

FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION Washington, DC 20463

February 24, 2022

<u>CERTIFIED MAIL</u> <u>RETURN RECEIPT REQUESTED</u> AND ELECTRONI<u>C MAIL</u>

Matthew Rafat

Campbell, CA 95008-3804

RE: MUR 7829 Twitter, Inc.

Dear Mr. Rafat:

On February 15, 2022, the Federal Election Commission reviewed the allegations in your complaint dated October 21, 2020, and found that on the basis of the information provided in your complaint, and information provided by Twitter, Inc., there is no reason to believe Twitter, Inc. violated 52 U.S.C. § 30118(a) and 11 C.F.R. § 114.2(b). Accordingly, on February 15, 2022, the Commission closed its file in this matter.

Documents related to the case will be placed on the public record within 30 days. *See* Disclosure of Certain Documents in Enforcement and Other Matters, 81 Fed. Reg. 50,702 (Aug. 2, 2016). The Factual and Legal Analysis, which more fully explains the Commission's finding is enclosed.

The Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, as amended, allows a complainant to seek judicial review of the Commission's dismissal of this action. *See* 52 U.S.C. § 30109(a)(8).

If you have any questions, please contact Christine C. Gallagher, the attorney assigned to this matter, at (202) 694-1650.

Sincerely,

Lisa J. Stevenson Acting General Counsel

Ana J. Pena-Wallace

BY: Ana J. Peña-Wallace Acting Assistant General Counsel

Enclosure Factual and Legal Analysis

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FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION FACTUAL AND LEGAL ANALYSIS

4 **RESPONDENT:** Twitter, Inc. **MUR:** 7829

6 I. INTRODUCTION

7 This matter was generated by a Complaint filed with the Federal Election Commission by 8 Matthew Rafat, a Twitter user, alleging that Twitter, Inc. ("Twitter") violated the Federal 9 Election Campaign Act of 1971, as amended (the "Act"), by making a prohibited in-kind 10 corporate contribution to the presidential campaigns of Joseph Biden and Donald Trump during 11 the 2020 election when it locked his account. Rafat is a self-described "amateur journalist... promoting the attempts of any minor party to gain at least 5% of the national vote."¹ On October 12 13 9, 2020, Twitter temporarily suspended his account and required him to input verifying personal 14 information following his use of the term "Uncle Tom" in the context of what Rafat describes as an academic conversation with another Twitter user.² Rafat asserts that Twitter intentionally 15 mislabeled his language as hate speech to justify a "pretextual suspension," in an attempt to 16 17 shield both Biden and Trump "from negative news coverage by muzzling independent voices."³ 18 Twitter denies the allegations, arguing that its actions to suspend Rafat's account were in 19 accordance with its widespread efforts to combat malicious activity and not for the purpose of 20 influencing a federal election.⁴ More specifically, Twitter asserts that it determined Rafat's use 21 of the term "Uncle Tom" was a violation of its Hateful Conduct Policy and initiated a 12-hour

¹ Compl. at 1-2 (Oct. 21, 2020); *id.*, Attach. at 6-11, 14-15.

² Compl. at 1-2; *id.*, Attach. at 3-4 (Screenshot of Twitter restriction of @matthewrafat: "Your account, @matthewrafat has been locked for violating the Twitter Rules"); *id.* at 5 (Screenshot of Twitter restriction of @matthewrafat: "An update regarding your account"); *id.* at 8-9 (Screenshot of @davidminpdx Oct. 6, 2020 tweet, showing @matthewrafat's reply deleted by Twitter: "This Tweet violated the Twitter Rules.").

³ Compl. at 3-4.

⁴ Resp. at 1 (Dec. 14, 2020).

