



## **The Twitter Files: Bombshell Pentagon PsyOp Revealed, with Lee Fang | SYSTEM UPDATE**

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**Glenn Greenwald (GG):** So as I indicated at the start of the show, one of the nation's best and most dogged investigative journalists, Lee Fang- one of the hires I made at The Intercept of which I'm proudest- used the so-called Twitter Files to publish a truly bombshell story uncovering the vast online psychological influence operations run by the Pentagon to shape global attitudes and opinions about foreign countries and US foreign policy, as well as Twitter's hand in hand cooperation to support these deceitful propaganda operations. His report detailed the extent to which the US military has for years been setting up and operating fake news portals, online personalities and memes to manipulate public opinion and how Twitter, despite pledging to crack down on state backed influence operations of other countries, not only allowed these US operations to continue, but granting them special privileges. On October 31st, Lee, along with a colleague, published an equally vital story on the intense cooperation between the US security state and big tech using secret documents he obtained from Homeland Security. He reported the invasive plans of DHS and other agencies to integrate themselves further into big tech to further control the flow of information over the Internet. As one of the few American journalists left in American media practising true adversarial investigative reporting, I'm thrilled to have Lee tonight in our Interview segment.

**GG:** Hello Lee, so good to see you. First of all, thanks so much for taking the time for your first appearance on our show and for your new Substack, which you should take a little time and talk about if you want.

**Lee Fang (LF):** Hey, thanks, Glenn, and congratulations on your show. I appreciate you having me. Yeah, I launched a Substack yesterday just to kind of provide additional analysis and documentation to my reporting so readers can stay up to date with what I'm doing. And I want to provide more context and explanation. You know, my normal reporting, I kind of just do by the books, regular journalism, but the Substack kind of provides a different format. I can give a little bit of an extended explanation, I can talk about how I do my work, I can talk

a little bit about analysis and, you know, the way I kind of observe politics and society. So I appreciate you plugging that.

**GG:** Yeah, I'll probably regret saying this, but I do consider myself, even if you don't, the godfather of your Substack page since I've been badgering you for at least two years to just start. Well, I'm glad you finally relented. So before we talk about your story from yesterday of the Twitter Files, I want to ask you to revisit the story that you published at the end of October, along with Ken Klippenstein that reported on Homeland Security's increasing relationship with big tech and specifically its intention to use that to better censor the Internet from its perspective. I think people have forgotten that story because of the latest revelations in the Twitter Files. So remind us what that story showed and what its key revelations were.

**LF:** That story took a look at the evolution of the Department of Homeland Security, which has really refashioned itself from focussing on a kind of global jihadism and threats from al-Qaeda; you know, security at airports and that type of thing to looking more and more at supposed dangers from speech on social media. And this is a focus that kind of began in 2016 after the Russian hacking and the Russian Facebook pages and meme pages on Twitter. There was a huge reaction to that. As you know, and you've covered so much, where Washington said that we want answers. We can't have a foreign meddling in our election. That's the greatest threat we face. So the Department of Homeland Security, as the kind of war on terror was winding down, was looking for a new focus for their multibillion dollar budget, and they started creating new divisions within the agency focussed on the social media companies. They started creating roundtables, information sharing meetings, and weekly kind of check-ins. They kind of had a mission creep for their role where they see themselves as guardians of democracy by putting themselves as the kind of stewards of what we can say online and what's information and what's misinformation. There's a lot of alarming kinds of issues presented by this new agenda by the DHS. But the biggest and most obvious one is how is the government going to tell us what is true and what is not on contentious political issues? We talked to a whistleblower who shared documents with us showing that the DHS planners, as it were, folks who were kind of setting the agenda for the next four years, said that they helped expand the misinformation, disinformation team to police, supposed misinformation, around racial justice, around the origins of COVID 19, around the effectiveness of vaccines, around the withdrawal from Afghanistan. So these are issues where we have a spirited public debate, where the government really has no appropriate role telling us what's true and what's not, especially since I don't think anyone knows the true origins of COVID or what is the kind of correct answer around racial justice. I mean, these are inherently subjective, politicised issues and why the government should be weighing in and telling us what's true and what's not true, what's misinformation, what's disinformation it's clearly not appropriate. And it is clearly an effort to censor and stifle First Amendment protected speech.

