Thread by David Zweig

‹ TWITTER FILES ›

#11 How Twitter Rigged the COVID Debate

@UngaTheGreat

1. THREAD:

THE TWITTER FILES: HOW TWITTER RIGGED THE COVID DEBATE

– By censoring info that was true but inconvenient to U.S. govt. policy
– By discrediting doctors and other experts who disagreed
– By suppressing ordinary users, including some sharing the CDC’s *own data*

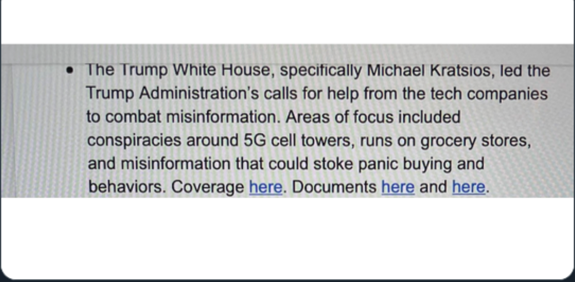
2. So far the Twitter Files have focused on evidence of Twitter’s secret blacklists; how the company functioned as a kind of subsidiary of the FBI; and how execs rewrote the platform’s rules to accommodate their own political desires.

3. What we have yet to cover is Covid. This reporting, for The Free Press, @TheFP, is one piece of that important story.

4. The United States government pressured Twitter and other social media platforms to elevate certain content and suppress other content about Covid-19.

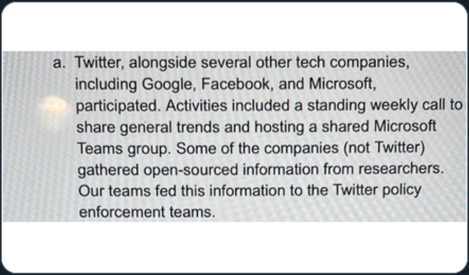
5. Internal files at Twitter that I viewed while on assignment for @TheFP showed that both the Trump and Biden administrations directly pressed Twitter executives to moderate the platform’s pandemic content according to their wishes.

6. At the onset of the pandemic, according to meeting notes, the Trump admin was especially concerned about panic buying. They came looking for “help from the tech companies to combat misinformation” about “runs on grocery stores.” But . . . there were runs on grocery stores.



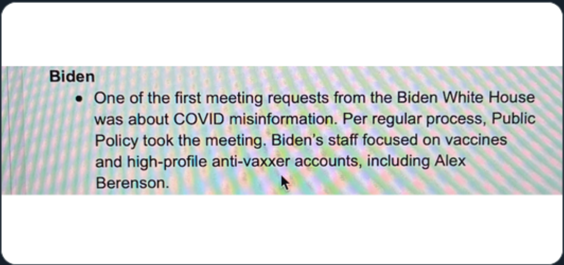
- The Trump White House, specifically Michael Kratsios, led the Trump Administration’s calls for help from the tech companies to combat misinformation. Areas of focus included conspiracies around 5G cell towers, runs on grocery stores, and misinformation that could stoke panic buying and behaviors. Coverage here. Documents here and here.

7. It wasn’t just Twitter. The meetings with the Trump White House were also attended by Google, Facebook, Microsoft and others.



a. Twitter, alongside several other tech companies, including Google, Facebook, and Microsoft, participated. Activities included a standing weekly call to share general trends and hosting a shared Microsoft Teams group. Some of the companies (not Twitter) gathered open-sourced information from researchers. Our teams fed this information to the Twitter policy enforcement teams.

8. When the Biden admin took over, one of their first meeting requests with Twitter executives was on Covid. The focus was on “anti-vaxxer accounts.” Especially Alex Berenson:



