THREAD BY MATT TAIBII

‹ TWITTER FILES ›

#1 THE TWITTER FILES

@UNGATHEGREAT

1. Thread: THE TWITTER FILES

2. What you're about to read is the first installment in a series, based upon thousands of internal documents obtained by sources at Twitter.

3. The "Twitter Files" tell an incredible story from inside one of the world's largest and most influential social media platforms. It is a Frankensteinian tale of a human-built mechanism grown out the control of its designer.

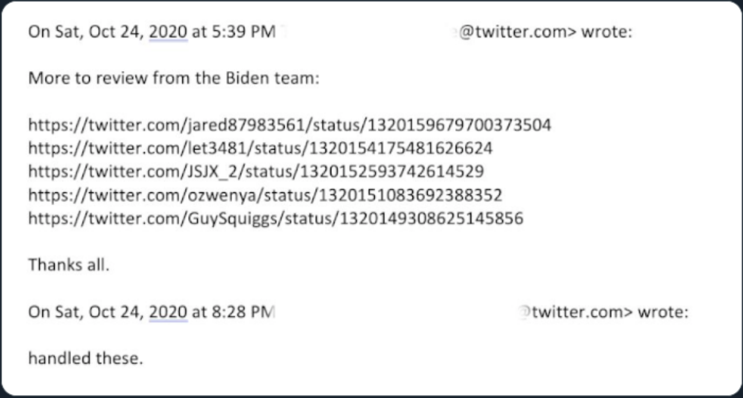
4. Twitter in its conception was a brilliant tool for enabling instant mass communication, making a true real-time global conversation possible for the first time.

5. In an early conception, Twitter more than lived up to its mission statement, giving people "the power to create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers."

6. As time progressed, however, the company was slowly forced to add those barriers. Some of the first tools for controlling speech were designed to combat the likes of spam and financial fraudsters.

7. Slowly, over time, Twitter staff and executives began to find more and more uses for these tools. Outsiders began petitioning the company to manipulate speech as well: first a little, then more often, then constantly.

8. By 2020, requests from connected actors to delete tweets were routine. One executive would write to another: "More to review from the Biden team." The reply would come back: "Handled."



On Sat, Oct 24, 2020 at 5:39 PM @twitter.com> wrote:

More to review from the Biden team:

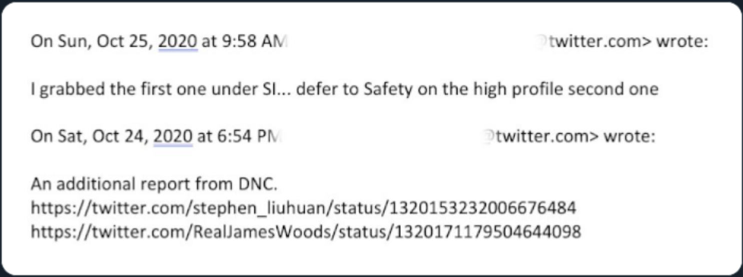
https://twitter.com/jared87983561/status/1320159679700373504
https://twitter.com/let3481/status/1320154175481626624
https://twitter.com/JSJX_2/status/1320152593742614529
https://twitter.com/ozwenya/status/1320151083692388352
https://twitter.com/GuySquiggs/status/1320149308625145856

Thanks all.

On Sat, Oct 24, 2020 at 8:28 PM twitter.com> wrote:

handled these.

9. Celebrities and unknowns alike could be removed or reviewed at the behest of a political party:



On Sun, Oct 25, 2020 at 9:58 AM twitter.com> wrote:

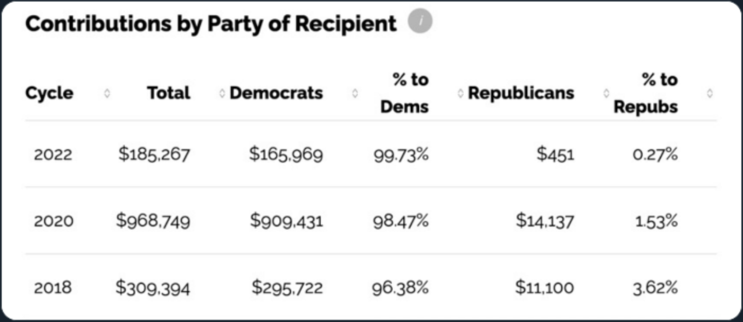
I grabbed the first one under SI... defer to Safety on the high profile second one

