? How did it work logistically?**

The company [Twitter, now known as X] and Elon invited me to come and participate. The logistics are very hard to explain because the situation kept changing over time. So for instance, in the first Twitter Files report, I was just handed a batch of documents that pertain to a subject that I had asked about, which was the decision by Twitter to block access to the *New York Post* exposé on

Hunter Biden's laptop. After that, there was a moment where we had basically laptop access to Slack conversations for about an eight-month period of time in Twitter's history before and after the 2020 election that produced, I would say, the lion's share of the raw documentation that we got throughout the entire project. After that, it was a different system where each of the journalists had to submit individualized searches that would be cross-referenced against various databases and terms. In the end, we ended up with big piles of documents once every couple of weeks.



Matt Taibbi has earned a reputation for exposing government and media lies and excesses. He has earned numerous awards for his writing and is the author of 10 books including four *New York Times* bestsellers.

**How would you characterize the most important revelations from the Twitter files?**

If you want to look into it from a traditional breaking news standpoint, the biggest stories had to do with us nailing down, for instance, the system of communication that existed between the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security, about two dozen different tech companies, including Twitter, Facebook, and Google, and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. They not only had regular meetings, they had a system that involved flagging requests and sending them to each one

of these companies. They had regular communication flow back and forth. We identified all of that and showed exactly how the process worked and in what direction the information flowed. I think that was the headline revelation. I can get into some of the bigger picture ideas that have only recently come into relief because that, I think, is going to end up becoming the more important consequence of this research. There was a lot that we just couldn't get to at the time because it wasn't clear, and we're only now starting to understand it.

**What do you have in mind when you talk about the bigger, more consequential discoveries?**

So there's this whole gigantic complex of governmental organizations, law enforcement organizations, intelligence agencies, then there are NGOs, there are civil society organizations, then there's the news media. There's a whole gigantic mix of characters and it took us a long time to figure out who they all were. The biggest story in the end, I think, turned out to be that a lot of these organizations that are supposed to be providing checks on each other, for instance, the news media against government, or corporate organizations are supposed to sometimes push back against regulatory initiatives. They were all actually cooperating in what one of the actors called the shared endeavor of censoring, basically the general public. And that is a total corruption of how democracy is supposed to work.

These groups are supposed to be checking each other's influence, and instead they were coordinating to create essentially a kind of subterranean bureaucratic state. This is very hard to explain, but I think it's a very powerful, scary story that was under the surface of these documents. And we're only just now kind of putting together how all that works.

**What is really striking to me is the alacrity with which these employees**



of the social media companies like Twitter were happy to collaborate with government officials in this censorship project.

Yes, there's a tone that's very strange. Normally, when the government knocks on the door of a corporation and says, "Hey, we want you to do this, or else there are going to be regulatory consequences," what you would expect to see is a series of executives saying, "Alright, how do we push back against this? How do we make sure that the boundaries are established so that we don't have to give away the store to the federal government every single time?" But instead of that kind of adversarial relationship, which we saw a bit of at the beginning of this process like in 2016 or 2017, it very quickly

---

**"They call information that is true but has a so-called adverse consequence *malinformation*, which is an Orwellian idea. We found countless examples of this in the files."**

---

devolved into an open partnership where essentially all these different government agencies are calling the Trust and Safety employees at Twitter.

They're just sort of freely associating about which groups they're going to clamp down on. There's no representation of the people in all this, but there is a very, very tight bond both socially and professionally between these executives and the officials in government where there should be a barrier between them, and it's just not there. It's also not there between the company and people who work in news media — they would both be collaborating about which kinds of accounts should be taken down. As a

reporter, it was very odd for me to see the nature of that relationship.

**Regarding censorship and the information contained on Hunter Biden's laptop — the relevance lies in the documents found as they relate to then-candidate Biden. Many people think that the suppression of that story really played a significant role in the 2020 presidential campaign.**

It very easily could have played a significant role. It was very strange to look at the internal discussions about this because the primary motivation of Twitter, at least internally at the company, was not to have a repeat of 2016. They were worried about what they called hack and leak, or hack and dump, operations. They've been warned about this by officials at the FBI. But as a journalist, I know that that kind of reporting is expressly allowed in American journalism. The Supreme Court has ruled allowing us to publish documents that are stolen, but in the public interest — we do it all the time. For instance, during the War on Terror period and WikiLeaks, which was a partner to all these major news organizations. Whistleblowers bring us things that are taken from their workplaces, and we publish them; that's legitimate and goes back a long way to the Pentagon Papers.