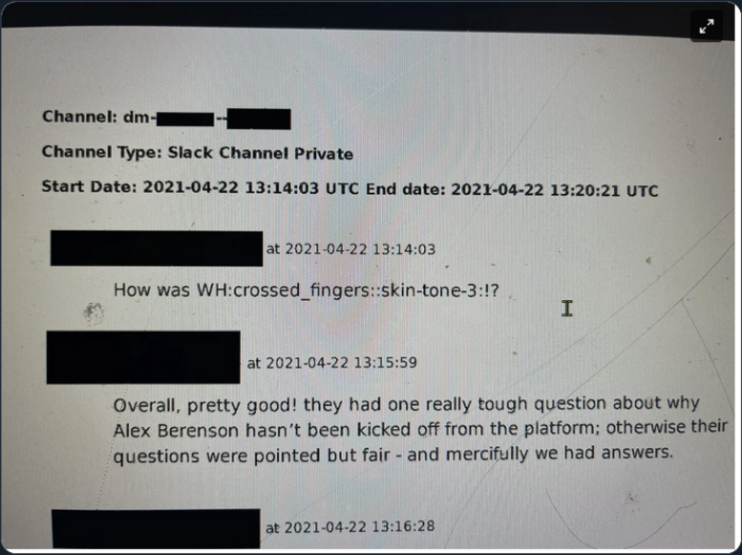
Biden

- One of the first meeting requests from the Biden White House was about COVID misinformation. Per regular process, Public Policy took the meeting. Biden’s staff focused on vaccines and high-profile anti-vaxxer accounts, including Alex Berenson.

9. In the summer of 2021, president Biden said social media companies were "killing people" for allowing vaccine misinformation. Berenson was suspended hours after Biden's comments, and kicked off the platform the following month.

10. Berenson sued (and then settled with) Twitter. In the legal process Twitter was compelled to release certain internal communications, which showed direct White House pressure on the company to take action on Berenson.

alexberenson.substack.com/p/jesse-jackso…



Channel: dm-[redacted]--[redacted]

Channel Type: Slack Channel Private

Start Date: 2021-04-22 13:14:03 UTC End date: 2021-04-22 13:20:21 UTC

[redacted] at 2021-04-22 13:14:03

How was WH:crossed_fingers::skin-tone-3:!?

[redacted] at 2021-04-22 13:15:59

Overall, pretty good! they had one really tough question about why Alex Berenson hasn't been kicked off from the platform; otherwise their questions were pointed but fair - and mercifully we had answers.

[redacted] at 2021-04-22 13:16:28

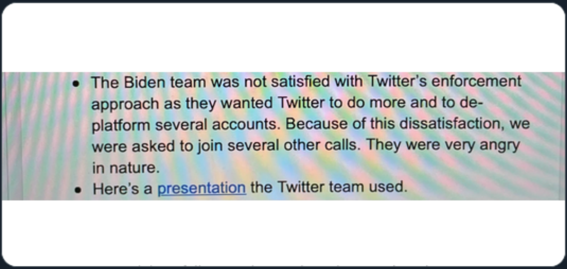
Jesse Jackson can't swim*

*Don't shoot me, it's the punchline to an old (and not racist) joke

https://alexberenson.substack.com/p/jesse-jackson-cant-swim

11. A December 2022 summary of meetings with the White House by Lauren Culbertson, Twitter's Head of U.S. Public Policy, adds new evidence of the White House's pressure campaign, and cements that it repeatedly attempted to directly influence the platform.

12. Culbertson wrote that the Biden team was "very angry" that Twitter had not been more aggressive in deplatforming multiple accounts. They wanted Twitter to do more.



- The Biden team was not satisfied with Twitter's enforcement approach as they wanted Twitter to do more and to de-platform several accounts. Because of this dissatisfaction, we were asked to join several other calls. They were very angry in nature.
- Here's a presentation the Twitter team used.

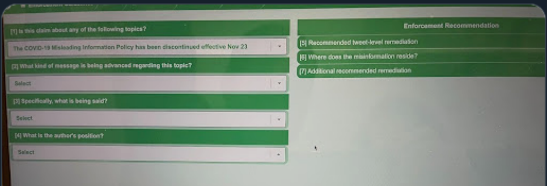
13. Twitter executives did not fully capitulate to the Biden team's wishes. An extensive review of internal communications at the company revealed employees often debating moderation cases in great detail, and with more care than was shown by the government toward free speech.

14. But Twitter did suppress views—many from doctors and scientific experts—that conflicted with the official positions of the White House. As a result, legitimate findings and questions that would have expanded the public debate went missing.

15. There were three serious problems with Twitter's process:

First, much of the content moderation was conducted by bots, trained on machine learning and AI – impressive in their engineering, yet still too crude for such nuanced work.