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1 suspension of his account, requiring him to remove the offending tweet, which Rafat has not done.⁵ Twitter asserts that it undertook these actions to "protect the overall quality of the 2 discourse on its platform."⁶ Twitter states that, "[i]f Mr. Rafat removes that Tweet, Twitter will 3 4 unlock his account and he can resume communicating on the platform."7 5 As discussed below, while there might be a question whether Twitter correctly interpreted 6 Rafat's language as hate speech, in context, there is nothing to suggest that Twitter otherwise 7 acted for the purpose of influencing a federal election. Twitter has credibly stated that its actions 8 were motived by commercial interests, and there is no suggestion that Twitter coordinated with 9 any candidate or campaign. Accordingly, there is no reason to believe Twitter violated 10 52 U.S.C. § 30118(a) and 11 C.F.R. § 114.2(b). 11 II. FACTUAL BACKGROUND 12 Incorporated in Delaware in April 2007, Twitter is a web-based social networking 13 platform, and describes itself as "a free service that allows users to publicly communicate in 14 messages of up to 280 characters – regardless of the substantive content of the communication."⁸ 15 Twitter asserts that its purpose is to "bolster the public conversation," and that it stands for "freedom of expression," and the principal that "every voice has the power to impact the 16 world."9 According to Twitter, all 100 senators, 50 governors, and nearly every member of 17

⁵ *Id.* at 1-2, 8.

⁶ *Id.* at 11.

⁷ *Id.* at 2.

⁸ Id.

⁹ *Id.* at 3, nn.10-12 (citing Twitter, *The Twitter Rules*, <u>https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/twitter-rules/</u>; Bridget Coyne, *Empowering Freedom of Expression for National Voter Registration Day*, TWITTER: BLOG, Sept. 27, 2017, https://blog.twitter.com/official/en_us/topics/events/2017/national-voter-reg-day-2017.html/; Twitter, *Our Values*, <u>https://about.twitter.com/en_us/values.html/</u>).

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1	congress reach their constituents through Twitter accounts, and that "conservatives, in particular
2	hav[e] a strong presence on Twitter," and that [t]hird parties are also prominent on the platform
3	and often turn to Twitter to get their message out when other means are not available."10
4	Matthew Rafat is a Twitter user, @matthewrafat, and describes himself as "an
5	unaffiliated individual and amateur journalist" and "long-time active commentator on local and
6	national politics" and states that he "writes from the perspective of a third party supporter, <i>i.e.</i> ,
7	promoting the attempts of any minor party to gain at least 5% of the national vote." ¹¹ Rafat also
8	states that he is hearing-impaired since birth and uses Twitter on his laptop, not a mobile app,
9	and is "wary" of giving out his mobile number due to "not having a mobile amplifier." ¹²
10	On October 6, 2020, Rafat tweeted the following response to another user's tweet asking
11	for suggestions on terms to describe sympathizers with foreign colonizers: "@davidminpdx
12	Uncle Tom. In one of Malcolm X's speeches, he calls the Chinese Revolution a Revolution
13	against Uncle Tom Chinese." ¹³ On October 7, Rafat live blogged the 2020 U.S. Vice-
14	Presidential debate on his Twitter page, and states that around the same time he posted a link on
15	the Twitter page of the Christian Science Monitor to a blog post he wrote that was critical of

¹⁰ *Id.* at 2-3, nn.7-9 (citing *Twitter: Transparency and Accountability: Hearing before the H. Comm. on Energy and Commerce*, 115th Cong. (2018) (Testimony of Jack Dorsey, Chief Executive Officer, Twitter, Inc. at 2, 6), https://docs.house.gov/meetings/IF/IF00/20180905/108642/HHRG-115-IF00-Wstate-DorseyJ-20180905.pdf/; Jessica Gregory, *Third-party Candidates Voice Disapproval as They're Excluded from Televised Debates*, WSUM.ORG, Sept. 28, 2020, https://wsum.org/2020/09/28/third-party-candidates-voice-disapproval-as-theyreexcluded-from-televised-debates/

¹¹ Compl. at 2.

¹² *Id.* at 3, Attach. at 2 (Ltr. from Matthew Rafat, to Vijaya Venkata Gadde, Twitter, Inc., appealing Twitter locking him out of his account) (Oct. 9, 2020)).