One of the scarier things we found in the Twitter Files was a discussion about the reversal of what they called the Pentagon Papers principle, which is the idea that we should publish anything that's true irrespective of the provenance or political purpose of those documents. Again, I was raised as a traditional journalist, so I'm not supposed to care about which way the facts break. My job is supposed to be narrowly focused on, "Is this true? Can I prove that? And if so, I'll put it out there." And then the public can figure out what to do with that information. But now there is a new idea, which is we have to think about how the public is going to perceive this



Dan Goldman, (D) congressman from New York

---

**"He was basically asking me to pledge my allegiance to the Russia investigation."**

---

information. Is it going to cause them to vote for the wrong person? Is it going to cause them to avoid being vaccinated? So they call information that is true but has a so-called adverse consequence *malinformation*, which is an Orwellian idea. We found countless examples of this in the files.

**It wasn't a question of trying to stop the propagation of information that was false — in fact, they acknowledged truths at times — but they'd rather people not learn about it.**

Yes. And that's also the basis of the current litigation that's moving toward the Supreme Court, the *Missouri v. Biden* case about internet censorship. It's rooted in the experiences of three highly credentialed academics, one from the University of California system, one from Stanford, and one from Harvard. They were arguing against lockdowns and saying there are negative mental health consequences and they had signed what's called the Great Barrington Declaration.

This gets to the issue of why we don't have a media regulator in America — because truth squads are almost always susceptible to getting things wrong. And in this case, these doctors were de-amplified, blacklisted, and put on algorithmic suppression lists because they were advocating against federal health policy. But they weren't wrong. It was an opinion about policy that was just being suppressed. It's a violation

of the First Amendment, but it's also a violation of what I would call free speech culture: The idea that we arrive at the truth by freely talking about things. It's a fundamental American idea, and it's just been shoved aside without any debate. And this is another thing that we saw a lot in the files.

Again, this is very upsetting for me personally in my own field of journalism. The way this first presented itself was when journalists strayed from this model of just reporting the facts, and then it's up to the audience to make sense of it. Our job is to make sure that we get it right, and then we're upholding our part of the democratic contract. Your part of it is to evaluate this information as citizens. There was something touching and inspiring about that model — we believed in it, and audiences believed in it, and they held us to a standard, and suddenly, people in my business started to say, “We don't trust audiences to make the right call anymore. We're going to tell them overtly how to interpret facts that they get. We're going to constantly stick the words in, ‘without evidence.’ I always understood if it's a big story, I want to put it out. If it's against the Republicans or if it's against Democrats, whatever. It's not my job to worry about that, but they do now, and it's antithetical to free speech culture.

**There were White House officials who were engaged in part of this censorship.**

That's some of the worst evidence in the *Missouri v. Biden* case. For instance, there was a meme that somebody put on Twitter basically making a joke about the vaccine and saying, 10 years from now you're going to have class action attorneys doing commercials. If you took the vaccine, call 1-800 whatever — it's a joke, but the Biden administration was furious. They wanted that down

immediately, and there's an email record where they're openly saying, “This has to come down ASAP.” That's very strong evidence of a direct First Amendment violation, and the judges have said as much. They wanted to remove Tucker Carlson's broadcasts. They were very upset that Joe Biden's personal account had been de-amplified inadvertently when he was talking too much about vaccines. That actually triggered an

who are building this capability, irrespective of politics, and it doesn't really matter which administration is in power. They're much more interested in expanding capability than in suppressing particular points of view, although that's also happening.

**Many people viewed the Twitter Files as being a real revelation. You were called upon to testify in front of the House Weaponization of the Federal Government Subcommittee. What kind of reception did you get from the Democrats on that committee?**

I'm a lifelong Democrat and the reception was beyond hostile. Dan Goldman, the congressman from New York, was holding up indictments that he had worked on with the Mueller investigation and asked me if I agreed with the idea that Russians were interfering with our election. He was basically asking me

to pledge my allegiance to the Russia investigation. He's a lawyer. I had to remind him that indictments are not facts, they're just charges. I can't agree or disagree. It was terrifying and hostile in many other ways, too.

An IRS agent had come to my door as I was testifying. When I got home, my wife handed me a note that said, “Call me back in four days.” When I finally reached them, it was about two very strange issues. One of them was totally ridiculous, and the other one was minor that they could have dealt with by correspondence. I told the people on the subcommittee that the IRS came by and this might be witness intimidation and they may want to look into it. And they did. I didn't say anything publicly about it until we got back some information that was kind of upsetting, specifically that the case had been opened on me on Christmas Eve, which was a Saturday, and the day that probably the biggest Twitter File story came out. ★



Taibbi testifies in front of the Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government on March 9, 2023 about investigating the Twitter Files.

algorithmic response that de-amplified his account, which they demanded to be fixed right away.

**Is there any indication that Trump was involved in the censorship or knew about it?**

We didn't find Trump's fingerprints, per se, on any documents, although we were told that he had personally written to some of the people at Twitter demanding that this account or that be taken down or he was upset about somebody tweeting about him.

Yes, there were some Trump officials who were involved at the State Department, for instance. But most of what we were looking at I would describe as nonpartisan. It's permanent security and law enforcement officials