16. Second, contractors, in places like the Philippines, also moderated content. They were given decision trees to aid in the process, but tasking non experts to adjudicate tweets on complex topics like myocarditis and mask efficacy data was destined for a significant error rate



[1] Is this claim about any of the following topics?

The COVID-19 Misleading Information Policy has been discontinued effective Nov 23

[2] What kind of message is being advanced regarding this topic?

Select

[3] Specifically, what is being said?

Select

[4] What is the author's position?

Select

Enforcement Recommendation

[5] Recommended tweet-level remediation

[6] Where does the misinformation reside?

[7] Additional recommended remediation

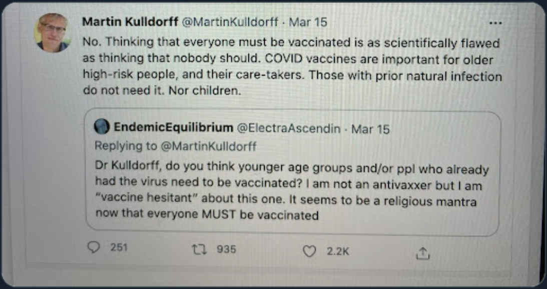
Copy Data
Submit Data

17 Third, most importantly, the buck stopped with higher level employees at Twitter who chose the inputs for the bots and decision trees, and subjectively decided escalated cases and suspensions. As it is with all people and institutions, there was individual and collective bias

18. With Covid, this bias bent heavily toward establishment dogmas.

19. Inevitably, dissident yet legitimate content was labeled as misinformation, and the accounts of doctors and others were suspended both for tweeting opinions and demonstrably true information.

20. Exhibit A: Dr. Martin Kulldorff, an epidemiologist at Harvard Medical School, tweeted views at odds with US public health authorities and the American left, the political affiliation of nearly the entire staff at Twitter.

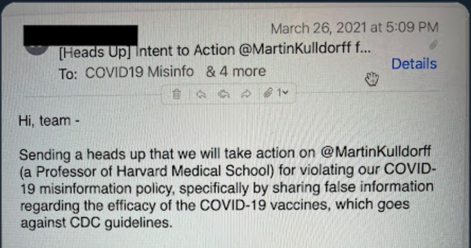


Martin Kulldorff @MartinKulldorff · Mar 15

No. Thinking that everyone must be vaccinated is as scientifically flawed as thinking that nobody should. COVID vaccines are important for older high-risk people, and their care-takers. Those with prior natural infection do not need it. Nor children.

> **EndemicEquilibrium** @ElectraAscendin · Mar 15
> Replying to @MartinKulldorff
> Dr Kulldorff, do you think younger age groups and/or ppl who already had the virus need to be vaccinated? I am not an antivaxxer but I am "vaccine hesitant" about this one. It seems to be a religious mantra now that everyone MUST be vaccinated

21. Internal emails show an "intent to action" by a moderator, saying Kulldorff's tweet violated the company's Covid-19 misinformation policy and claimed he shared "false information."



[redacted]

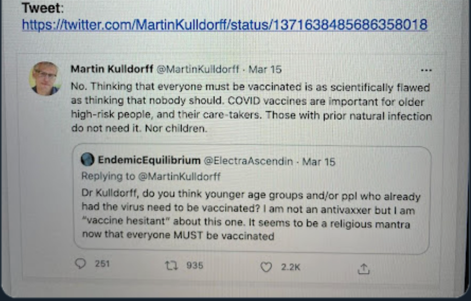
March 26, 2021 at 5:09 PM

[Heads Up] Intent to Action @MartinKulldorff f...

To: COVID19 Misinfo & 4 more

Hi, team -

Sending a heads up that we will take action on @MartinKulldorff (a Professor of Harvard Medical School) for violating our COVID-19 misinformation policy, specifically by sharing false information regarding the efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccines, which goes against CDC guidelines.



Tweet: https://twitter.com/MartinKulldorff/status/1371638485686358018

Martin Kulldorff @MartinKulldorff · Mar 15

No. Thinking that everyone must be vaccinated is as scientifically flawed as thinking that nobody should. COVID vaccines are important for older high-risk people, and their care-takers. Those with prior natural infection do not need it. Nor children.