¹³ Compl. at 1-2, Attach. at 8-9 (Screenshot of @davidminpdx Oct. 6, 2020 tweet, showing @matthewrafat's reply deleted by Twitter: "This Tweet violated the Twitter Rules."). The Response asserts that Rafat's "Uncle Tom" reply tweet occurred on October 8. Resp. at 8. However, the Complaint attached a screen shot of the reply tweet with the date October 6, 2020. Compl. at Attach. at 3-4 (Screenshot of Twitter restriction of @matthewrafat: "Your account, @matthewrafat has been locked for violating the Twitter Rules").

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Biden.¹⁴ On October 9, Twitter alerted Rafat via email that his use of the term "Uncle Tom" in
 his October 6 tweet violated Twitter's Hateful Conduct Policy and suspended Rafat's account for
 12 hours.¹⁵

4 By letter dated October 9, Rafat appealed the temporary suspension stating that the timing of the suspension after he live-blogged the vice presidential debate indicated that 5 6 Twitter's actions were a pretext to "prevent independent political commentary" and "mitigate competition from independent sources."¹⁶ In response to Rafat's letter, Twitter issued a decision 7 8 stating that it reviewed his appeal, and that its support team confirmed that he violated Twitter's rules against hateful conduct.¹⁷ The decision further informed Rafat that he could resolve the 9 violations by logging into his account and completing online instructions.¹⁸ Rafat states that one 10 11 of these instructions was a requirement to enter his mobile telephone number to receive a text message with a confirmation code, but that he refused to comply.¹⁹ He states: "Until October 9, 12 13 2020, I was never required to enter or submit a mobile number in order to reach my followers or

¹⁹ Compl. at 1.

¹⁴ Compl. at 3; *see also* Matthew Rafat, *Joe Biden: America's Golden Retriever*, WILLWORKFORJUSTICE. BLOGSPOT.COM (June 3, 2020 (<u>https://willworkforjustice.blogspot.com/2020/06/joe-biden-americas-golden-retriever.html</u>) (blog post written by Rafat).

¹⁵ Compl. at 2, Attach. at 3-4 (Screenshot of Twitter restriction of @matthewrafat: "Your account, @matthewrafat has been locked for violating the Twitter Rules"); Attach. at 8-9 (Screenshot of @davidminpdx Oct. 6, 2020 tweet, showing @matthewrafat's reply deleted by Twitter: "This Tweet violated the Twitter Rules"); Resp. at 8 & n.58 (citing Twitter, *Hateful Conduct Policy*, <u>https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/hateful-conduct-policy</u>).

¹⁶ *Id.* at 1,3, Attach. at 2 (Ltr. from Matthew Rafat, to Vijaya Venkata Gadde, Twitter, Inc. (appealing Twitter locking him out of his account) (Oct. 9, 2020)).

¹⁷ Compl., Attach. at 5 (Screenshot Twitter restriction of @matthewrafat: "An update regarding your account").

¹⁸ *Id.*; Resp. at 8.

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the public...... I have been severely hearing impaired since birth and am wary of giving out a
 mobile number to anyone due to not having a mobile amplifier."²⁰

3 The Complaint alleges that Twitter's actions in suspending Rafat's account and asking 4 him to provide a mobile phone number constituted a prohibited in-kind corporate contribution to the Biden and Trump campaigns.²¹ The Complaint argues that Twitter prevents third party 5 6 supporters from using social media platforms "to promote independent political commentary" 7 and "substantially harms the ability of third party supporters... to reach an audience[,]" thus 8 benefitting both Democratic and Republican candidates.²² 9 Twitter asserts that its actions in response to Rafat's tweet were undertaken for business 10 reasons to regulate the quality of the content on its platform, and not to influence a federal election.²³ Twitter asserts that it has a commercial interest in detecting and minimizing abusive 11 12 and manipulative behavior on its platform.²⁴ Twitter's Hateful Conduct Policy states in pertinent 13 part: "Repeated and/or non-consensual slurs, epithets, racist and sexist tropes, or other content 14 that degrades someone. We prohibit targeting individuals with repeated slurs, tropes or other 15 content that intends to dehumanize, degrade or reinforce negative or harmful stereotypes about a

16 protected category."²⁵ Twitter states that compliance with its Hateful Conduct Policy is

17 "critical" to its commercial success because corporations and advertisers have indicated that they

- ²³ Resp. at 5.
- ²⁴ *Id.* at 4.

