

Twitter banned the Proud Boys, but they're still there. Under Elon Musk, there could be more

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

On April 26, a five-month old Twitter account with the handle @LegacyChaser369 pinned a tweet to its profile that began: "The Proud

Boys are back on Twitter! #NewProfilePic #POYB #Westisthebest #Uhuru #maga"

The pinned tweet, which sits atop any other posts, was practically a glossary for the language of the extremist street gang known as the Proud Boys. But if the insider terms weren't clear enough, there was the banner image: A group of Proud Boys holding their hands in sideways "OK" signs, a known rallying symbol for white supremacy.

Twitter, citing its policy against violent organizations, had permanently banned the Proud Boys and its founder in 2018. But @LegacyChaser369's profile, along with at least 30 others that contained obvious Proud Boys messaging, were active until last week. When those accounts were followed, the service's algorithm even "recommended" other similar accounts to follow.

After U.S. TODAY inquired about the accounts, Twitter removed nearly all of them for violating its rules.

"In 2018, we permanently suspended accounts affiliated with the Proud Boys organization. In line with our violent organizations policy, when we identify or become aware of accounts affiliated with this or other designated organizations, we immediately and permanently suspend the accounts," the company said in a statement.

Twitter says it uses "automated tooling and manual assessments" to remove accounts violating its rules.

But the presence of dozens of Proud Boys accounts—at the same time the group's leaders are facing federal charges of seditious conspiracy in the Jan. 6 riot—is the latest illustration of how [extremist groups](#) can sometimes spread their message with impunity, despite social media companies' promises to the contrary.

Many of the accounts could be found by a simple word search, because they used "Proud Boys" in their Twitter bio or username, raising questions about how effectively the company enforces its rules on hate speech and extremism.

"I don't think that Twitter is a platform that is seriously interested in banning extremists and bad actors, even when they go out of their way to make it explicit about who they are and what they're about," said Bridget Todd, a writer and host of the podcast "There are No Girls on the Internet." "If I were running Twitter, I would consider that a failure on my part, to create a platform that, even at a very base level, in the most basic ways, is a safe place to be."

Proud Boys hope Elon Musk will let them return to Twitter

For years, extremist groups like the Proud Boys openly organized on mainstream social media platforms. Social media companies came under growing pressure to limit hate speech and extremism as growing evidence showed the platforms were being used to radicalize people.

After being banned from Twitter and Facebook, the Proud Boys decamped to the encrypted messaging app Telegram and other smaller apps with fewer restrictions.

But when Elon Musk announced earlier this year he wanted to buy Twitter, the Proud Boys and other extremist groups expressed hope that he will allow them back on the platform. Musk, who has 100 million Twitter followers, says he supports more unbridled expression on Twitter. He also says the social media company has gone too far in policing the speech of users.

Telegram accounts associated with the Proud Boys celebrated the Musk deal, which is yet to be finalized, posting memes featuring the Tesla billionaire, one of which read "ELON MUSK: Proud Boy of the week."

Musk agreed to buy Twitter for \$44 billion in April but has expressed reservations about the deal, fueling speculation he may not complete the purchase.

Among other things, Musk wants to abolish permanent suspensions against users including former President Trump. Twitter co-founder and former CEO Jack Dorsey has publicly agreed with Musk though both say Twitter should still prohibit illegal behavior and spam.

"Perma bans just fundamentally undermine trust in Twitter as a town square where everyone can voice their opinion," Musk said at a conference in May when asked if he would reverse the decision to oust former President Trump from Twitter.

Musk did not respond to a tweet seeking comment for this story.

U.S. TODAY attempted to contact all of the Proud Boy-affiliated accounts on Twitter. A few accounts responded saying they were unapologetic Proud Boys. Most did not respond.

Whether he reverses the Twitter ban on extremists like the Proud Boys, the group has been using the platform anyway. Cyabra, a disinformation monitoring platform, found 7,448 profiles using hashtags and phrases connected to the Proud Boys between June 2021 and June 2022.

The nonprofit research organization Advance Democracy found that many uses of the Proud Boy hashtags over the last year were to denounce rather than promote the group.

Still, supporters of the Proud Boys weren't hard to find on Twitter.

Why didn't Twitter spot the Proud Boys accounts?

In mid-April, U.S. TODAY identified 45 Twitter accounts supporting the Proud Boys.

Some had "Proud Boy" in their bios. Others used the term ProudBoy in their Twitter handle. Dozens more sported imagery of the Proud Boys logo, or used the hashtags #Uhuru (used to mock the idea of slavery reparations), #POYB (insiders say "Proud of your boy") and others. The accounts often tweeted hateful content mocking the LGBTQ community, the Hispanic community and the Jewish community.

Over the next two months, Twitter removed 13 of those accounts, but the rest remained. When U.S. TODAY inquired about the accounts, Twitter removed nearly all of them for violating its rules.

Between January and June 2021, Twitter says it suspended 44,974 accounts under its violent organizations policy, which encompasses Proud Boys and dozens of other movements and groups.

"The conduct these groups engage in and/or promote jeopardizes the well-being of those targeted, and compromises the safety of our service," the company told U.S. TODAY in a statement.

Twitter uses a mix of artificial intelligence and human moderation to detect accounts that violate its rules. It did not say why it allowed dozens of accounts with "Proud Boy" in the bio, had "Proud Boy" as part of the account's Twitter handle or used hashtags associated with the Proud Boys.

"Knowing what is on their platform is Twitter's business model. What

they are selling is knowledge of what is happening on their platform," said Jared Holt, resident fellow at Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab. "So this idea that, you know, Twitter can't possibly know this is happening, or that this is an unreasonable ask, really strikes me as a cop out."

U.S. TODAY found the Proud Boys account by following one account, then looking at who that account was retweeting and who they were following. Within minutes, anybody with a basic knowledge of the Proud Boys can start finding accounts promoting the group.

After following accounts promoting the Proud Boys, Twitter also recommended similar accounts and recommended groups adjacent to the Proud Boys, like an account connected to the movement "White Lives Matter."

"I think the fact that people could have 'Proud Boy' in their bio, flaunting their affiliation with a violent extremist group, and still be welcomed on the platform really tells you all you need to know," Todd said. "Twitter is just an incredibly powerful, moneyed company. You don't work at Twitter, and yet you had to do the work of being like: 'Hey, these guys are explicitly violent extremists, maybe they should get off the platform.' If you can do it, they can do it."

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