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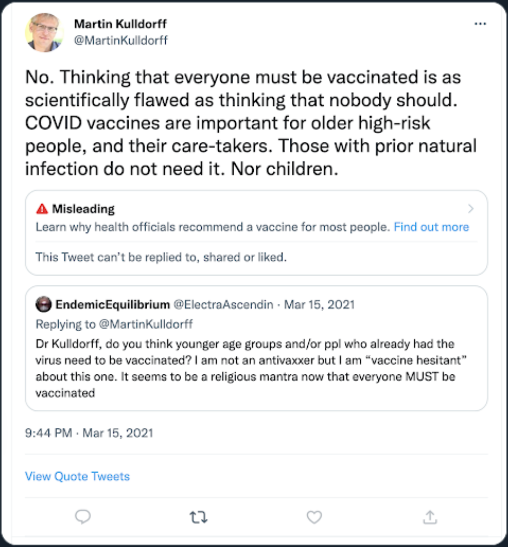
22. But Kulldorff's statement was an expert's opinion—one which also happened to be in line with vaccine policies in numerous other countries. Yet it was deemed "false information" by Twitter moderators merely because it differed from CDC guidelines.

23. After Twitter took action, Kulldorff's tweet was slapped with a "Misleading" label and all replies and likes were shut off, throttling the tweet's ability to be seen and shared by many people, the ostensible core function of the platform:



Martin Kulldorff
@MartinKulldorff

No. Thinking that everyone must be vaccinated is as scientifically flawed as thinking that nobody should. COVID vaccines are important for older high-risk people, and their care-takers. Those with prior natural infection do not need it. Nor children.

Misleading

Learn why health officials recommend a vaccine for most people. Find out more

This Tweet can't be replied to, shared or liked.

EndemicEquilibrium @ElectraAscendin · Mar 15, 2021

Replying to @MartinKulldorff

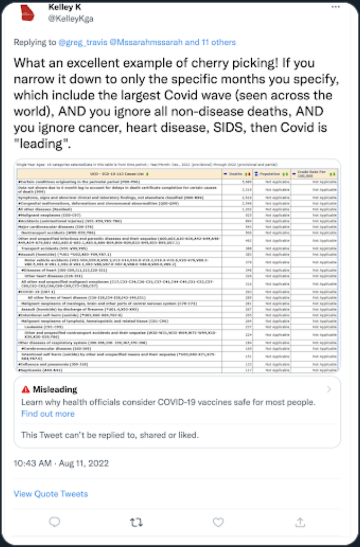
Dr Kulldorff, do you think younger age groups and/or ppl who already had the virus need to be vaccinated? I am not an antivaxxer but I am "vaccine hesitant" about this one. It seems to be a religious mantra now that everyone MUST be vaccinated

9:44 PM · Mar 15, 2021

24. In my review of internal files, I found countless instances of tweets labeled as

"misleading" or taken down entirely, sometimes triggering account suspensions, simply because they veered from CDC guidance or differed from establishment views.

25. A tweet by @KelleyKga, a self-proclaimed public health fact checker, with 18K followers, was flagged as "Misleading," and replies and likes disabled, even though it displayed the CDC's *own data.*



Kelley K
@KelleyKga

Replying to @greg_travis @Mssarahmssarah and 11 others

What an excellent example of cherry picking! If you narrow it down to only the specific months you specify, which include the largest Covid wave (seen across the world), AND you ignore all non-disease deaths, AND you ignore cancer, heart disease, SIDS, then Covid is "leading".

Misleading
Learn why health officials consider COVID-19 vaccines safe for most people.
Find out more

This Tweet can't be replied to, shared or liked.

