



CITIZENS FOR
RESPONSIBILITY &
ETHICS IN WASHINGTON

November 15, 2022

Elon Musk
CEO, Twitter Inc.
1355 Market Street, Suite 900
San Francisco, CA 94103

Dear Mr. Musk:

As you navigate your new role as Twitter's owner and CEO, few issues are of such public importance as how Twitter, under your leadership, will oversee content moderation, including when and how to suspend users who incite violence and violate Twitter's community guidelines. Given the frequency of threats of political violence on your platform, Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington ("CREW") urges you to maintain Twitter's permanent ban on former President Donald Trump from your platform and to take additional steps to protect social media from being used as a tool of democratic erosion. With Trump poised to announce his candidacy for president imminently, it could not be more urgent to address these concerns.

Donald Trump's conduct before, during, and after his presidency demonstrates a consistent pattern of using social media to spread misinformation to encourage violence and undermine the legitimacy of government processes.¹ His deft use of social media to stir up the civil unrest that led to the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol is a case in point. Allowing high-profile users, such as Trump, who foment violence to return to Twitter ignores the role your company can play in either upholding democratic norms or, alternatively, in facilitating attacks on the integrity of our democratic institutions.

Before and after the 2020 presidential election, Trump used his Twitter profile to spread the "Big Lie," the false claim that he won the 2020 presidential election. He also used the platform to promote political violence and elevate groups committed to political violence around the election. This conduct significantly contributed to inciting Trump's supporters to attack the Capitol building on January 6, 2021 in an attempt to overturn the 2020 presidential election, threatening the lives of former Vice President Mike Pence, members of Congress, law enforcement, and countless others.

¹ See, e.g., Ryan Mac, [Trump Just Used Social Media to Attempt a Coup](https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanmac/president-trump-facebook-twitter-coup), BuzzFeed News (Jan. 6, 2021), <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanmac/president-trump-facebook-twitter-coup>; <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/108811279834566814>; <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/108906909057160138>.



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Two days after the January 6th attack, Twitter made the hard, but necessary, decision to permanently suspend Trump’s account from the social media platform, citing “the risk of further incitement to violence.”² Although a significant amount of time has since passed, there is no reason to think that, if Trump were to return to Twitter, he would cease spreading hate and misinformation in violation of Twitter’s content moderation standards. For instance, in recent months, Trump has taken to his own platform, Truth Social, to double down on the false claim that the 2020 election was fraudulent and to vilify government actors including the FBI and Department of Justice.³ Following Trump’s statements on Truth Social discrediting law enforcement in the wake of the court-approved search of his residence at Mar-a-Lago to retrieve highly classified documents, researchers tracked an escalation of violent rhetoric from the far-right, including threats against law enforcement officers and chatter suggesting the start of another “civil war.”⁴ In response, CREW has repeatedly called on Apple and Google to remove the Truth Social platform from their online stores, citing its use to promote political violence and threaten democratic stability.⁵

During the recently concluded 2022 election cycle, we witnessed growing social media-fueled threats to democratic legitimacy.⁶ As we move towards a presidential election cycle in a political climate that is already deeply polarized, we are likely to witness a further rise in inflammatory speech online and a demonization of political opponents, similar to what we saw in the 2016 and 2020 elections. It is important to note that Trump’s reported imminent announcement that he will run for president again in 2024 should not change the determination of whether he is allowed on the site. When Trump was initially deplatformed in 2020 he was a sitting president, making clear that a user’s political status has no bearing on evaluating whether they violate Twitter’s terms of service.

Ensuring that Twitter is not a space that promotes violence and misinformation is a pressing concern. Alarming, researchers documented an increase in hate speech on

² *Permanent suspension of @realDonaldTrump*, Twitter (Jan. 8, 2021), https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/suspension.

³ See, e.g., Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump), Truth Social (Oct. 13, 2022), <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/109162884494107435>.

⁴ Tom Dreisbach, *An attempted attack on an FBI office raises concerns about violent far-right rhetoric*, NPR (Aug. 12, 2022), <https://www.npr.org/2022/08/12/1117275044/an-attempted-attack-on-an-fbi-office-raises-concerns-about-violent-far-right-rhe>.