On Sat, Oct 24, 2020 at 6:54 PM twitter.com> wrote:

An additional report from DNC.
https://twitter.com/stephen_liuhuan/status/1320153232006676484
https://twitter.com/RealJamesWoods/status/1320171179504644098

10.Both parties had access to these tools. For instance, in 2020, requests from both the Trump White House and the Biden campaign were received and honored. However:

11. This system wasn't balanced. It was based on contacts. Because Twitter was and is overwhelmingly staffed by people of one political orientation, there were more channels, more ways to complain, open to the left (well, Democrats) than the right. opensecrets.org/orgs/twitter/s…



Contributions by Party of Recipient

Cycle	Total	Democrats	% to Dems	Republicans	% to Repubs
2022	$185,267	$165,969	99.73%	$451	0.27%
2020	$968,749	$909,431	98.47%	$14,137	1.53%
2018	$309,394	$295,722	96.38%	$11,100	3.62%

Twitter Profile: Summary
Twitter organization profile. Contributions in the 2022 cycle: $185,267. Lobbying in 2022: $970,000. Outside Spending in the 2022 cycle: $0.
https://www.opensecrets.org/orgs/twitter/summary?id=D000067113

12. The resulting slant in content moderation decisions is visible in the documents you're about to read. However, it's also the assessment of multiple current and former high-level executives.

Okay, there was more throat-clearing about the process, but screw it, let's jump forward

16. The Twitter Files, Part One: How and Why Twitter Blocked the Hunter Biden Laptop Story

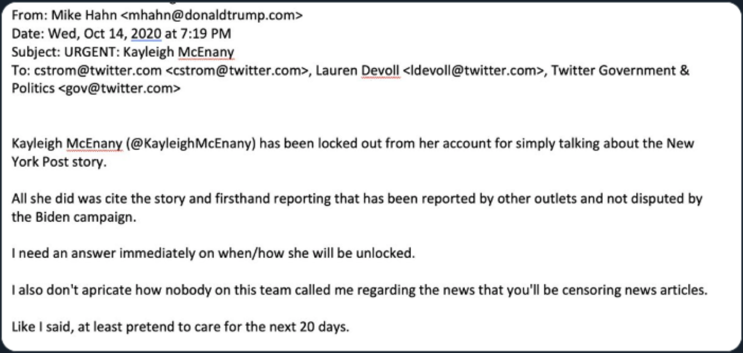
17. On October 14, 2020, the New York Post published BIDEN SECRET EMAILS, an expose based on the contents of Hunter Biden's abandoned laptop:

Smoking-gun email reveals how Hunter Biden introduced Ukrainian busine…
Hunter Biden introduced his father, then-Vice President Joe Biden, to a top executive at a Ukrainian energy firm less than a year before the elder Biden pressured…
https://nypost.com/2020/10/14/email-reveals-how-hunter-biden-introduced-ukrainian…

18. Twitter took extraordinary steps to suppress the story, removing links and posting warnings that it may be "unsafe." They even blocked its transmission via direct message, a tool hitherto reserved for extreme cases, e.g. child pornography.

19. White House spokeswoman Kaleigh McEnany was locked out of her account for

tweeting about the story, prompting a furious letter from Trump campaign staffer Mike Hahn, who seethed: “At least pretend to care for the next 20 days.”



From: Mike Hahn <mhahn@donaldtrump.com>
Date: Wed, Oct 14, 2020 at 7:19 PM
Subject: URGENT: Kayleigh McEnany
To: cstrom@twitter.com <cstrom@twitter.com>, Lauren Devoll <ldevoll@twitter.com>, Twitter Government & Politics <gov@twitter.com>

Kayleigh McEnany (@KayleighMcEnany) has been locked out from her account for simply talking about the New York Post story.