²⁵ *Id.* at 5, n.29 (citing Twitter, *Hateful Conduct Policy*, <u>https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/hateful-conduct-policy</u>). The factors that Twitter states it takes into account when determining a penalty for violating this policy include, the severity of the violation and the individual's previous record on rule violations). *Id.* at 5.

²⁰ *Id.* at 1, 3.

²¹ *Id.* at 2.

²² *Id.* at 2-4.

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1 will only work with companies like Twitter if they permit "responsible content" to improve consumer ad experiences.²⁶ Twitter also asserts that on other occasions it has taken action 2 3 against other users on its platform for use of the same term for which is suspended Rafat's 4 account.²⁷ Twitter states that Rafat could immediately regain his account by complying with 5 Twitter's instructions and entering the required information.²⁸ 6 III. LEGAL ANALYSIS

7 The Act prohibits corporations from making contributions to federal candidates, and

8 likewise bars candidates, political committees (other than independent expenditure-only political

9 committees and committees with hybrid accounts), and other persons, from knowingly accepting

10 or receiving corporate contributions.²⁹

- Under the Act, a "contribution" includes "any gift, subscription, loan, advance, or deposit 11
- 12 of money or anything of value made by any person for the purpose of influencing any election

²⁶ Id. at 5-6, nn.30-40.

²⁷ Id. at 8, n.57 (citing Elie Mystal, That Time I Got Suspended on Twitter For Calling Kanve West an 'Uncle Tom' and Other Things, ABOVETHELAW.COM, May 2, 2018, https://abovethelaw.com/2018/05/that-time-i-gotsuspended-on-twitter-for-calling-kanye-west-an-uncle-tom-and-other-things/;Tanasia Kenney, Sportscaster Who Called Sen. Tim Scott 'Uncle Tom' Is Out of a Job, CT Station Says, THE STATE, Oct. 2, 2020, https://www.thestate.com/news/nation-world/national/article246172055.html (explaining that an Emmy-winning sportscaster was firedfor an "Uncle Tom" Tweet critical of Senator Tim Scott)).

²⁸ Id. at 8. Twitter states that it previously suspended Rafat's account from September 21 through 23, 2020, for "spam-like behavior" detected by its algorithm, and required Rafat to supply "information sufficient enough for Twitter to authenticate his account and restore access." Id. Twitter asserts that it has a commercial interest in determining which accounts are engaging in spam-like behavior and which accounts might be controlled by bots, rather than humans. Id. at 4 (citing Yoel Roth and Del Harvey, How Twitter Is Fighting Spam and Malicious Automation, Twitter: Blog (June 26, 2018), https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2018/how-twitter-isfighting-spam-and-malicious-automation.html; Jack Dorsey (@jack), Twitter (Mar. 1, 2018, 10:33 A.M.), https://twitter.com/jack/status/969234279321419776 (explaining that "harassment, troll armies, manipulation through bots and human-coordination, misinformation campaigns, and increasingly divisive echo chambers" are receiving particular attention at Twitter)).

²⁹ 52 U.S.C. § 30118(a); 11 C.F.R. § 114.2(a), (d).