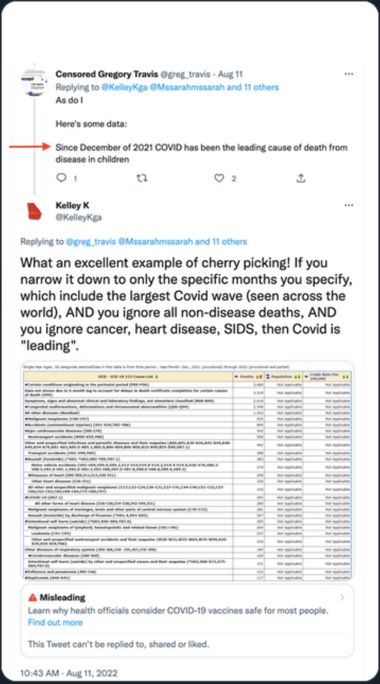
10:43 AM · Aug 11, 2022

View Quote Tweets

26. Internal records showed that a bot had flagged the tweet, and that it received many "tattles" (what the system amusingly called reports from users). That triggered a manual review by a human who– despite the tweet showing actual CDC data– nevertheless labeled it "Misleading"

27. Tellingly, the tweet by @KelleyKga that was labeled "Misleading" was a reply to a tweet that contained actual misinformation.

Covid has never been the leading cause of death from disease in children. Yet that tweet remains on the platform, and without a "misleading" label.



Censored Gregory Travis @greg_travis · Aug 11
Replying to @KelleyKga @Mssarahmssarah and 11 others
As do I

Here's some data:

Since December of 2021 COVID has been the leading cause of death from disease in children

Kelley K
@KelleyKga

Replying to @greg_travis @Mssarahmssarah and 11 others

What an excellent example of cherry picking! If you narrow it down to only the specific months you specify, which include the largest Covid wave (seen across the world), AND you ignore all non-disease deaths, AND you ignore cancer, heart disease, SIDS, then Covid is "leading".

Misleading
Learn why health officials consider COVID-19 vaccines safe for most people.
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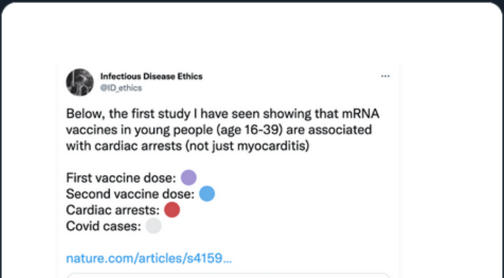
10:43 AM · Aug 11, 2022

28. Whether by humans or algorithms, content that was contrarian but true was still subject to getting flagged or suppressed

This tweet was labeled "Misleading," even though the owner of this account, @_euzebiusz_, a physician, was referring to the results of a published study

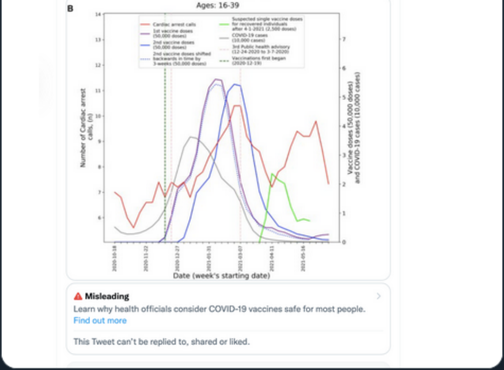


Infectious Disease Ethics
@ID_ethics

Below, the first study I have seen showing that mRNA vaccines in young people (age 16-39) are associated with cardiac arrests (not just myocarditis)

First vaccine dose: ●
Second vaccine dose: ●
Cardiac arrests: ●
Covid cases: ●

nature.com/articles/s4159...


B
Ages: 16-39
Cardiac arrest calls
1st vaccine doses (50,000 doses)
2nd vaccine doses (50,000 doses)
2nd vaccine doses shifted backwards in time by 3-weeks (50,000 doses)
Suspected single vaccine doses for recovered individuals after 4-1-2021 (2,500 doses)
COVID-19 cases (10,000 cases)
3rd Public health advisory (12-24-2020 to 3-7-2020)
Vaccinations first began (2020-12-19)
Number of Cardiac arrest calls, (n)
Vaccine doses (50,000 doses) and COVID-19 cases (10,000 cases)
14
13
12
11
10
9
8
7
6
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
0
2020-10-18
2020-11-22
2020-12-27
2021-01-31
2021-03-07
2021-04-11
2021-05-16
Date (week's starting date)

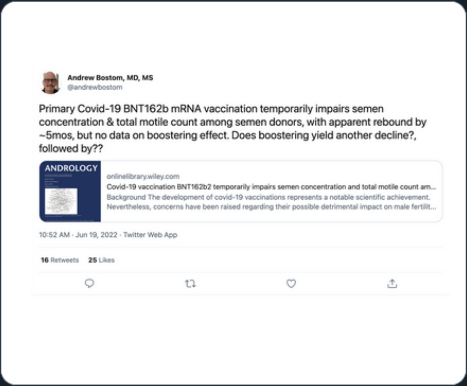
Misleading

Learn why health officials consider COVID-19 vaccines safe for most people.