**GG:** Yeah. I mean, I think it should be intuitively obvious why we don't want the government being the final arbiter of truth and falsity; just in theory, that should be obvious. But if you

want an example that should close the debate forever, for the first year of the COVID pandemic, people were actually banned from those social media platforms for opinionating that it was debatable what the origins of COVID actually were. A very consequential question, obviously, how this worldwide pandemic began, and it turned out that even the US government admitted, but a year later, that that is an open question. And yet for a year it was declared a closed question to the point it couldn't be debated on the Internet because the government said it shouldn't. But let me ask you about the kind of argument that's made to justify these policies, which is they kind of done it out in the open. Homeland Security, which was only created in 2002, this sprawling new bureaucracy, has long identified what it claims are the greatest threats to the American homeland. And as you said, typically it's al-Qaeda or ISIS or foreign countries. And during the Trump years, they started explicitly saying, look, the greatest threat to the American homeland does not come from outside our borders, but from within. It comes from white wing extremism and white supremacist ideology, especially people willing to take out violence in the name of that cause. And so it's a legitimate function of us to protect the country by focusing our attention inward, because that's where the real threat is. Why isn't that a legitimate way for the US security state to see its role?

**LF:** Well, any of these terms, you know, calling anyone a terrorist, whether you're saying that there's kind of right wing, white supremacists, you know, nationalism, that type of thing, or ISIS or Islamic Jihad, these are inherently political terms. It's very easy if you're a bureaucrat in Washington or a politician to inflate the fear and the danger of these groups, to use them as a convenient bogeyman for expanding your bureaucratic power. If you look at the numbers, you know, these are threats that can quickly mobilise public opinion. But we already live in a violent country. You know, something like 16 to 17000 gun homicides a year. The number of actual whether that's foreign terror organisations or domestic right wing or left wing terror groups is minuscule. It really is. So just from my perspective as a kind of a utilitarian, the actual threat and danger is constantly overhyped. It's constantly used as a cudgel for these politicians and policymakers to demand more resources, to demand more of an encroachment on civil liberties, to call for greater surveillance, to call for more restrictions on our daily lives, whether that's at airports or on social media. They're constantly seeking to expand their role.

**GG:** So let's turn to the story from yesterday that you were able to do with your access to the Twitter Files that obviously has a lot of relevance to the story you reported in late October we just discussed. And before delving into this substance, there's been a lot of attempts to denigrate this reporting by suggesting there's something nefarious about the relationship between Elon Musk and the reporters who have been reporting it. That there's conditions he imposed on what you can and can't say, that he's paid you to say what he wanted, is any of that true? Were there conditions imposed on the access that you had to this material in terms of what you were allowed to report or couldn't?

**LF:** No. No conditions. I signed nothing. I agreed to nothing. I'm happy to have the opportunity to come in and do some reporting on these files. But, you know, I have to be

perfectly candid. I simply came to the Twitter offices last week for three days without any editorial input. No one told me what to look for or asked me what I was doing. I came in and I made some requests to a Twitter attorney who would go to another room and then try to kind of fulfil those requests using some research tools on various documents that I asked for. And another Twitter engineer helped fulfil other requests, because I also asked around about certain tools that they use to manage people's Twitter profiles. That's about it. They did not kind of pressure me or reach out in any way. There's actually no money exchange, and nothing like that. I never met Elon Musk. But this is an interesting opportunity. So I seized it and hope to do more public interest focussed reporting using these documents. If there's stuff in those documents that helps us understand the world better, understand this company better, understand how public life, whether it's social media or interactions with the government, can be kind of elevated or illustrated with journalism, I'm happy to do it.