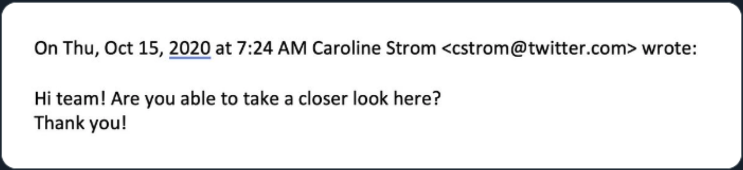
All she did was cite the story and firsthand reporting that has been reported by other outlets and not disputed by the Biden campaign.

I need an answer immediately on when/how she will be unlocked.

I also don't apricate how nobody on this team called me regarding the news that you'll be censoring news articles.

Like I said, at least pretend to care for the next 20 days.

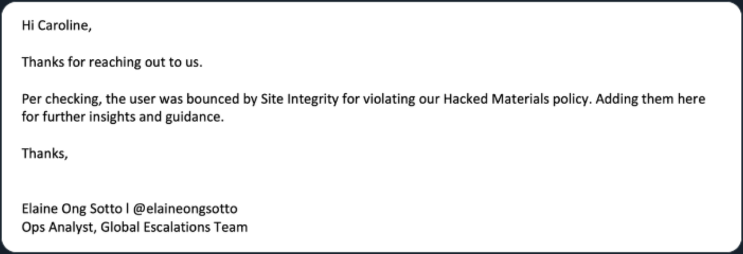
20.This led public policy executive Caroline Strom to send out a polite WTF query. Several employees noted that there was tension between the comms/policy teams, who had little/less control over moderation, and the safety/trust teams:



On Thu, Oct 15, 2020 at 7:24 AM Caroline Strom <cstrom@twitter.com> wrote:

Hi team! Are you able to take a closer look here?
Thank you!

21. Strom’s note returned the answer that the laptop story had been removed for violation of the company’s “hacked materials” policy: web.archive.org/web/2019071714…



Hi Caroline,

Thanks for reaching out to us.

Per checking, the user was bounced by Site Integrity for violating our Hacked Materials policy. Adding them here for further insights and guidance.

Thanks,

Elaine Ong Sotto | @elaineongsotto
Ops Analyst, Global Escalations Team

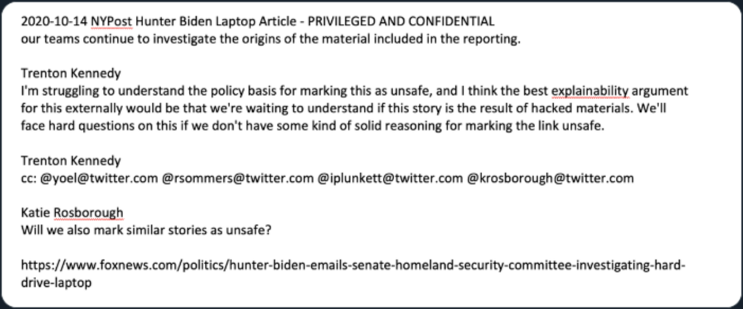
Distribution of hacked material policy
We don’t condone attempts to compromise or infiltrate computer systems for malicious purposes.
https://web.archive.org/web/20190717143909/https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-p...

22. Although several sources recalled hearing about a “general” warning from federal law enforcement that summer about possible foreign hacks, there’s no evidence - that I've seen - of any government involvement in the laptop story. In fact, that might have been the problem...

23. The decision was made at the highest levels of the company, but without the knowledge of CEO Jack Dorsey, with former head of legal, policy and trust Vijaya Gadde playing a key role.

24. “They just freelanced it,” is how one former employee characterized the decision. “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.”

25.You can see the confusion in the following lengthy exchange, which ends up including Gadde and former Trust and safety chief Yoel Roth. Comms official Trenton Kennedy writes, “I'm struggling to understand the policy basis for marking this as unsafe”:



2020-10-14 NYPost Hunter Biden Laptop Article - PRIVILEGED AND CONFIDENTIAL
our teams continue to investigate the origins of the material included in the reporting.

