

When Big Tech Becomes Alt-Tech: The Clash Between Social Media Networks and Democracy

Dr. Liram Koblentz-Stenzler

Ms. Sigalit Maor-Hirsh

Mr. Bradley Martin

January 2023

About the ICT

The International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) is one of the leading academic institutes for counter-terrorism in the world. Using a multidisciplinary approach, the ICT work to facilitate international cooperation in the global struggle against terrorism.

As an independent think-do-tank, the ICT focuses on themes related terrorism, counter-terrorism, homeland security, threat vulnerability, risk assessment, intelligence analysis, national security, and defense policy.

Serving as a joint forum for international policymakers and scholars, the ICT draws upon the experiences of a comprehensive and international network of individuals and organizations with unique expertise on terrorism and counter-terrorism research, public policy analysis and education

In addition to publishing research papers, situation reports and academic publications for worldwide distribution, the ICT hosts a number of international seminars, workshops and conferences to discuss and educate followers on global and regional issues of security, defense, and public policy in order to better facilitate the exchange of perspectives, information and proposals for policy action.

Licensing & Distribution

ICT publications are published in an open-access format and are distributed under the terms of the the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International Public License, which permits the non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

When Big Tech Becomes Alt-Tech: The Clash Between Social Media Networks and Democracy

Dr. Liram Koblentz-Stenzler
Ms. Sigalit Maor-Hirsh
Mr. Bradley Martin

Abstract

Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter, considered part of the Big-Tech ecosystem, heralds an alarming change regarding online disinformation. Statements about removing censorship and the allowing free speech, accompanied with solid end-to-end encryption and weakening the enforcement of online content monitoring, are prominent warning signs for democracy and its institutions.

The transfer of control over information and data and supervision of how it can be used, into the hands of individuals, becomes a tangible danger due to the lack of checks and balances and captive users. The fact that far-right activists desire to go back to Twitter and re-open their blocked accounts to spread far-right propaganda, clearly demonstrates the risk that it poses. By monitoring posts of activists in encrypted and non-encrypted far-right communication channels towards two events occurred in October and November 2022, U.S. mid-term elections and purchase Telegram by Musk, there is a clear demonstration of the danger posed to public order and to the democracy stability by social networks platforms terms of use.

Keywords: Social Media, Far-Right, Alt-Tech, Big Tech

Received: 11 January 2023 ■ Accepted: 27 January 2023.

Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter, considered part of the Big-Tech ecosystem, heralds an alarming change regarding online disinformation. Statements about removing censorship and the allowing free speech, accompanied with solid end-to-end encryption and weakening the enforcement of online content monitoring, are prominent warning signs for democracy and its institutions.

The transfer of control over information and data and supervision of how it can be used, into the hands of individuals, becomes a tangible danger due to the lack of checks and balances and captive users. The fact that far-right activists desire to go back to Twitter and re-open their blocked accounts to spread far-right propaganda, clearly demonstrates the risk that it poses. By monitoring posts of activists in encrypted and non-encrypted far-right communication channels towards two events occurred in October and November 2022, U.S. mid-term elections and purchase Telegram by Musk, there is a clear demonstration of the danger posed to public

order and to the democracy stability by social networks platforms terms of use.

Timeline

After the mid-term elections far-right activists started to distribute in Alt-tech social networks sphere fake news and disinformation regarding the falsification of the election results. The lack of censorship and sufficient regulation rules in these kinds of platforms has helped spreading the information.

While it is known that Alt-tech platforms have become an alternative to the Big-tech companies due to the fact that they allow free speech - social networks that are considered as part of the mainstream big tech companies (Amazon, Apple, Meta and Microsoft), are usually aware of the need for regulations and censorship. This is the reason why most people trust the reliability of the information distributed by them. What happens however when censorship is removed, and free speech is allowed not in alternative platforms chosen to use by people who wish to create an alternative universe allows them to spread and to receive unfiltered information, but on mainstream platform?