Find out more

This Tweet can't be replied to, shared or liked.

29. Andrew Bostom, a Rhode Island physician, was permanently suspended from Twitter after receiving multiple strikes for misinformation. One of his strikes was for a tweet referring to the results from a peer reviewed study on mRNA vaccines.



Andrew Bostom, MD, MS
@andrewbostom

Primary Covid-19 BNT162b mRNA vaccination temporarily impairs semen concentration & total motile count among semen donors, with apparent rebound by ~5mos, but no data on boostering effect. Does boostering yield another decline?, followed by??

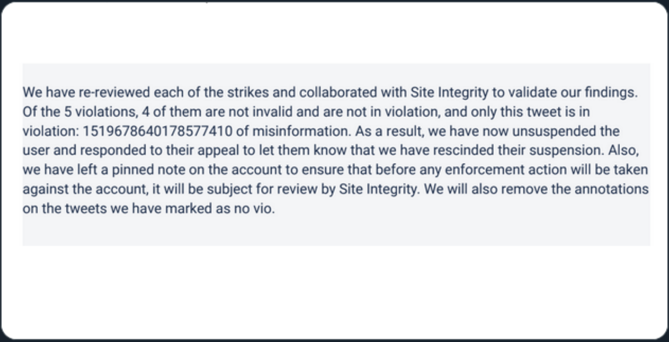
ANDROLOGY

onlinelibrary.wiley.com
Covid-19 vaccination BNT162b2 temporarily impairs semen concentration and total motile count am...
Background The development of covid-19 vaccinations represents a notable scientific achievement. Nevertheless, concerns have been raised regarding their possible detrimental impact on male fertilit...

10:52 AM · Jun 19, 2022 · Twitter Web App

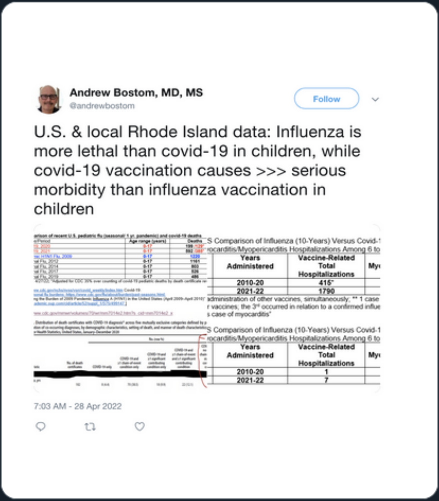
16 Retweets 25 Likes

30. A review of Twitter log files revealed that an internal audit, conducted after Bostom's attorney contacted Twitter, found that only 1 of Bostom's 5 violations were valid.



We have re-reviewed each of the strikes and collaborated with Site Integrity to validate our findings. Of the 5 violations, 4 of them are not invalid and are not in violation, and only this tweet is in violation: 1519678640178577410 of misinformation. As a result, we have now unsuspended the user and responded to their appeal to let them know that we have rescinded their suspension. Also, we have left a pinned note on the account to ensure that before any enforcement action will be taken against the account, it will be subject for review by Site Integrity. We will also remove the annotations on the tweets we have marked as no vio.

31. The one Bostom tweet found to still be in violation cited data that was legitimate but inconvenient to the public health establishment's narrative about the risks of flu versus Covid in children.