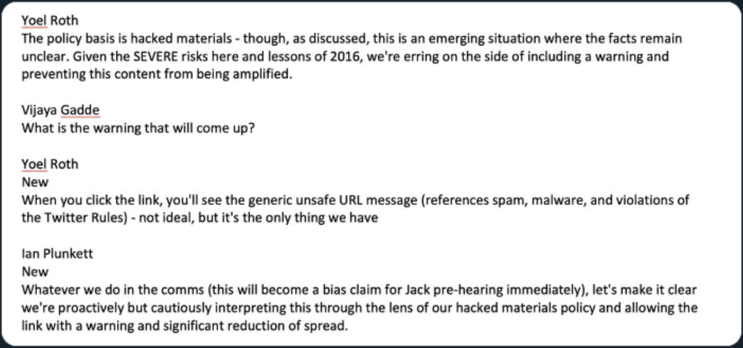
Trenton Kennedy
I'm struggling to understand the policy basis for marking this as unsafe, and I think the best explainability argument for this externally would be that we're waiting to understand if this story is the result of hacked materials. We'll face hard questions on this if we don't have some kind of solid reasoning for marking the link unsafe.

Trenton Kennedy
cc: @yoel@twitter.com @rsommers@twitter.com @iplunkett@twitter.com @krosborough@twitter.com

Katie Rosborough
Will we also mark similar stories as unsafe?

https://www.foxnews.com/politics/hunter-biden-emails-senate-homeland-security-committee-investigating-hard-drive-laptop

26. By this point “everyone knew this was fucked,” said one former employee, but the response was essentially to err on the side of… continuing to err.



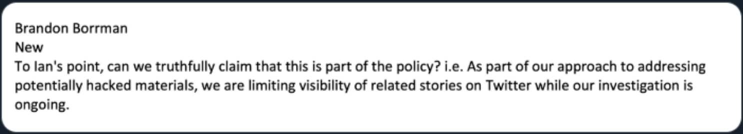
Yoel Roth
The policy basis is hacked materials - though, as discussed, this is an emerging situation where the facts remain unclear. Given the SEVERE risks here and lessons of 2016, we're erring on the side of including a warning and preventing this content from being amplified.

Vijaya Gadde
What is the warning that will come up?

Yoel Roth
New
When you click the link, you'll see the generic unsafe URL message (references spam, malware, and violations of the Twitter Rules) - not ideal, but it's the only thing we have

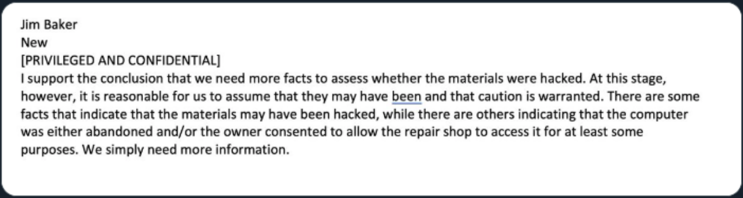
Ian Plunkett
New
Whatever we do in the comms (this will become a bias claim for Jack pre-hearing immediately), let's make it clear we're proactively but cautiously interpreting this through the lens of our hacked materials policy and allowing the link with a warning and significant reduction of spread.

27. Former VP of Global Comms Brandon Borrman asks, “Can we truthfully claim that this is part of the policy?”



Brandon Borrman
New
To Ian's point, can we truthfully claim that this is part of the policy? i.e. As part of our approach to addressing potentially hacked materials, we are limiting visibility of related stories on Twitter while our investigation is ongoing.