Difference between Alt-Tech and Mainstream Platforms

Social networks have billions of users around the world and hence accelerate the spread of real and fake information among the society.¹

Mainstream social networks that are part of the big tech (Amazon, Apple, Meta and Microsoft), usually aware of the need of regulations and censorship. Twitter's past attitude to the importance of information reliability indicates this. Before the Covid-19 outbreak, Twitter's misinformation policies applied only to "platform manipulation" – i.e., coordinated efforts to spread misinformation, typically backed by state actors.²

After the outbreak of Covid-19 and the disinformation campaign that accompanied the virus which led people to act contrary to authorized advice, Twitter announced in March 2020 that it would be applying a new broader definition of the term "harm" to address content that "goes directly against guidance from authoritative sources of global and local public health information".³

The spread of fake news about election fraud by former President, Donald Trump and his supporters, along with the attack on the capitol that followed on Jan. 6, led Twitter to declare

1 Zhao, Z., Zhao, J., Sano, Y. et al. Fake news propagates differently from real news even at early stages of spreading. EPJ Data Sci. 9, 7 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1140/epjds/s13688-020-00224-z>

2 Hern Alex, "Fake coronavirus tweets spread as other sites take harder stance". The Gurdian. March 4, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/04/fake-coronavirus-tweets-spread-as-other-sites-take-harder-stance> (last retrieved November 11 2022).

3 Hern Alex. "Twitter to remove harmful fake news about coronavirus". The Gurdian. March 19 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/19/twitter-to-remove-harmful-fake-news-about-coronavirus> (last retrieved November 13 2020).

that it “permanently suspended the account due to the risk of further incitement of violence.”⁴

In contrast to these regulated platforms, we have witnessed in the past six years, significant changes in the power structure of the Internet’s ecosystem in Western society. Alongside mainstream platforms, a new ecosystem of alternative networks (alt-tech) has been expanding. By offering unregulated freedom of speech, these platforms belonging to alt-tech make it possible to consume content and information that is usually censored due to the policy of the big-tech companies.

Alt-tech includes platforms such as Gab, Truth Social and MeWe (alternatives to Twitter), Bitchute and Rumble (Youtube alternatives) and Parler (an alternative to Facebook).

These platforms offer people uncensored discourse concerning controversial ideas, such as anti-vaccination, climate change denial, white supremacy, and Holocaust denial. Users are exposed to these ideas and can even act accordingly.⁵

Rise of Alt-Tech Platforms

Casey Newton, the founder of “Platformer”, a blog that analyzes the intersection of big technology and democracy, claimed that these networks often operate like broadcast networks. Immediately after joining platforms, such as Parler or Gettr, users must follow “conservative commentators” and publishers. These platforms allow politicians and others to become resounding mouthpieces of communication. President Trump established “Truth Social” after he was banned from Facebook and Twitter in 2021.⁶ Kanye West’s Instagram and Twitter accounts were blocked on October 2022 over antisemitic comments. According to various reports, West is in talks to purchase the alternative social network “Parler”.⁷ In September 2022 that particular platform had approximately 1,200,000 users.⁸

The Alt-tech social networks platforms were established mainly by far-right activists. Most of the people who consume the content say, “they have found a community of like-minded people there.”⁹ A study carried out by the Pew Research Center which examined the identity of the people using alternative networks platforms, found that 26% of users are right-leaning/

4 Twitter. “Permanent suspension of @realDonaldTrump”. January 08 2021. https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/suspension Last retrieved November 13 2021).

5 Kakutani, M. (2018). “The death of truth: Notes on falsehood in the age of Trump”. tim duggan Books.P.13

6 Newton Casey, “The hard truth about Truth Social”, Platformer, February 2022, <https://www.platformer.news/p/why-truth-social-cant-win-in-the> . Last retrieved November 16 2022

7 Fung Brian “Kanye West to acquire conservative social media platform Parler”, CNN business, October 18 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/10/17/tech/kanye-west-ye-parler/index.html>. Last retrieved November 16 2022.