Andrew Bostom, MD, MS
@andrewbostom

U.S. & local Rhode Island data: Influenza is more lethal than covid-19 in children, while covid-19 vaccination causes >>> serious morbidity than influenza vaccination in children

S Comparison of Influenza (10-Years) Versus Covid-1
rocarditis/Myopericarditis Hospitalizations Among 6 to

Years Administered	Vaccine-Related Total Hospitalizations	My
2010-20	415*	
2021-22	1790	

administration of other vaccines, simultaneously; ** 1 case
r vaccines; the 3rd occurred in relation to a confirmed influe
s case of myocarditis"

S Comparison of Influenza (10-Years) Versus Covid-1
rocarditis/Myopericarditis Hospitalizations Among 6 to

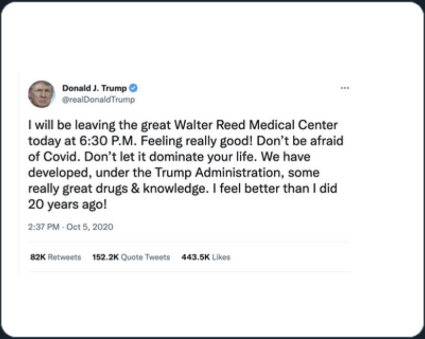
Years Administered	Vaccine-Related Total Hospitalizations	My
2010-20	1	
2021-22	7	

7:03 AM - 28 Apr 2022

32. That this tweet was not only flagged by a bot, but its violation manually affirmed by a staff member is telling of both the algorithmic and human bias at play. Bostom's account was suspended for months and was finally restored on Christmas Day.

33. Another example of human bias run amok was the reaction to this tweet by Trump. Many Trump tweets led to extensive internal debates, and this one was no

different.



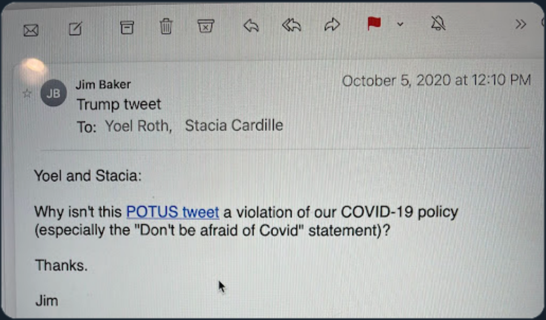
Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump

I will be leaving the great Walter Reed Medical Center today at 6:30 P.M. Feeling really good! Don't be afraid of Covid. Don't let it dominate your life. We have developed, under the Trump Administration, some really great drugs & knowledge. I feel better than I did 20 years ago!

2:37 PM · Oct 5, 2020

82K Retweets 152.2K Quote Tweets 443.5K Likes

34. In a surreal exchange, Jim Baker, at the time Twitter's Deputy General Counsel, asks why telling people to not be afraid wasn't a violation of Twitter's Covid-19 misinformation policy.



Jim Baker
October 5, 2020 at 12:10 PM
Trump tweet
To: Yoel Roth, Stacia Cardille

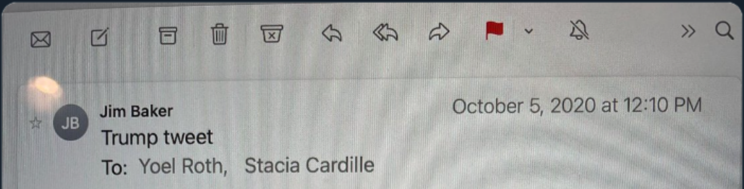
Yoel and Stacia:

Why isn't this POTUS tweet a violation of our COVID-19 policy (especially the "Don't be afraid of Covid" statement)?

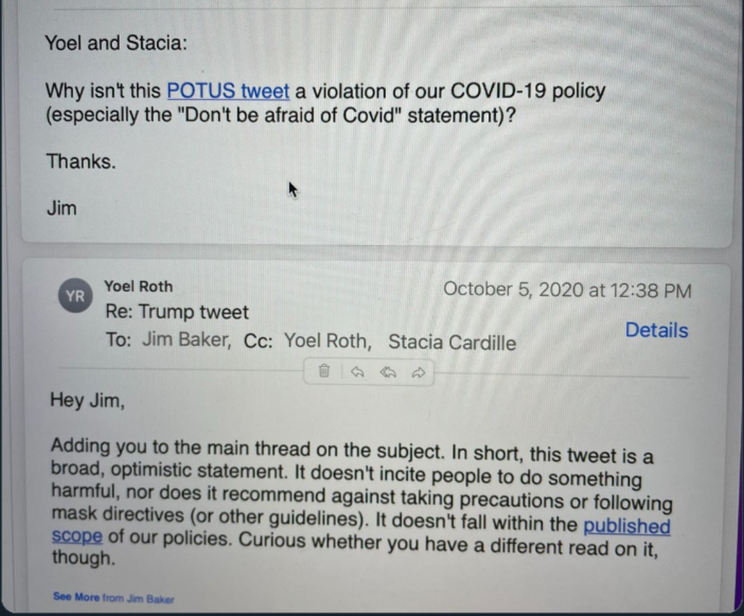
Thanks.