**GG:** Yeah, it used to be kind of uncontroversial that if you were a journalist and someone offered you the opportunity to get information that helped the world understand powerful actors, important decisions better, you immediately say yes, without regard to who that source is or what their motives are. But that seems to have changed quite a bit in at least some sectors of journalism. So you're the third person I've spoken with. Go ahead. Do you want to say something about that?

**LF:** Well, I should just say, you know, I've reported on dozens and dozens of stories with kind of unusual sources. I think there are alleged Qatari hackers that I have obtained documents from, Algerian hackers of Russian sources, FBI, law enforcement, leakers; there are people with various motives. And I get that Elon Musk is an unusual, controversial source. But I've done so many stories with other kinds of unusual sources. What matters is, is it a public interest story? Do the documents, does the story actually tell something that serves the public interest? And here that's clearly the case. But of course people obsess over Elon Musk because he is a kind of a polarising figure. I get that. But it doesn't reflect the journalism.

**GG:** Yeah. I mean, you know, in Watergate, what we were all taught in childhood is like the pinnacle of journalistic excellence. The main source that they call Deep Throat turned out to be an FBI official, bitter that he was passed over for the position of FBI director by Nixon. And his leaks were designed to get vengeance on Nixon for what he took as that personal affront. So you're the third journalist that I've interviewed who has reported on these files after Matt Taibbi, then Michael Shellenberger last night with whom I spoke. There's a lot of, kind of complex documents being tossed around, a lot of important revelations being divulged at once. I think sometimes the public has a hard time processing that when that's the case. So talk about what you regard as, say, the two or three most significant findings from the first instalment of reporting that you did.

**LF:** Well, these are kind of two simultaneous stories that I reported yesterday. One, as you described at the top of the segment, we're looking at the kind of hypocritical policies of

Twitter that - this is a company that's promised since 2016 that they rapidly identify and thwart and shut down all state backed influence operations, covert government efforts to manipulate their platform using fake aliases, fake identities to shape public opinion in a foreign country or to place military or intelligence propaganda. They've testified to Congress that they're against and they're going to shut down all government action. And the story also looks at the US military and their sprawling effort and their interactions with Twitter. Twitter gave essentially a concierge service to CENTCOM, US Central Command, which has really been kind of orchestrating this influence and psychological operations throughout the Middle East, using these Arab language accounts to create what looks like authentic interactions, authentic people and news sources, news portals. I'm talking about the accuracy of US drone strikes in Yemen, success in wars and military engagement with US enemies like al-Qaeda and ISIS, promoting anti-Iran and anti-Russia narratives in the Middle East, promoting the Saudi led coalition that's fighting a war in Yemen. And this kind of relationship between Twitter and the military goes back at least until 2017. That's the earliest I found documents where you have officials from CENTCOM sending an email to Twitter with a list of their Twitter accounts that they control asking for special privileges for those accounts. And I can see in the Twitter documents that as soon as they sent that request, that same day, Twitter officials went to the back end into their tools and provided a special tag to those accounts that were requested by CENTCOM. And they gave a special white list tag that's basically giving the privileges of a blue check verification without the visible blue check. So what does the verification do beyond being a status marker? Even without the blue check on the Twitter back end that blocks accounts from being flagged as spam or for abuse or for interacting with accounts that might be promoting terrorist content, that helps them be more likely to trend or be indexed by hashtags and more more visible basically on the Twitter timeline. So they were providing very close support. And, you know, initially some of these CENTCOM accounts were publicly identified as affiliated with the military. But for a very long period, they shed that affiliation and that disclosure and Twitter was well aware. We can see in the emails that they were talking about these kinds of cloak and dagger Twitter accounts and not sure what to do with them.

**GG:** So one of the reasons I think, you know that I was so contemptuous of the kind of faux indignation in 2016 over the idea that Russia would interfere in our sacred elections is because obviously the US government has been interfering in the message politics of virtually every country, including Russia, in ways far more significant than a few fake Facebook ads or Twitter bots or even hacking operations that Russia was accused of doing. The United States actually created an entire new fake Twitter in order to destabilise the Cuban government by luring young Cubans in. And there's all these stories like that of the US government doing similar things on the Internet. I suppose some people might defend this on the grounds that Twitter is an American company, and therefore we want Twitter to stop other governments, especially enemy governments, from being able to disseminate their propaganda over Twitter. But why shouldn't we as Americans want our own government to have the power to use the Internet to promote its own propaganda and destabilising

operations and propaganda operations throughout the world? Why shouldn't Twitter be working with the US government this way?