⁵ See, e.g., *CREW Letter to Tim Cook*, CREW (April 21, 2022), <https://www.citizensforethics.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/CREW-Letter-to-Tim-Cook-4-21-2022-Final-For-matted.pdf>; *CREW Letter to Tim Cook and Sundar Pichai*, CREW (August 31, 2022), <https://www.citizensforethics.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Truth-Social-Letter-8.31.22.pdf>.

⁶ Erin Simpson, Ashleigh Maciolek, and Adam Connor, *Social Media and the 2022 Midterm Elections*, Center for American Progress (Nov. 3, 2022), <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/social-media-and-the-2022-midterm-elections-anticipating-online-threats-to-democratic-legitimacy/>.



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Twitter immediately following your acquisition of the platform, attributed to “the perception by extremists users that content restrictions would be alleviated.”⁷ Twitter’s recent wave of layoffs, including that of its chief content moderation officer, raise concerns not only about Twitter’s commitment to community safety, but also its ability to do so effectively.⁸

It has been reported that some advertising agencies and brands have already started walking away from Twitter, concerned that Twitter would loosen its content moderation policies.⁹ This, combined with recent calls for advertisers to boycott Twitter until the platform demonstrates that it can effectively moderate misinformation and extremism, shows that the business community is taking notice of Twitter’s action—or inaction—and that there will be financial consequences for Twitter should extremists use the platform to foment violence and spread hate.¹⁰ Moreover, in the long term, anti-democratic messages could disillusion users and drive them from your platform, thus further damaging the company’s bottom line.

In your recent meeting with civil rights leaders, we were heartened to hear that Twitter will not consider reinstating banned users unless, and until, there is a transparent process for doing so. While we commend your commitment to including groups that have suffered from hate-fueled violence on Twitter’s recently proposed content moderation council, we strongly believe that representatives from the good government community also need representation on this body. Social media has been weaponized in the United States, India, and beyond to support democratic erosion and political violence, and, according to reports, thirty governments around the globe have used armies of so-called opinion shapers to interfere in elections, promote anti-democratic messages, and repress their citizens.¹¹

⁷ *Study Finds Hate Speech on Twitter Increases After Elon Musk Acquisition*, Montclair State University School of Communication and Media (Oct. 22, 2022), <https://www.montclair.edu/school-of-communication-and-media/2022/10/29/study-finds-hate-speech-increases-on-twitter-after-elon-musk-acquisition/>.

⁸ Nikki McCann Ramirez, *NAACP, ADL, Other Orgs Call for Advertisers to Boycott Twitter*, Rolling Stone (Nov. 4, 2022), <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/naACP-adl-coalition-call-for-advertisers-boycott-twitter-1234625113/>.

⁹ Sheila Dang, *Elon Musk tells Twitter advertisers he wants to stop fake accounts, pursue truth*, Reuters (Nov. 9, 2022), <https://www.reuters.com/technology/elon-musk-address-advertisers-twitter-spaces-town-hall-email-2022-11-09/>.

¹⁰ *Calling on Advertisers to Pause their Spend on Twitter*, Stop Hate for Profit (Nov. 4, 2022), <https://www.stophateforprofit.org/statement-calling-on-advertisers>.

¹¹ *E.g., Alex Hern, Thirty countries use armies of ‘opinion shapers’ to manipulate democracy - report*, The Guardian (Nov. 14, 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/nov/14/social-media-influence-election-countries-armies-of-opinion-shapers-manipulate-democracy-fake-news>; *Freedom on the Net*, Freedom House (accessed Nov. 8, 2022), <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net>.



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Members of the good government community would offer specialized knowledge in the nuances of the democratic process, and in how to expose corruption, combat disinformation, and uncover abuses of power. Bringing their perspectives to the discussion would help the company navigate how to be a responsible corporate citizen.

If Twitter is serious about upholding its publicly stated rules “to ensure all people can participate in the public conversation freely and safely,”¹² then it must lead by example and remain committed to not providing a safe haven for users who seek to spread misinformation, incite political violence, fuel hate, and undermine democracy. Not reinstating Donald Trump to your platform is a necessary start. Adding representatives from the good government and democracy protection space to your proposed council would also be a step in the right direction.

Thank you for your time and consideration. We would be happy to discuss any of these issues with you at your convenience, and look forward to your urgent attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Noah Bookbinder".

Noah Bookbinder
President and Chief Executive Officer
Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington

¹² *The Twitter Rules*, Twitter (accessed Nov. 4, 2022), <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/twitter-rules>.