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## **The Emergence of the Shallow State and the Capturing of Twitter**

### **Abstract**

Tech billionaire Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter for political messaging toward ideological factionalization is well documented. Less documented are the uses of Twitter data for ideological surveillance, state persecution of US citizens and non-citizens, and abuses of power. Where Twitter once encouraged collective indexing (hashtagging) of public deliberation, Musk's reshaping of Twitter into X and the ensuing enshittification emerged in a milieu of platform consolidation and privatization of US national security systems, including through partnerships with surveillance and data management companies like Palantir Technologies. The Twitter Ads connector for Palantir Foundry combines data from social media posts to generate detailed profiles of individuals. Federal agencies such as the US Department of Homeland Security and the US Department of State use these profiles to construct evidence for use in criminal and civil investigations of travelers, immigrants, and political dissidents. In this environment of large-scale privatized data processing, X/Twitter posts are repurposed for repressive objectives. Musk's capture of X/Twitter represents a key development in the emergence of an oligarchical *Shallow State*, which utilizes these mechanisms to amplify ideological control while ostracizing critics.

### **Introduction: A Shift Toward the 'Dark Enlightenment'**

In 2007, Jack Dorsey, Biz Stone, Evan Williams, and Noah Glass launched Twitter as a platform for open and public conversations. In 2022, Elon Musk, CEO of Tesla, SpaceX, and founder of The Boring Company, acquired Twitter for forty-four billion dollars. Musk transformed Twitter

into X, which we argue has evolved into a component of a greater surveillance assemblage and an ideological tool for oligarchical governance. The acquisition was a watershed moment in a global trend toward consolidated command of integral digital infrastructure by a wealthy few. It is in part an outcome of a burgeoning ideology—the Dark Enlightenment—which activates through the neo-reactionary (NRx) political movement. NRx adherents propose that liberal democracies, such as the United States (US), should be ruled by an elite techno-industrialist class, and not through elected officials or the consent of the governed (Siegel, 2022).

Musk's strategic transformation of Twitter into X took place amid a push by prominent Silicon Valley figures against tech regulation. Among these, Peter Thiel, the venture capitalist and co-founder of Paypal and Palantir, forecasts the collapse of democracy as a stable mode of government. Thiel evokes notions of the Anti-Christ in his public speeches (Caldararo, 2025; Durán, 2025) while espousing the view that the high-earning industrialist and entrepreneur class in liberal democracies ought to strategize exit as a means of evading government regulation of their ventures, funds, and properties. This agenda echoes nihilist philosopher Nick Land and political blogger Curtis Yarvin ideology of anti-egalitarian, anti-humanist, and anti-democratic concepts that resonated with Silicon Valley entrepreneurs. The ideas held sway with US businessman Donald J. Trump's 2024 presidential campaign, with key figures like Elon Musk offering financial and ideological support for Trump's Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement.

While Yarvin is credited for initiating NRx, others have expanded upon and enacted the internal technocratic logics. Coinbase chief technology officer and Counsyl founder Balaji Srinivasan's (2022) free e-book *The Network State: How to Start a New Country* is an aspirational implementation of this ideology. It provides a blueprint for a decentralized private

federation of communities, with the Próspera initiative backed by Peter Thiel and Marc Andreessen in Honduras offering an example of the ultra-wealthy residence in island-like enclaves with bunkers and resort-style amenities. The associated [Network School](#) offers a training program for situating labor, systems, and funds for corporate entities beyond the reach of democratic accountability. Through colonial rule, ideologues and corporate leaders of techno-industries generate new institutions within existing democracies, including social classes and norms, that produce a more pervasive, privatized technocratic surveillance apparatus under their control. Meanwhile, their privatized communities gain, in their view, status as quasi-sovereign entities with capital, corporate power, military, and the political might to acquire sources of capital locked within larger nation-states without being tied to taxation or regulatory burdens. Venture capital and crypto-governance become turnkeys for ‘startup nations’ where capital is the ultimate sovereign, rule is by conquest, and citizenship is offered through subscription (Srinivasan, 2022).

### **The Action: Techno-Industrialists Refuse and Remove Local Expertise**

In the 1990s, right-wing political pundits and conspiracy theorists imagined a US Deep State: a permanent expert-led bureaucracy of secretive contractors and intelligence operatives running the US federal government. One of Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign promises was to destroy the Deep State by “draining the swamp.” When elected in 2024, President Trump assigned Elon Musk a position as a special government employee charged with recommending massive budget and program cuts to public and federal services through the newly created US Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). DOGE took aim at the alleged wastefulness of an expert-led civil service, with far-reaching outcomes for key programs such as USAID, the Centers for

Disease Control, and the US Department of Education. In contrast to the imagined Deep State narratives, the US executive branch projects an emerging Shallow State. Ideologues, technocrats, government leaders, and the supporting base express disdain for institutional depth, expertise, and liberal democratic norms (Starbird, DiResta, & DeButts, 2023). This emerging form of leadership employs extensive measures of narrative control (Schack, 2025) and destructive emotional appeals (Phillips, 2025). These institutions also weaponize social media data, including X user data, and govern (Moynihan, 2026) alongside private security contractors generating deceptive narratives from disparate datasets.