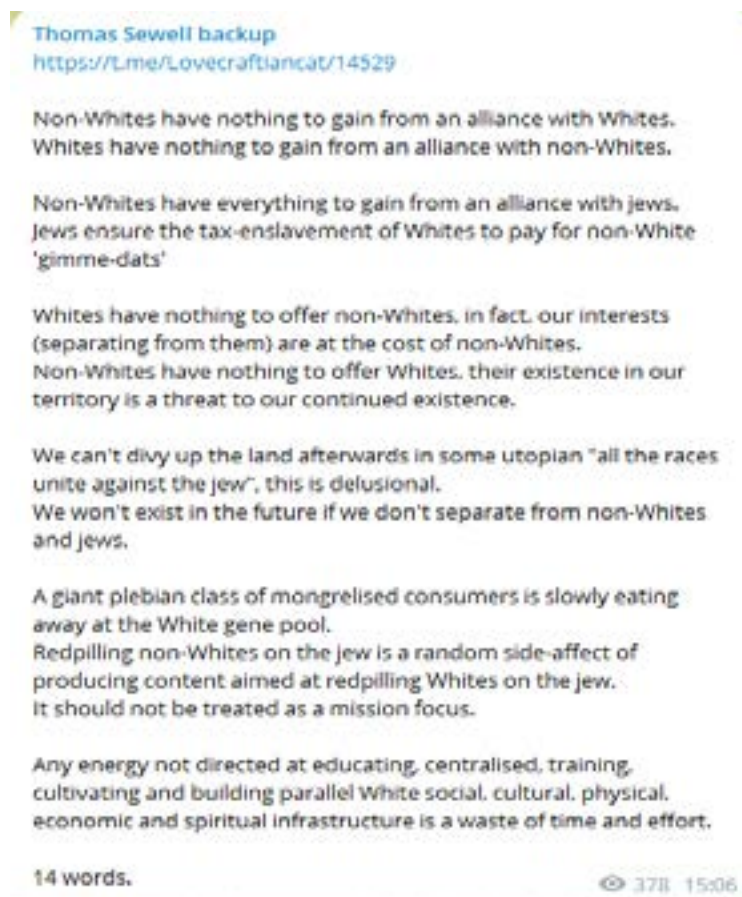
8 Akhta Allana and Nguyen Britney, Everything you need to know about Parler, the right-wing social media platform Kanye West is planning to buy”, Insider, October 20 2022 <https://www.businessinsider.com/what-is-parler-app-social-media-twitter> . Lst retrieved November 18 2022.

9 Pew Research Center. “The Role of Alternative Social Media in the News and Information Environment”. October 06 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2022/10/06/the-role-of-alternative-social-media-in-the-news-and-information-environment/> . Last retrieved November 13 2022

pro-Trump, 21% have a religious identity, 21% declare themselves as patriots, 7% are pro-freedom, 5% are Qanon supporters, 6% are pro-Second Amendment/pro-gun, and 4% are pro free speech.¹⁰

In a series of articles published in *The Atlantic*, it was stated that these alternative social networks are part of “the rise of mainstream conspiracism is the result not just of bad information or bad politics or bad thinking, but of systems built to stoke paranoia and to profit from mistrust”.¹¹

Far-right white supremacist activists, such as Thomas Sewell, a leader of a few far-right organizations in Australia, suggests that the energy of white supremacist needs to be put in creating parallel far-right infrastructure in all fields.



(Telegram, 18 August 2022)

In a post published a few months after the presidential election, a Gab user said “Done with Twitter & Instagram. We need more platforms where we can speak freely!”

10 Pew Research Center. “The Role of Alternative Social Media in the News and Information Environment”. October 06 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2022/10/06/the-role-of-alternative-social-media-in-the-news-and-information-environment/>. Last retrieved November 13 2022

11 Shadowland, The Atlantic, <https://www.theatlantic.com/shadowland/> Last retrieved November 19 2022

Done with Twitter & Instagram. We need more platforms where we can speak freely! Go to patriot.com & join the family 🇺🇸