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1	for Federal office. ³⁰ The term "anything of value" includes "all in-kind contributions." ³¹ In-
2	kind contributions include "coordinated expenditures," that is, expenditures "made by any person
3	in cooperation, consultation or in concert, with, or at the request or suggestion of, a candidate,
4	his [or her] authorized committees, or their agents." ³² A communication is coordinated and thus
5	treated as an in-kind contribution when it is: (1) paid for by a third-party; (2) satisfies one of five
6	content standards; and (3) satisfies one of five conduct standards. ³³ In-kind contributions also
7	include "provision of any goods or services without charge or at a charge that is less than the
8	usual and normal charge for such goods or services."34
9	The Commission has concluded that a commercial vendor providing services to political
10	committees will not make a contribution for the purpose of influencing an election when its
11	business activity "reflects commercial considerations and does not reflect considerations outside
12	of a business relationship." ³⁵ A commercial vendor need not make its services available to
13	committees representing all political ideologies, but rather may establish objective business
14	criteria to protect commercial viability of its business without making contributions to the
15	committees that meet those criteria. ³⁶ The Commission has long considered activity engaged in

³⁰ 52 U.S.C. § 30101(8)(A); 11 C.F.R. § 100.52.

³³ 11 C.F.R. § 109.21(a).

³⁴ *Id.* § 100.52(d) (listing examples of goods or services, such as securities, facilities, equipment, supplies, personnel, advertising services, membership lists, and mailing lists).

³⁵ Advisory Opinion 2012-31 at 4 (AT&T).

³⁶ Advisory Opinion 2017-06 (Stein & Gottlieb) at 6 ("[A] commercial vendor, providing services to political committees . . . need not make its services available to committees representing all political ideologies, but rather may establish objective business criteria to protect the commercial viability of its business without making contributions to the committees that meet those criteria."); Advisory Opinion 2004-06 at 1 (Meetup) (explaining that a corporation may provide goods and services to political committees without being considered to have made an in-kind contribution so long as it does so "on the same terms and conditions available to all similarly situated persons

³¹ 11 C.F.R. § 100.52(d).

³² 52 U.S.C. § 30116(a)(7)(B); 11 C.F.R. § 109.20.

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1 for *bona fide* commercial reasons not to be "for the purpose of influencing an election," and thus,

- 2 not a contribution or expenditure under section 30118(a).³⁷ This is true even if a candidate
- ³ benefitted from the commercial activity.³⁸

4 Here, Twitter has credibly asserted that the actions it undertook against Rafat, that is,

5 suspending his account for 12 hours and requiring him to enter verifying information, reflect

6 *bona fide* commercial interests and were not undertaken for the purpose of influencing any

7 federal election. Specifically, Twitter asserts that malicious content, spam, and inauthentic

8 accounts disrupt the user experience on its platform and that such abusive behavior can harm

- 9 advertising revenue.³⁹ Twitter states that it implemented policies to combat such activities, *e.g.*,
- 10 hate speech, for business reasons.⁴⁰ While Twitter's application of its Hateful Conduct Policy

11 seems somewhat questionable here, given that Rafat was apparently using the term in the context

³⁹ Resp. at 5, 8; *see supra* notes 24-28 and accompanying text.

in the general public"); Advisory Opinion 2012-26 at 10 (Cooper for Congress, *et al.*) (concluding that no contribution to committee resulted where its participation in a text message fundraising program was subject to "objective and . . . commercially reasonable" criteria).

³⁷ See, e.g., Factual & Legal Analysis at 4, MUR 6586 (World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc.) (finding that WWE acted with the "sole intent to defend its business reputation" and not for the purpose of influencing an election when WWE's senior vice president sent a letter to a newspaper seeking a retraction of a negative article about Senate candidate Linda McMahon, who owned and served as CEO of WWE); First Gen. Counsel's Rpt. at 13 & Cert. ¶ 1 (June 7, 2005), MUR 5474 (Dog Eat Dog Films, *et al.*) (approving no reason to believe recommendation) (determining that distributors and marketers of *Fahrenheit 9/11* film did so "in connection with *bona fide* commercial activity and not for the purpose of influencing an election"); Advisory Opinion 2018-11 at 4 (Microsoft Corp.) (concluding that commercially reasonable efforts "to protect [Microsoft's] brand reputation" by providing election-sensitive customers with free account security services are not an in-kind contribution).