Musk's transformation of Twitter into X reveals infrastructural aspects of this new power structure. These aspects include technocratic control of major social media platforms, with privatized intelligence corporations like Palantir nesting within networks of affiliated companies, many of which have contracts and ties to government agencies. Government agencies like the US Department of Homeland Security, the State Department, and the Internal Revenue Service are charged with implementing searchable super-networks of individuals and citizens for the purpose of censorship, deportation, and maintenance of oligarchical control. X becomes one source among many for surveillance data as well as content to manipulate public sentiment. In keeping with the Dark Enlightenment, the actions of the techno-industrialists are parasitic of government institutions, as subsidiary companies and corporations take lucrative government contracts that had previously been the responsibility of experienced and dedicated civil servants.

### **The Technocracy: Growing a New Ruling Social Class**

NRx technocrats are skeptical of modern democracy. Figures such as venture capitalist Marc Andreessen, Peter Thiel, and Elon Musk value authoritarian policies and laws that work in favor

of their consolidation of power. This class of technocrats have come to experience democracy as a brake on their vision of economic freedom and on the hyper-capitalist potential of those in their exclusive social network. This is embodied in Thiel's assertion of 2009 that freedom is no longer compatible with democracy (Caldararo, 2025). In 2025, Andreessen asserted that AI regulation is an existential threat, and likened democratic regulation to soft authoritarianism targeting pro-growth technologists (Fridman, 2025). NRx technocrats believe that the path to progress lies not in political reform, but in the satiation of their desires to accelerate technological growth in unregulated and unsupervised locales (Robinson, 2024).

Srinivasan's *Network State* offers paths for establishing this new technocratic political body. Territoriality is inspired by micronations that declared sovereignty on disputed land, offshore platforms occupied by eccentric activists, and sea-steading and semi-permanent cruise ship inhabitants in international waters. Network state citizens seek autonomy from nation-state rule while retaining social capital and military might. Possession of routes through the supra-territories of space (orbits, missions, launches, and spacecrafts) are key to acquisition of this level of autonomy. Dark Enlightenment ideologues view space as a set of infrastructures (satellites, funds, zones, grids, access points, and military bases) through which privatized information flows (web traffic, geolocation information, astronomical information, environmental information, and design processes) can be combined with government intelligence to reboot the social contract in their favor. The network state concept is embodied in digital-first Charter Cities—private communities with separate legal codes in developing nations—that crowdfund territories, establish recognition among like-minded citizens, and provide terrain for legal and political experimentation (Durán, 2026; Srinivasan, 2022).

This drive for a technocratic sovereignty is inextricably linked to the personal ambitions of figures like Musk, who views government regulation as a primary obstacle to his projects in space travel, neurotechnology, autonomous vehicles, and public opinion management (Durán, 2025). Musk's recurrent tweeting of *vox populi, vox dei* (the voice of the people is the voice of God) to justify arbitrary policy changes exemplifies the techno-authoritarian mindset whereby the supreme ruler voices the will of the people by making absolute decisions (Ibled, 2025). Musk's authoritarian politics differ from Thiel's neo-Christian eschatological framework, but they converge into a pragmatic alliance devoted to freedom from regulation (Ibled, 2025). Such alliances position a loyalist elite to manage popular discourse while influencing national security decisions through platforms and infrastructures rather than through, respectively, government agencies and an independent press.

This is clear in the Shallow State strategic shrinking of federal government while expanding its surveillance capacity. Musk's goal through DOGE in the US was the removal of adjudication and regulatory checks on the NRx technocracy's power. By hollowing out the state's ability to regulate technology, finance, and public administration, the technocracy ensures that the only remaining robust infrastructures are the systems they own. This model of governance parallels Chinese governmental structures consolidating power in the hands of leaders who 'leapfrog' traditional regulatory hurdles toward the next technological stage. Like the Chinese Communist Party, the technocracy of Musk, Thiel, and their associates does not have to trade increased scale for increased accountability. They employ dual-class share systems and other corporate governance structures to maintain personal control over platforms performing integral social and economic infrastructural functions. This renders their power transnational, and nearly impervious to national economic regulations (Durán, 2026).

