The provocateur who went out into the cold

It was a cold and overcast Wednesday in New York when Laura Loomer returned to Twitter's New York City headquarters to protest. Last November, the right wing activist and provocateur handcuffed herself to the building, calling for Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey to unban her, and remove other people she believed had violated Twitter's terms of service instead. "We're posting in real life," Loomer tells me that day. "I've been banned on Twitter, and so here I am."

Loomer was permanently suspended from Twitter at the end of November 2018; according to BuzzFeed News, the ban came after she "tweeted a series of anti-Muslim falsehoods about Ilhan Omar, a Somali refugee who is one of two Muslim women elected to Congress." At the time, Loomer had more than a quarter of a million followers, and was known for "consistently [misidentifying] suspects during breaking news situations and, during the midterm elections, [spreading] hoaxes about voter fraud." The crowd assembled around Loomer for her second protest was a motley crew, a rotating group of between 15 and 25 people, many of them livestreaming, there to complain about what they felt was unfair censorship on the social network.

Adrienna DiCioccio, the event's co-organizer, told me as much. "When you go online, and you're trying to search things, and you get errors like 404 or 451, that means censorship. That means you're not allowed to find information that you are truly looking for," she said. (A 404 error means that a server could not find the requested page; a 451 error means something has been taken down for legal reasons.)

"We're posting in real life"

DiCioccio continued: “So when we go on platforms that we agree to by contract with TOS terms, and a company is not, you know, complying with their terms? That is a problem. And that’s why we’re here. We are here to show people truly what’s going on behind the algorithms, behind active, active user, you know, active daily users things that are going on. Basically, we. Want. Free. Speech.”

She conceded that users should be banned if they break a website’s terms of service. “You know when 2 Live Crew was banned in the ’90s when they were trying to sing? ‘We live in America. We should not be banned in the USA for what we’re trying to say.’ Do you get what I’m saying?” (The rappers in 2 Live Crew were arrested and tried on obscenity charges in the early 1990s, which was overturned by a federal judge after a years-long First Amendment battle over sexually explicit lyrics from their seminal album *As Nasty As They Wanna Be*.)

There were at least three megaphones, which were passed around like a bong, and people took turns shouting at the brick Twitter building, which did not reply.

“Social media companies like Twitter and Facebook get to decide whether or not you get pertinent information about national security issues in your country,” Loomer yelled. “If your congresswoman is a Sharia advocate and is advocating for ISIS terrorists, don’t you think you ought to know about it without having that information silenced and banned on social media?”

She claimed Dorsey had lied to Congress in his testimony last September — where he said that the company doesn’t use political ideology to make decisions — and said that he should be locked up, as lying to Congress is a crime. (There is no evidence Dorsey lied.) Asked about the protest, a Twitter spokesperson said that “Twitter was founded on freedom of expression and we welcome the public to express their views. We apply the Twitter Rules impartially and not based on

ideology.”

Loomer went on: “Who is Jack Dorsey protecting? Who are the social media companies protecting when they ban people for reporting facts about Islamic Jihad and Sharia in America? Who? Who are they protecting? Islamic terrorists, that’s who they’re protecting.” She continued: “And so when I handcuffed myself many people mocked me, and they said that it was ridiculous that I was talking about Sharia law when I handcuffed myself, and I was talking about how these companies are upholding Sharia by banning people. Did you know that Twitter is now sending —” And here she paused, dropping her voice to a normal level.

“This one is losing battery, I think,” she said to an associate, about her loudspeaker. “Let me use the louder one.” The building remained silent.

Afterward, Loomer texted me to say that the event had trended online. There is no record that was actually the case.

In 2016, Milo Yiannopoulos lost his Twitter verification; the former Breitbart writer and right-wing darling had apparently run afoul of the company’s internal rules, and, at the time, Twitter declined to comment on the move. (One executive, who said he wasn’t speaking for the company, implied that it may have been because Yiannopoulos had said someone deserved to be harassed.) Yiannopoulos was banned permanently from Twitter later that year, after he incited a racist, targeted harassment campaign against the actress Leslie Jones, who was then starring in the *Ghostbusters* reboot. It was the start of the narrative that Twitter and other social media companies were biased against conservatives, which has since morphed into a belief that these platforms are somehow discriminatory; the companies involved rarely explain what specific action has violated a specific rule.

Twitter didn’t tell Loomer why she was banned

This January, the technology writer John Herrman published a piece about how platform secrecy enables tech paranoia: “Everything that takes place within the platform kingdoms is enabled by systems we’re told must be kept private in order to function,” he wrote. “We’re living in worlds governed by trade secrets. No wonder they’re making us all paranoid.”

Twitter didn’t tell Loomer why she was banned, which has contributed to her feeling that conservatives have been censored online. DiCioccio, the co-organizer, told me she’d tried to do something about it.