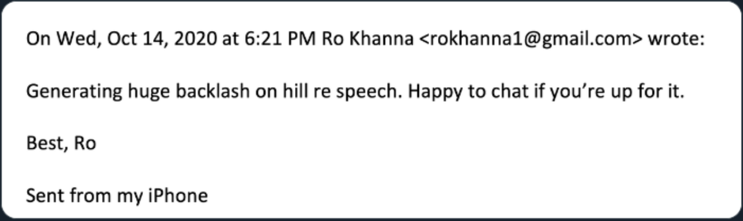
28. To which former Deputy General Counsel Jim Baker again seems to advise staying the non-course, because “caution is warranted”:



Jim Baker
New
[PRIVILEGED AND CONFIDENTIAL]
I support the conclusion that we need more facts to assess whether the materials were hacked. At this stage, however, it is reasonable for us to assume that they may have been and that caution is warranted. There are some facts that indicate that the materials may have been hacked, while there are others indicating that the computer was either abandoned and/or the owner consented to allow the repair shop to access it for at least some purposes. We simply need more information.

29. A fundamental problem with tech companies and content moderation: many people in charge of speech know/care little about speech, and have to be told the basics by outsiders. To wit:

30. In one humorous exchange on day 1, Democratic congressman Ro Khanna reaches out to Gadde to gently suggest she hop on the phone to talk about the “backlash re speech.” Khanna was the only Democratic official I could find in the files who expressed concern.



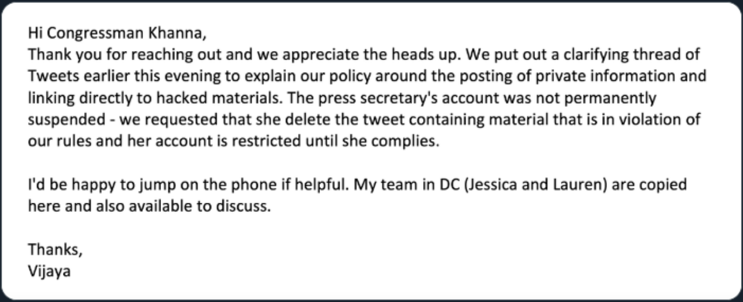
On Wed, Oct 14, 2020 at 6:21 PM Ro Khanna <rokhanna1@gmail.com> wrote:

Generating huge backlash on hill re speech. Happy to chat if you're up for it.

Best, Ro

Sent from my iPhone

Gadde replies quickly, immediately diving into the weeds of Twitter policy, unaware Khanna is more worried about the Bill of Rights:

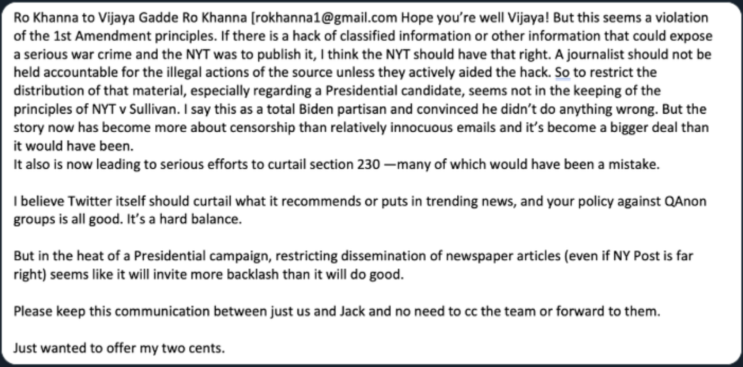


Hi Congressman Khanna,
Thank you for reaching out and we appreciate the heads up. We put out a clarifying thread of Tweets earlier this evening to explain our policy around the posting of private information and linking directly to hacked materials. The press secretary's account was not permanently suspended - we requested that she delete the tweet containing material that is in violation of our rules and her account is restricted until she complies.

I'd be happy to jump on the phone if helpful. My team in DC (Jessica and Lauren) are copied here and also available to discuss.

Thanks,
Vijaya

32.Khanna tries to reroute the conversation to the First Amendment, mention of which is generally hard to find in the files:



Ro Khanna to Vijaya Gadde Ro Khanna [rokhanna1@gmail.com Hope you're well Vijaya! But this seems a violation of the 1st Amendment principles. If there is a hack of classified information or other information that could expose a serious war crime and the NYT was to publish it, I think the NYT should have that right. 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 principles of NYT v Sullivan. I say this as a total Biden partisan and convinced he didn't do anything wrong. But the story now has become more about censorship than relatively innocuous emails and it's become a bigger deal than it would have been.
It also is now leading to serious efforts to curtail section 230 —many of which would have been a mistake.