Jim

35. Yoel Roth, Twitter's former head of Trust & Safety, had to explain that optimism wasn't misinformation.



Jim Baker
October 5, 2020 at 12:10 PM
Trump tweet
To: Yoel Roth, Stacia Cardille



Yoel and Stacia:

Why isn't this POTUS tweet a violation of our COVID-19 policy (especially the "Don't be afraid of Covid" statement)?

Thanks.

Jim

Yoel Roth October 5, 2020 at 12:38 PM

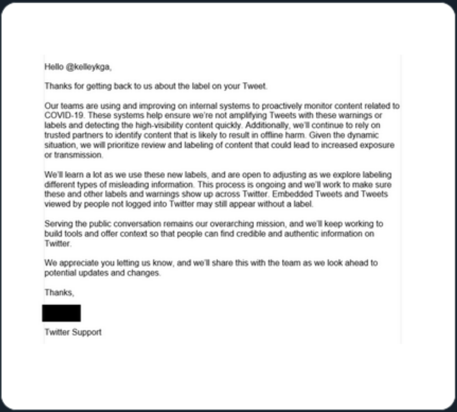
Re: Trump tweet

To: Jim Baker, Cc: Yoel Roth, Stacia Cardille

Hey Jim,

Adding you to the main thread on the subject. In short, this tweet is a broad, optimistic statement. It doesn't incite people to do something harmful, nor does it recommend against taking precautions or following mask directives (or other guidelines). It doesn't fall within the published scope of our policies. Curious whether you have a different read on it, though.

36. Remember @KelleyKga with the CDC data tweet? Twitter's response to her is clarifying: "we will prioritize review and labeling of content that could lead to increased exposure or transmission."



Hello @kelleykga,

Thanks for getting back to us about the label on your Tweet.

Our teams are using and improving on internal systems to proactively monitor content related to COVID-19. These systems help ensure we're not amplifying Tweets with these warnings or labels and detecting the high-visibility content quickly. Additionally, we'll continue to rely on trusted partners to identify content that is likely to result in offline harm. Given the dynamic situation, we will prioritize review and labeling of content that could lead to increased exposure or transmission.

We'll learn a lot as we use these new labels, and are open to adjusting as we explore labeling different types of misleading information. This process is ongoing and we'll work to make sure these and other labels and warnings show up across Twitter. Embedded Tweets and Tweets viewed by people not logged into Twitter may still appear without a label.

Serving the public conversation remains our overarching mission, and we'll keep working to build tools and offer context so that people can find credible and authentic information on Twitter.

We appreciate you letting us know, and we'll share this with the team as we look ahead to potential updates and changes.

Thanks,

[redacted]

Twitter Support

37. Twitter made a decision, via the political leanings of senior staff, and govt pressure, that the public health authorities' approach to the pandemic – prioritizing mitigation over other concerns – was "The Science" . . .

38. Information that challenged that view, such as showing harms of vaccines, or that could be perceived as downplaying the risks of Covid, especially to children, was subject to moderation, and even suppression. No matter whether such views were correct or adopted abroad.

39. What might this pandemic and its aftermath have looked like if there had been a more open debate on Twitter and other social media platforms—not to mention the mainstream press—about the origins of Covid, about lockdowns, about the true risks of Covid in kids, and much more?

40. Thanks to @ShellenbergerMD, @lwoodhouse, @lhfang and the team @TheFP for their help reporting this story.

41. An expanded version of this thread is available now @TheFP!

How Twitter Rigged the Covid Debate

The platform suppressed true information from doctors and public-health experts that was at odds with U.S. government policy.

https://www.thefp.com/p/how-twitter-rigged-the-covid-debate