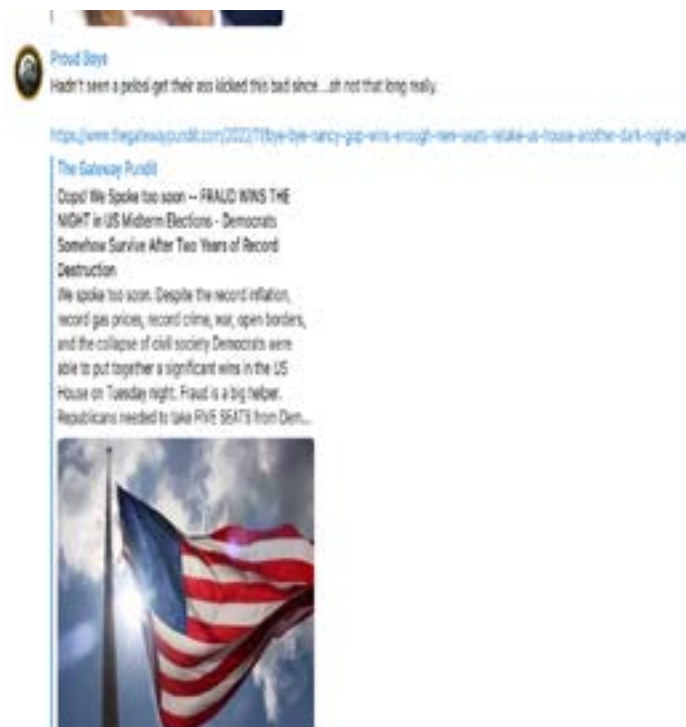
(Gab, 20 May 2021)

Monitoring of far-right alternative channels during September – November 2022 raised two disturbing issues that governments and jurists must be dealt with:

1. Posts monitored before and after the midterm elections in the US raise the inherent danger of those alternative networks that spread fake news and disinformation due to the lack of sufficient regulation on them.
2. Posts monitored after Twitter's purchase by Elon Musk (October 27, 2022) raise the danger inherent in a platform that is part of big-tech companies and people trust its reliability, now in the hands of a person who has openly declared the importance of absolute freedom of speech and reducing regulation.

Spreading disinformation and fake news regarding midterm elections in the U.S.

As we saw after the 2020 Presidential Election up until now, far-right activists spread disinformation and fake news regarding the election's results.



Post claiming that the Democrats managed to get a large number of seats in the House of Representatives only because they cheated in the elections. In their words: "Fraud is a big helper"

(Telegram, 11 October 2022)

Another user wrote in his Parler account that the election was stolen.



The midterm election was rigged and stolen
#riggedelections #riggedelections2022

(Parler, 14 November 2022)

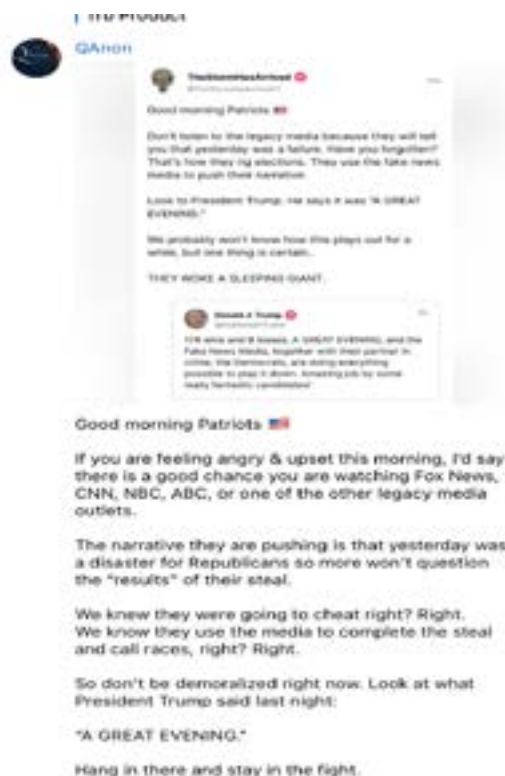
Another claim appeared on Parler, suggesting that 2024 election's results will not count since they are rigged.



Ben Armstrong - Talk Show Host
@BenArmstrong · 12 · 3d
Will People Finally Realize 2024 Doesn't Matter Because The Elections are Rigged?
#riggedelection #rigged #election #2024

(Parler, 14 November 2022)

Users are talking against the mainstream media and claiming the “narrative they try to push is that the election night was a disaster for republicans so that republicans will not question the results they see as a steal.



Good morning Patriots 🇺🇸

Don't listen to the legacy media because they will tell you that yesterday was a failure. Have you forgotten? That's how they rig elections. They use the late news media to push their narrative.