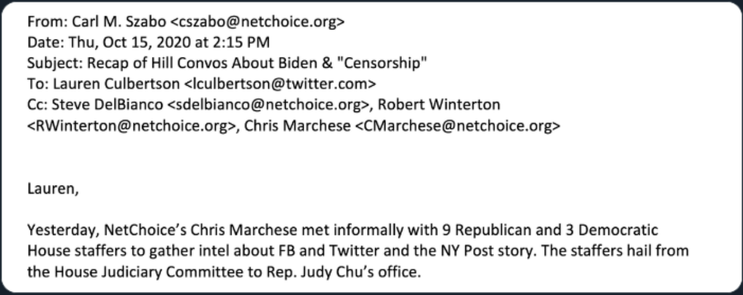
I believe Twitter itself should curtail what it recommends or puts in trending news, and your policy against QAnon groups is all good. It's a hard balance.

But in the heat of a Presidential campaign, restricting dissemination of newspaper articles (even if NY Post is far right) seems like it will invite more backlash than it will do good.

Please keep this communication between just us and Jack and no need to cc the team or forward to them.

Just wanted to offer my two cents.

33.Within a day, head of Public Policy Lauren Culbertson receives a ghastly letter/report from Carl Szabo of the research firm NetChoice, which had already polled 12 members of congress – 9 Rs and 3 Democrats, from “the House Judiciary Committee to Rep. Judy Chu’s office.”

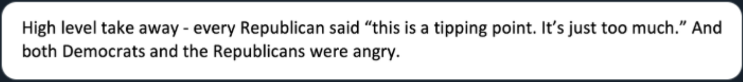


From: Carl M. Szabo <cszabo@netchoice.org>
Date: Thu, Oct 15, 2020 at 2:15 PM
Subject: Recap of Hill Convos About Biden & "Censorship"
To: Lauren Culbertson <lculbertson@twitter.com>
Cc: Steve DelBianco <sdelbianco@netchoice.org>, Robert Winterton <RWinterton@netchoice.org>, Chris Marchese <CMarchese@netchoice.org>

Lauren,

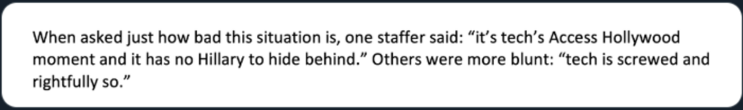
Yesterday, NetChoice’s Chris Marchese met informally with 9 Republican and 3 Democratic House staffers to gather intel about FB and Twitter and the NY Post story. The staffers hail from the House Judiciary Committee to Rep. Judy Chu’s office.

34.NetChoice lets Twitter know a “blood bath” awaits in upcoming Hill hearings, with members saying it's a "tipping point," complaining tech has “grown so big that they can’t even regulate themselves, so government may need to intervene.”



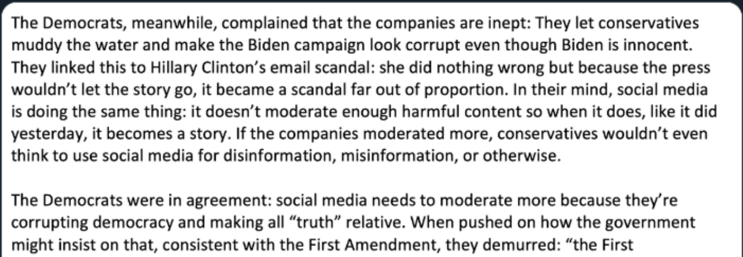
High level take away - every Republican said “this is a tipping point. It’s just too much.” And both Democrats and the Republicans were angry.

35.Szabo reports to Twitter that some Hill figures are characterizing the laptop story as “tech’s Access Hollywood moment”:



When asked just how bad this situation is, one staffer said: “it’s tech’s Access Hollywood moment and it has no Hillary to hide behind.” Others were more blunt: “tech is screwed and rightfully so.”