“I just tried getting an app developed because Twitter is censoring accounts, shadow banning, et cetera, you know what I’m saying? Followers are going down. Views are going down,” she says. “So I was talking to an app developer trying to get something that would contradict their algorithms. But you know, this private company that says they’re not socialist and they’re not trying to make a bias have APIs up where nobody can make an app and even try to go against that.” (APIs, otherwise known as application programming interfaces, are a suite of tools used by developers to make applications; it wasn’t immediately clear what DiCioccio was trying to say.)

Many people at Wednesday’s protest felt similarly frustrated, and they revealed that they either had not read the terms of service they agreed to and were banned for violating them, or that they lacked the technical knowledge to understand how platforms are moderated. It seemed like they’d all been suspended, at least briefly — one man shouted his account had been temporarily disabled because he’d tweeted a “stance that the Y chromosome determines sex,” which if true would violate Twitter’s policy against hate speech — but what they all had in common was a set of politics. The gathering had the feeling of an amateur support group, at times; at others, it was a debate club. (Loomer told me later she had been involved in college debate, which explains both the vibe and her insistent way of arguing. At press time, I wasn’t able to confirm with

her alma mater whether that was true or not.)

A podcaster who went by Brad Chadford and his cameraman had come down from Boston, as token liberals to debate Loomer and her group. “I think when these companies like Twitter and Facebook start, they never like conceived that this would eventually become a problem,” he said, referring to the politics that spring up around social media bans. “Where we have a disagreement – me and Adrienna and Laura and all these people that organize this stuff – is that they think that they’re just being targeted because they’re conservatives. I think it’s just kind of like an… inept management that’s going on at Twitter that’s actually causing the problem,” he said. “I just don’t ascribe, like, a nefarious motivation to it, and they do, you know, because they’re fucking crazy.”

If Twitter considers itself a public utility, then how can it ban anyone?
“I came out here for the protest, obviously,” said Craig Brittain, the ex-revenge porn purveyor who is suing Twitter and who is a former 2018 Senate candidate. He’d flown in from Arizona to take part in Loomer’s action, and said he was also planning to run for Senate again in 2020. “I’ve had members of my staff banned from Twitter when Twitter established a world leaders policy that was supposed to guarantee to protect all candidates, world leaders, and agencies from being blocked or prohibited from spreading their message and reaching their voters and constituents on social media.” (Twitter’s world leaders policy does, in fact, exist; it does not, however, appear to extend to candidates, because they are not world leaders.) Earlier in the day, Brittain had taken up one of the loudspeakers and expounded on a theory of why Twitter had become successful – a sort of alternate history.

“What happened was they went from 57,000 members to over 3 million members in three months after President Barack Obama won the election of 2008 because John McCain at the time was ill-equipped to handle social media,” Brittain told the

assembled crowd, who didn't seem to be paying that much attention. "After that, the valuation of the company skyrocketed as a direct result of Barack Obama's activity with the company. This resulted in multiple town halls and official government events scheduled with Jack Dorsey in which there were numerous press photos and handshakes, and all sorts of events, government money spent, taxpayer dollars invested in the company. And what happened is between 2007 and 2011 the company went from a $3 million valuation to a $23 billion valuation." (None of this is true. Twitter was worth $35 million near the end of 2007, when it raised its Series B round of funding that October; by the summer of 2011, that had jumped to $9.25 billion, after a Series G.)

"Where did the money come from?" Brittain asked. "The money came from the taxpayers. It came from the politicians and government officials and suddenly wanted a piece of this emerging platform," Brittain said, as a kind of trump card, before he got to his larger point. "Now at the time Dick Costolo was the CEO. And the big statement that he made in 2009 was that Twitter is a public utility. Like water, or electricity. Jack Dorsey would echo that sentiment in the *New Yorker* in 2011" – it was – "and again in 2013 in an interview with *The New York Times*." (I couldn't find the *Times* piece in question, though they wrote a lot about Dorsey in 2013.) What he meant to say: if Twitter considers itself a public utility, then how can it ban anyone?

"That's how bad censorship is," Brittain continued. "When you can have your water or electricity on in a day just by paying the bill. But you can't get your Twitter account back. You can't get your Facebook account back. You can't get your YouTube account back."

But nobody pays for Twitter, or Facebook, or YouTube. Online, in this metaphor, the utilities are Internet Service Providers. Donald Trump's FCC has done away with net neutrality, which means that now ISPs are legally allowed to

discriminate against traffic to certain sites, like, say, Twitter, or Netflix. Similarly, social platforms operate under their own terms and conditions, even though they undergird much of the infrastructure of modern life.

The confusion about what platforms are and the role they play in society extended across the crowd; it was hard for people to separate a platform's actions – moderating users – from what it means to be deplatformed in an increasingly digital world. "My life has become extremely hard," said Loomer. "I am banned on Twitter. I'm banned on Uber. I'm banned on Lyft. I'm banned on Venmo. I'm banned on GoFundMe. I'm banned on PayPal. I'm banned on Uber Eats. I can't even order a sandwich. I now had access suspended from my online Chase banking yesterday," she continued, the last of which was impossible to verify. While there are non-digital equivalents for most of these services (aside from crowdfunding, as chain letters that request money are illegal), there might not be in the future; as an example, modern cities across the globe have started to go cashless, which means those locked out of the banking system for whatever reason will be further excluded from mainstream society. It's not hard to imagine a future where you can authenticate yourself in physical space with an online profile, one where if you don't have a presence you don't, technically speaking, exist. (By way of analogy: If you match on a dating app, and you Google the person and they don't appear to have an online trail, how likely are you to still go on the date?)