³⁸ See First Gen. Counsel's Rpt. at 16 & Cert. ¶ 5 (June 6, 1994), MUR 3622 (The Clinton/Gore '92 Committee) (approving no reason to believe recommendation); First Gen. Counsel's Rpt. at 16, MUR 3622 (The Clinton/Gore '92 Committee) ("[T]he fact that any of these candidates . . . may have received an indirect benefit (dissemination of their political positions) as a result of the sale of these tapes does not convert commercial activity into a corporate contribution."); Factual & Legal Analysis at 6, MUR 7024 (Van Hollen for Senate, *et al.*) (opining that the "question under the Act is whether the legal services were provided for the purpose of influencing a federal election, not whether they provided a benefit to Van Hollen's campaign," and concluding there was no contribution given the "absence of any objective or subjective indication" respondents acted for the purpose of influencing the election); *See Supra* discussion page 5 line 16 through page 6 line 13.

⁴⁰ Resp. at 8.

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of a legitimate discussion and did not "direct" the term at anyone, other than the person seeking
responses to an academic question, there is still no information to suggest that Twitter's actions
were for the purpose of influencing an election.

4 Indeed, there is no specific factual information in the Complaint or elsewhere to support 5 the Complaint's assertion that Twitter's decision to suspend Rafat's account was "pretext" to 6 shield Biden or Trump from negative news coverage or that the suspension was related to his coverage of the vice presidential debate the day before.⁴¹ The Complaint asserts that "someone 7 8 partial to either the Biden or Trump campaign went hunting for a reason to suspend my account 9 in order to prevent independent political commentary," but does not provide any support other 10 than his claim that the suspension was unwarranted and the existence of an allegation in another matter that Twitter has suppressed news articles critical of Biden.⁴² Without more, the claim that 11 12 Twitter acted to silence Rafat's political commentary rather than enforce its content policies is 13 speculative. In any event, the fact that Twitter's suspension of Rafat's account was for 12 hours 14 undercuts the Complaint's assertion that Twitter's actions equated to "muzzling independent 15 voices," since Rafat would have been permitted to quickly resume his coverage of the election.⁴³ 16 Although the Complaint argues that, given Rafat's accessibility issues, this resulted in a *de facto* 17 permanent suspension, it does not appear that Twitter was aware of his situation or the effects of the verification requirement.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the Complaint does not allege, and there is no other 18

⁴¹ See Compl. at 2.

⁴² *Id.* at 3 (referring to allegations made by the Republican National Committee that Twitter suppressed articles from the *New York Post* regarding Biden's son from being shared on its platform).

⁴³ See Resp. at 8; Compl. at 4.

⁴⁴ See Compl. at 1; Resp. at 8; see also supra note 28 (indicating that, in response to a prior suspension for "spam-like behavior," Rafat supplied "information sufficient enough for Twitter to authenticate his account"). As noted above, Rafat does not state that his accessibility issues prevent him from supplying a mobile phone number for

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1	information to reasonably suggest, that Twitter's actions against Rafat were coordinated with any
2	candidate or committee. Absent coordination, there does not appear to be any basis to conclude
3	that Twitter's actions, even if they had been for the purpose of influencing a federal election,
4	constituted in-kind contributions to Biden or Trump.
5	In conclusion, the available information does not reasonably suggest Twitter engaged in
6	any activities for the purpose of influencing a federal election or coordinated with any candidate
7	or committee. Accordingly, there is no reason to believe that Twitter, Inc. violated 52 U.S.C.

8 § 30118(a) and 11 C.F.R. § 114.2(b) by making prohibited in-kind corporate contributions.

the purposes of receiving a text message with a confirmation code, which is the purpose for which Twitter requires that Rafat submit a mobile number to access his account, but rather that he is "wary of giving out a mobile number to anyone due to not having a mobile amplifier." Compl. at 3. As of the date of this Report, Rafat apparently has not complied with Twitter's requirements given there is no activity on his account since before the suspension. Mateo (@matthewrafat), TWITTER, <u>https://twitter.com/matthewrafat</u> (last visited Aug. 12, 2021).