36.Twitter files continued:
"THE FIRST AMENDMENT ISN’T ABSOLUTE”
Szabo’s letter contains chilling passages relaying Democratic lawmakers’ attitudes. They want “more” moderation, and as for the Bill of Rights, it's "not absolute"



The Democrats, meanwhile, complained that the companies are inept: They let conservatives muddy the water and make the Biden campaign look corrupt even though Biden is innocent. They linked this to Hillary Clinton’s email scandal: she did nothing wrong but because the press wouldn’t let the story go, it became a scandal far out of proportion. In their mind, social media is doing the same thing: it doesn’t moderate enough harmful content so when it does, like it did yesterday, it becomes a story. If the companies moderated more, conservatives wouldn’t even think to use social media for disinformation, misinformation, or otherwise.

The Democrats were in agreement: social media needs to moderate more because they’re corrupting democracy and making all “truth” relative. When pushed on how the government might insist on that, consistent with the First Amendment, they demurred: “the First

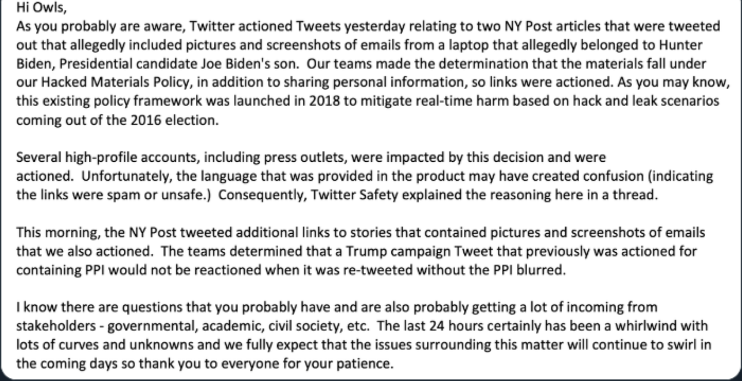
Amendment isn't absolute."

An amazing subplot of the Twitter/Hunter Biden laptop affair was how much was done without the knowledge of CEO Jack Dorsey, and how long it took for the situation to get "unfucked" (as one ex-employee put it) even after Dorsey jumped in.

While reviewing Gadde's emails, I saw a familiar name - my own. Dorsey sent her a copy of my Substack article blasting the incident

There are multiple instances in the files of Dorsey intervening to question suspensions and other moderation actions, for accounts across the political spectrum

The problem with the "hacked materials" ruling, several sources said, was that this normally required an official/law enforcement finding of a hack. But such a finding never appears throughout what one executive describes as a "whirlwind" 24-hour, company-wide mess.



Hi Owls,
As you probably are aware, Twitter actioned Tweets yesterday relating to two NY Post articles that were tweeted out that allegedly included pictures and screenshots of emails from a laptop that allegedly belonged to Hunter Biden, Presidential candidate Joe Biden's son. Our teams made the determination that the materials fall under our Hacked Materials Policy, in addition to sharing personal information, so links were actioned. As you may know, this existing policy framework was launched in 2018 to mitigate real-time harm based on hack and leak scenarios coming out of the 2016 election.

Several high-profile accounts, including press outlets, were impacted by this decision and were actioned. Unfortunately, the language that was provided in the product may have created confusion (indicating the links were spam or unsafe.) Consequently, Twitter Safety explained the reasoning here in a thread.

This morning, the NY Post tweeted additional links to stories that contained pictures and screenshots of emails that we also actioned. The teams determined that a Trump campaign Tweet that previously was actioned for containing PPI would not be reactioned when it was re-tweeted without the PPI blurred.

I know there are questions that you probably have and are also probably getting a lot of incoming from stakeholders - governmental, academic, civil society, etc. The last 24 hours certainly has been a whirlwind with lots of curves and unknowns and we fully expect that the issues surrounding this matter will continue to swirl in the coming days so thank you to everyone for your patience.

It's been a whirlwind 96 hours for me, too. There is much more to come, including answers to questions about issues like shadow-banning, boosting, follower counts, the fate of various individual accounts, and more. These issues are not limited to the political right.

Good night, everyone. Thanks to all those who picked up the phone in the last few days.