Look to President Trump. He says it was "A GREAT EVENING."

We probably won't know how this plays out for a while, but one thing is certain.

THEY WOKE A SLEEPING GIANT.

It's also not a loss. A GREAT EVENING, and the Fake News Media, together with their partner in crime, the Democrats, are doing everything possible to play it down, making it by some means favorable condition.

Good morning Patriots 🇺🇸

If you are feeling angry & upset this morning, I'd say there is a good chance you are watching Fox News, CNN, NBC, ABC, or one of the other legacy media outlets.

The narrative they are pushing is that yesterday was a disaster for Republicans so more won't question the "results" of their steal.

We knew they were going to cheat right? Right. We know they use the media to complete the steal and call races, right? Right.

So don't be demoralized right now. Look at what President Trump said last night:

"A GREAT EVENING."

Hang in there and stay in the fight.

(Telegram, 9 November 2022)

Far-right activists in alt-tech networks even suggested that the mainstream social networks are in favor of the Democrats and help them winning

On November 2, *Natural News* published on Parler that Google was rigging search results to favor the Democrats during the midterm election



(Parler, 2 November 2022)

Desire to return to Twitter in order to spread propaganda

On April 14, 2022, after buying Twitter, Musk wrote a letter to the Twitter board claiming that Twitter is “the platform for freedom of expression around the world” but the platform cannot achieve this “social imperative” in its current form and hence “needs to be turned into a private company.”¹²

Musk also declared that he is against censorship that goes far beyond the law and will allow free speech that will match the law of a given country.

12 Milmo Dan, How ‘free speech absolutist’ Elon Musk would transform Twitter, The Gurdian, April 14 2022, [How ‘free speech absolutist’ Elon Musk would transform Twitter | Twitter | The Guardian](#); Taylor Bret, “Read the Letter and Text Musk Sent to Twitter”, The Wall Street Journal, April 14 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/elon-musk-twitter/card/read-the-letter-and-text-musk-sent-to-twitter-56jnTcZJLlwaTp4CNrKl>



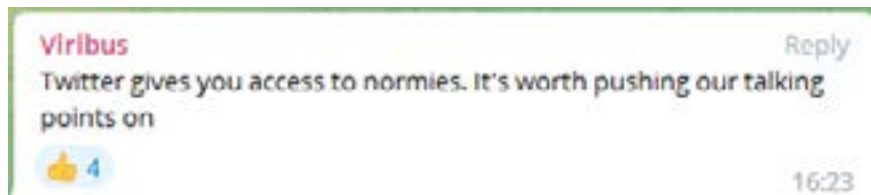
(Twitter, 26 April 2022)

Former President Donald Trump said in his platform Truth Social, "I am very happy that Twitter is now in sane hands, and will no longer be run by radical left lunatics and maniacs that truly hate our country..."

TRUTH SOCIAL has become somewhat of a phenomena. Last week it had bigger numbers than all other platforms, including TikTok, Twitter, Facebook, and the rest. It also looks and works better to my eye. I am very happy that Twitter is now in sane hands, and will no longer be run by Radical Left Lunatics and Maniacs that truly hate our country. Twitter must now work hard to rid itself of all of the bots and fake accounts that have hurt it so badly. It will be much smaller, but better. I LOVE TRUTH!

(Truth Social, November 2022)

Monitoring of encrypted and unencrypted far-right communication channels indicates that since the announcement regarding the purchase, these activists believe they can return to distribute their propaganda on Twitter. It seems their goal is to spread their propaganda among "normies" (people who, according to far-right activists, didn't see the truth yet).



(Telegram, 6 November 2022)

On October 28, a user on Telegram asked if the fact that Twitter was purchased by Musk means that he can migrate back to Twitter to make a racist Twitter account.



(Telegram, 28 October 2022)

In a post published on November 6, 2022 a Telegram user suggested to continue posting in Telegram until they are sure there was a Twitter comeback.



(Telegram, 6 November 2022)

In a different post posted on Telegram on November 27, 2022, a user suggested that time has

come¹³ and that people (like him) need to go to Twitter. He goes on to say that “all roads lead to 14.”