**LF:** Well, you know, I would just make a few kinds of comments around that. One is that I think, you know, the US has a much higher moral high ground. If it can conduct itself in a way that's truthful and ethical, they expect other countries to treat us in a certain way. We should project that same kind of behaviour abroad, not act hypocritically. And the other kind of dynamic here is that this is the Internet. You know, we've seen in the past many scandals with the US military using its psychological operations, teams and resources to illegally and unethically influence American policymakers. Michael Hastings, Rolling Stone had a great story showing that US forces in Afghanistan have used their psychological influence operations to influence American policymakers, members of Congress who are going to go visit the US war effort. We've seen Donald Rumsfeld with his scandal where he was kind of organising efforts around retired military generals to appear on CNN and other major networks to help sell the Iraq war, the Afghanistan war, the surge. So, for these kinds of social media accounts, what's interesting here is that although they were targeted in Syria and Iraq and Yemen, Kuwait and other places in the Middle East, this is the Internet. I was kind of tracing the influence of these social media empires, these social media accounts that were set up by CENTCOM and kind of allowed by Twitter. They trickle back to US politics. A lot of US media outlets covering issues in Yemen and Syria would end up citing these accounts without realising that they were actually part of a military PSYOP campaign. So, you see even if you're targeting a certain Arab or, you know, a local population in the Middle East this kind of propaganda trickles back and we end up kind of seeing a US military PSYOP campaign and potentially misinforming even American voters and the American population. So this stuff has a blowback in many ways.

**GG:** So last question. We only have a couple of minutes left, in part because you have to be on Tucker's show and they're already obnoxiously calling, even though they know we're not off the air until 8:00. But I do need to be done by 8:00, so just if you could, a couple of minutes. One of the things that struck me as you were talking about all these different propaganda operations that the Pentagon does and these far flung parts of the world, including helping the Saudis in their war in Yemen, it's the same point I was making when we were talking about just now President Zelensky's address, right now as we speak, before Congress demanding get more billions on top of 100 billion we already send. Like, what does any of this have to do with the lives of the American people? How does any of what you just talked about in terms of the Pentagon's propaganda and information operations, in terms of Yemen and Syria and all these places, in what way does it even affect, let alone improve the lives of American citizens? Is that question something that occurred to you as you were reviewing all this?

**LF:** Yeah, absolutely. I think this is actually most acute for the war in Yemen; at least for the war in Ukraine we're having some debate. I mean, there isn't a very vocal peace lobby fighting for a diplomatic end or resolution to this conflict. For the war in Yemen this has

raged since 2015. There's over, I believe, 1.5 million displaced people in Yemen. It's the poorest country in the Arab world. Thousands upon thousands of children killed in this conflict. And we have no debate about this in the US. We have no one, that I know, who's voted for this conflict. You know, this is something that's happened in the background that appears to just be a proxy effort between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Yet the US, because of our ironclad alliance with Saudi Arabia and our need for their oil, we provide lots and lots of military support and apparently social media support for this military conflict. There's no debate about it in Washington and there's no serious discussion, even though it clearly affects billions of lives.

**GG:** Absolutely. So first of all, again, congratulations on your Substack. I hope people go and follow you and our aftershow especially; we'll put the address where people can do that. I do have to run and I really appreciate your taking the time and I'm going to be pursuing you to appear on our show very shortly again in the future.

**GG:** Thanks for watching this clip from System Update. Catch our full shows for free live weekdays at 7 p.m. Eastern on Rumble. And join our locals community at [Greenwald.locals.com](https://www.greenwald.locals.com) for all of my written journalism exclusive aftershow Q&A and more.

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