Loomer told me she lost 90 percent of her income after she was banned from PayPal, where she solicited donations, and has claimed she's since gone into $40,000 of credit card debt. *Newsweek* confirmed the cancellation, and PayPal provided them with a statement. "PayPal works to ensure that our platform and services are not used for purposes that run counter to our core values," a spokesperson told the magazine. "Our decision and actions are values-based, not political."

Loomer lost 90 percent of her income after she was banned from PayPal

To Loomer, PayPal only wrote that they were terminating her account "pursuant to PayPal's User Agreement," which says that PayPal can delete your account for any reason and at any time. In an Instagram post about her ban from PayPal, Loomer reacted. "Essentially I can't even exist in society because the actual Nazis in tech and on the left constantly ban me because I post facts," she wrote. "How am I supposed to pay my bills? I can't get a regular job because I have been accused of being a Nazi. Am I supposed to be homeless? I guess these people won't be happy until I reach a breaking point and just die."

Existentialism aside, there's one plausible explanation for why PayPal might have banned Loomer from its service: her fervent islamophobia. stipulates that you may not use your account to "to display, upload, modify, publish, distribute, disseminate, transmit, update or share any information" that "[i]s grossly harmful, harassing, blasphemous defamatory, obscene, pornographic, paedophilic, libellous, invasive of another's privacy, hateful, or racially, ethnically objectionable, disparaging, relating or encouraging money laundering or gambling, or otherwise unlawful in any manner whatever," it reads. Presumably "hateful" covers religious bigotry.

Loomer was banned from both Uber and Lyft in November 2017 after she posted a series of anti-Muslim tweets in which she tagged both companies. "Someone needs to create a non Islamic form of Uber or Lyft because I never want to support another Islamic immigrant driver," she tweeted. NBC News reported that the tweet was "the beginning of a daylong anti-Islamic social media attack that blamed all Muslims for ISIS terrorism," and she was banned permanently from both services later that day. In her words, they were the first services to really ban her.

"There have been multiple instances of Muslims being hired by

Uber and Lyft – raping women, killing women. There was a Muslim Uber driver who killed a woman because her dress was too short. So he raped her and killed her," she tells me at Wednesday's protest, before claiming that a Muslim Uber driver had kicker her out of a car on Rosh Hashanah, an important Jewish religious celebration. She continued to inveigh against people who are Muslim, generally, until I interrupted her.

Do you think the drivers represent the company?

"Well, the CEO of Uber is a Muslim. So yeah, I do," she says.

"Why would I want to get a car with an Islamic immigrant when Uber and Lyft aren't doing background checks, and they have a documented history of hiring ISIS terrorists? It freaks me out," she says. "And then when I look at Islam as an ideology, and I see that it calls for the killing of Jews, and then Uber doesn't do anything when a Muslim driver kicks me out for being Jewish. It freaks me out!"

At the protest, the only person Loomer expressed empathy for was herself. "You're never going to know what it's like to not be able to make money. You're never going to know what it's like to wake up one morning and have 90 percent of your income gone," she says. "You're never going to know what it's like to, you know, be told that you deserve to not exist online simply because of your politics."

"How would you feel if the roles were reversed and all the executives were Republicans and they were like, 'You know what I don't like this guy. I don't like his politics I'm just going to ban him. And I'm going to ban him from banking. And I'm gonna make his life very hard and when he's walking around and taking cabs I'm going to deactivate his credit card so that you're stranded with no money,'" she says.

"How would you feel if the roles were reversed?"
It's the American way that private companies are allowed to do anything they want to, short of breaking the law. (And even

then, as in the 2008 financial crisis, breaking the law doesn’t have so many consequences if the company you’re a part of is ensconced in American society.) If a social network decides to remove a person from its platform, for any reason, there’s no legal recourse, because nothing illegal has happened; and moreover, once you sign a terms of service agreement, regardless of whether you read it in full or not, you have agreed to abide by the rules of the place. When a bartender bans you from their establishment, you’re done. That’s it. By entering you agree to obey the rules of the place, even if you think they’re silly. In that sense, the difference between a bar and Twitter or Uber or Paypal is negligible (although bars don’t yet sell your personal drinking data). In another, however, they couldn’t be more different: social media companies are inextricably part of the fabric of modern society, and getting banned means being excluded from a larger and larger sector of society.

But that’s hard to explain on a cold New York City sidewalk, when the forecast promises snow. It started coming down in earnest around noon, four or so hours into Loomer’s protest. The building didn’t shiver, and it had nothing to say.

https://www.theverge.com/2019/2/22/18236819/laura-loomer-twitter-protest-ban-conservative-censorship