# The year of deleted tweets



In July, Disney fired *Guardians of the Galaxy* director James Gunn. Cause for termination: a series of offensive tweets, in most cases about a decade old, that were circulated by a right-wing media personality. Gunn's tweets, many of which were about molestation or pedophilia, were indefensible. But the method in which they were dug up, as well as the people who circulated them — bad-faith conspiracy theorists who used old jokes made in poor taste to brand Gunn as a pedophile — are part of a larger trend in which problematic or out-of-context tweets are being ripped from the past to ruin their author in the present.

Trial by online fire isn't new. Milkshake Duck, a term coined by Twitter user @pixelatedboat in 2016, gave a name to a cultural internet phenomenon. It goes like this: someone gains online fame for something innocuous, only for it to come out shortly after that the person holds repugnant or problematic views. After a presidential election debate in 2016, for example, the internet became obsessed with a sweater-clad man named Ken Bone. His reign as a viral darling quickly came to an end after people discovered that his Reddit history

included comments about stolen celebrity nudes and the "justified" killing of Trayvon Martin.

In 2018, however, the concept of Milkshake Ducking became far more convoluted. Now it's not just about present problematic views, but holding people responsible for comments they've made previously, in some cases years ago. Call it Gunn's Law: everyone has a past.

*Tweet deletion is no longer a matter of curation, but a necessity*

Gunn's firing launched a flurry of pieces about deleting tweets. If a Hollywood icon with the vocal support of stars like Chris Pratt, Zoe Saldana, and Dave Bautista couldn't escape the wrath of Twitter, what hope did an ordinary person have? Twitter curiously doesn't offer the option to purge your timeline, but services like TweetDelete, TwitWipe, and TweetEraser offered freedom from Twitter mobs through mass deletion. Yet while Gunn may have been the year's most high-profile case, thanks to his involvement in a well-loved Disney movie franchise, he was hardly the last.

In the YouTube beauty community, vloggers like Laura Lee and Gabriel Zamora were skewered online for old racist tweets. Doja Cat, the woman behind viral hit "Mooo!," invited disaster after people dug up old, homophobic tweets when she tweeted a tone-deaf non-apology for them. Shortly after former *Verge* senior writer Sarah Jeong announced a new job with *The New York Times*, harassers started a campaign that included pulling old tweets and using them as an out-of-context argument for "anti-white" racism. Just this month, would-be Oscar host Kevin Hart lost his spot in record time after he frantically tried to purge old, homophobic tweets. The examples are widespread and plentiful.

Twitter has many pitfalls, one of which is the removal of context. Whether it's misread sarcasm, lost irony, or just one comment taken out of context, a single bad tweet has the

potential to make anyone go viral for the wrong reasons. Gunn's tweets are repugnant, but they reflect an earlier era of the internet, where edgy, inappropriate, or gross-out humor were the law of the land. At best, they're a relic of a previous time when the goal was to out-top everyone in how offensive your jokes could get; at worst, they're lazy. "Many people who have followed my career know when I started, I viewed myself as a provocateur, making movies and telling jokes that were outrageous and taboo," said Gunn in his apology. "As I have discussed publicly many times, as I've developed as a person, so has my work and my humor." Which raises another question: how long is the statute of limitations online, and at what point do we recognize that someone has grown from their questionable views?

Tweet deletion is no longer a matter of curation, but a necessity. Our lives are lived online more each year. We shouldn't excuse people who spout racist, misogynist, damaging views online in present day. But as we confront our younger, more problematic past selves preserved online, the line between personal growth and punishment deserves breathing room. Until we can accept that, deleting tweets is all we have.

https://www.theverge.com/2018/12/27/18150662/twitter-2018-tweets-delete-milkshake-ducking-james-gunn