# Death of a provocateur

By now, anybody who lives a social media life has probably heard that Laura Loomer — the 25-year-old far-right provocateur and self-styled Patreon-supported "investigative journalist" — handcuffed herself to Twitter's headquarters in New York City on Thursday evening, and, in her words, "threw away the key."

She was protesting Twitter, she said, because she believed the permanent ban she earned from the service for hate speech was unfair. She wanted her account reinstated. She was also there to take action over what she sees as the company's discrimination against conservatives. ("The account holder was suspended for violating our policies. We apply the Twitter Rules impartially and not based on ideology," a Twitter spokesperson told *The Verge* last night.) The protest, such as it was, went on for a few hours until Loomer had her fill of the cold and asked the police to find a pair of bolt cutters to free her. She left in a police car but was not arrested, as Twitter declined to press charges. A live stream of the protest surged in popularity on Twitter, and Loomer ended the day as a trending topic.

While that is one kind of victory — it certainly gave Loomer some of the audience and attention she craves — her protest was notable for precisely the opposite reason. It drew attention to Twitter's opaque, unevenly applied content policy, which *does* have a lot of problems, but they're consistent across the board. While Loomer and other right-wing voices believe Twitter and other social media platforms have been systematically shadowbanning conservatives and unduly promoting their opponents, liberals similarly feel that they're being banned and suspended for saying things

conservatives would get a pass for. Clearly, there can't be widespread institutional bias against both sides, but arbitrary enforcement of the rules would certainly give both sides the impression that they're being punished for crimes other people get away with.

*Thumbing your nose at authority makes teenagers cool, too*
The habitual opacity that accompanies bans is a vestige of an earlier, forum-driven internet when mods were demigods and admins wielded absolute power. Users could be banned for anything at all, often without recourse, and living with that ever-present anxiety was part of what kept posters in line. Bad behavior, however, could be tolerated by a permissive admin if it was amusing enough, which is part of the reason provocateurs of all stripes still enjoy outsized reputations online today. Thumbing your nose at authority makes teenagers cool, too.

As the internet developed and professionalized, that admin-anxiety gradually disappeared. Platforms adopted quasi-permissive protections — freedom of speech (excluding hate speech), freedom of association, freedom of thought, and the like — that mimicked America's own Bill of Rights. The founders of the world's largest and most influential tech companies thought of the internet as the only truly free space, and much like those who conducted this country's westward expansion, they forgot that the other people who might live there had rights, too.

The result is people like Loomer. They've forgotten that, at the end of the day, the Jack Dorseys and Mark Zuckerbergs of the world are still admins, and we still post at their pleasure. Twitter and Facebook are not democracies, though they might take pains to appear that way. They are businesses, not altruistic entities that exist for their users' benefit. They are fundamentally not governments, though they might like to be.

Being banned from Twitter might feel like the end of the world or the end of your career, but it isn't – unless, like most provocateurs, attention is your livelihood, and your paycheck depends on the spotlight. This is why deplatforming can clean up online communities. Supporters may grouse about the loss of a perceived champion, but very few of them are willing to leave the comforts of a familiar platform to venture out into the wilds of a new one. As of this writing, Loomer – who claimed during her protest to have had 265,000 followers on Twitter, where she promoted her writing – has 139 patrons on Patreon who donate to get her journalism. The audiences are hardly the same.

And while during her protest Loomer complained to a live broadcast audience of at least 10,000 people that she was being silenced, many of them were watching that stream through Twitter embeds or watching it on Periscope because of Twitter news alerts. Even in reaching a larger audience, she was still dependent on the platform that had ousted her. There's a form of victory in that – for a few hours, she controlled the Twitter narrative without Twitter's permission – but she also proved again just how necessary the social media outlet is for her messaging. And while Loomer has threatened to repeat her protest at Twitter's San Francisco headquarters, she no longer has novelty on her side, and she may find it difficult to capture that audience again.

For the canny provocateur, running afoul of Twitter and Facebook is dangerous because they're large and ubiquitous, and they have the biggest built-in audiences. They also have final say over who gets access to those audiences. Social media platforms have become de facto governments while retaining all of their private powers, which is why people who are perma-banned always cry tyranny.

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Loomer said she was protesting on behalf of Alex Jones, Milo

Yiannopoulos, Chuck Johnson, and others who have been forgotten just as quickly as they lost their social media accounts. They moved on to smaller, more niche platforms like Gab, and some fraction of their followers did meet them there. But moving to the fringe necessarily means you can't affect the mainstream, except through the natural osmosis of ideas. For a provocateur, a person more interested in attention-grabbing than serious intellectual work, that's a death sentence.

For now, the message hasn't sunk in for Loomer. Just before she handcuffed herself to a metal door in Chelsea in 35-degree weather, she joined a class action antitrust lawsuit against Apple, Google, Facebook, and Twitter, which was brought in part because the defendant believes the companies "entered into an illegal leftist agenda and designs to effectively overthrow President Trump and his administration." What she doesn't understand is that her career in the social media limelight as she knew it is over. She has followers on Facebook and YouTube, but they're a fraction of how many she once commanded on Twitter.

All that's left for her now is to move further and further from the place where the people are, away from the audiences who are even now forgetting her. Loomer didn't reply to *The Verge*'s request for an interview.

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