The term ‘14’ refers to the popular white supremacist slogan: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.” It means that unless immediate action will be taken, the white race will be vanished.



(Telegram, 27 November 2022)

Far-Right Activists view Musk as One of Them

Far-right activists celebrate Musk’s purchase of Twitter not only because of his pro-freedom of speech policies, but also because they believe he is one of them.

In a post posted on QAnon conspiracy theory channel on Telegram a far-right user claimed that Musk is a “white hat.”

I told you long ago MUSK was going to take Twitter and was a white hat. I said this long before MSM was reporting this....I told you this for a reason. Their are still allot of people who don't trust MUSK. that's ok.>NCSWIC

(Telegram, 02 November 2022)

The same also says that Musk needs to play a role of a “grey hat” but the truth is that he’s an operator. He concluded his post by saying “Trust the plan the world is connected.”

13 Time of the White race

You just don't become one of the richest men in the world and not choose sides or be placed inside Sensitive operations with our knowing it.....(The military intelligence agencies just can't have the richest man running around freely and spending money on any projects as he likes and support any President he wishes .. Because when a man is that rich... He can control GOVERNMENTs,presidents, prime Minister's, Military branches easily, readily with 100 million or 100' s of millions.. Or even billions.....a man this rich is a national security threat and issue!..... That's why MUSK, IS DEEP IN THE TRENCHES OF THIS WAR AND IS AN OPERATOR..... He often plays the grey hat. It's a role 🧢 it's needed...
 .] INFILTRATION [, Not invasion.Q/////

As MUSK secretly works with USSF and TRUMP is proud of MUSK..... It's reported MUSK Will back Ye (Kanye West). In 2023 with BILLIONS.....

CNN WILL change as expected and slowly HAPPENING///-

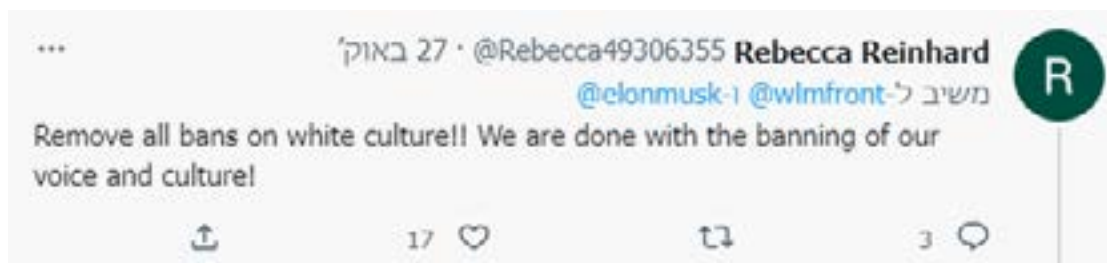
Somewhere bin Salman is smiling. As is PUTIN

TRUST THE PLAN

THE WORLD IS CONNECTED

(Telegram, 02 November 2022)

Far-right users also encourage Musk to remove all bans on white supremacists and, at the same time, ban others who resist white supremacy.



A user asks Musk to remove all bans on white culture, in his own words “we are done with banning our voice and culture.”

(Twitter, 27 October 2022)

In a different post, published on Telegram November 4, 2022, in a white supremacist channel, a user asks Musk to ban the ADL.



(Telegram, 04 November 2022)

Conclusions and Policy Implications

By monitoring posts of far-right activists in encrypted and non-encrypted alt-tech platforms, two significant events took place in October and November 2022 which demonstrate the danger posed to public order and democratic stability: the U.S midterm elections and Musk's purchase of Twitter.

Monitoring posts of online activists in encrypted and non-encrypted far-right alt-tech platforms demonstrate the danger these developments pose to public order and democracy. The transfer of control over information and how it can be used into the hands of such individuals with no oversight, becomes a tangible danger due to the lack of checks and balances being proposed by Musk.

Today, more than ever, it is the duty of politicians, prominent public and private sector leaders to promote steps that will create a new paradigm when it comes to the distribution of information on social media platforms. Freedom of speech must be protected, while individual users of social media platforms are also protected from the harmful effects of online misinformation.