## **Narrative Control: The Enshittification of Twitter, then X**

The transformation of Twitter into X is an example of the Shallow State's influence on the digital public commons. Musk 'enshittified' Twitter by systematically degrading user value in favor of corporate value extraction and ideological alignment (Doctorow, 2025). Enshittification is a trajectory common to many social media platforms. It begins by supporting user contributions to the public commons (Ostrom, 1990), usually through substantive venture capital in early iterations of the platform. Once users are committed to the platform and critical mass is achieved, the executive leadership of the platform shift the platform design, functionality, and brand to capture user contributions for financial or ideological ends (Walker, Mercea, & Bastos, 2019). Once competitors are eliminated and network effects ensure the high costs for users to switch platforms, the company begins abusing its users, catering to business customers or, in the case of Twitter, the whims of the technocracy (Doctorow, 2025).

For Twitter, this entailed the dismantlement of trust and safety teams, algorithmic promotion of divisive political narratives and users, and downranking of features that once encouraged diverse public conversation and social indexing, such as the hashtag. This process is not a failure of business strategy, but rather a realignment of the platform's utility from public discussion to political factionalization and surveillance of beliefs and values (Bastos, 2025). The resulting platform no longer facilitates open if contentious discourse. It instead functions as an information clearinghouse for narrative control. This degradation is however aligned with the Shallow State rhetorics, as the enshittified platform discourages meaningful public engagement and the institutional memory required for effective democratic resistance. By degrading the deliberative mechanisms of web-based public discussion, platforms like X ensure a curt,

superficial, reactive, and easily manipulated public discourse. As such, the public perception of Twitter's 'decay' is a contradiction only in appearance. The decay is part of the process that increases its utility as a tool for targeted ideological compliance and surveillance (Hubbard, 2025).

### **The Power Structure: The Mechanisms of the Shallow State**

We employ the term the *Shallow State* to characterize the power structure that has emerged in response to the imagined Deep State of prior eras of US federal government. While the Deep State is a creature of institutional memory, regard for tradition and bureaucratic expertise, the Shallow State encourage disdain for specialized skills and institutional legacies (Ernst, 2018; Pfiffner, 2022). The Shallow State operates through infrastructures that are formally visible but substantively opaque, much like X's mechanisms of governance. The Shallow State's nervous system is comprised of captured social platforms, and an advanced, privatized surveillance infrastructure designed to monitor, weaponize, and suppress dissent with unprecedented precision and speed. The shifting ideological composition of the Shallow State is an outcome of its adherents' real-time monitoring of the latest trends and developments in the governing political body.

Thiel's [Palantir](#) Technologies represents a key component of the Shallow State's surveillance apparatus. [Palantir](#) is a company that develops sophisticated data processing systems and user interfaces. This includes [Foundry](#), a system used by government agencies to integrate social media data with local law enforcement, the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and intelligence records. Palantir's growth is predicated on its ability to turn messy, large data into 'actionable intelligence,' including dashboards for assembling case files on potential

offenders and bystanders. Untrammelled by laws protecting immigrants and citizens, these are used by DHS officers and federal prosecutors to enact mass surveillance and state repression. One of the tools in this ecosystem is the ‘Twitter Ads Connector’ for [Foundry](#). This tool processes data embedded in X/Twitter posts to generate detailed profiles of individuals (Palantir, 2024). It is part of a super-network enabling users to monitor individual behaviors, map social networks, and identify dissidents in near real-time.

[Foundry](#) also employs Media Set Syncs to track protest activity, and the scalable processing of unstructured data like images and videos for facial recognition using AI-powered Spark profiles. [Palantir’s Gotham platform](#), including the FALCON database (Foreign Arrest and Liaison Communication Operations Network) supports US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) by aggregating large amounts of personal data with link analysis and social network mapping to identify individuals tangentially associated with alleged criminal activity. These systems are integrated with ImmigrationOS, which targets and prioritizes individuals for deportation, and Data Connection Agent Workers, snippets of software running on host machines to securely connect to external source systems for data ingestion and monitoring tasks across networks, ensuring around-the-clock surveillance of social media ‘leads’ (Hubbard, 2025).

DHS and ICE rely on private contractors beyond Palantir. [Babel Street](#) represents another important cog in the machinery of the Shallow State. These companies do not merely provide tools; they provide the architecture that shapes enforcement outcomes. [Babel Street Insights](#) platform (formerly Babel X) uses AI to scan social media for sentiment and intent, flagging individuals for visa revocation based on probabilistic assessments that have a high margin of error. This privatization of national security is reportedly tied to key individuals of Trump’s administration, including Stephen Miller, the architect of restrictive immigration policies. His

position in this exclusive social network underscores how the Shallow State establishes mechanisms that condition the public to accept forms of governance that bypass deliberation, legality, and democratic accountability (Silicon Valley Sociological Review, 2025).

Indeed, the ‘Catch and Revoke’ program of the US State Department relied on Babel X to scan for content that the US administration deemed ‘terrorism-related’ or antisemitic, conflating peaceful protest with criminal activity. Much like the close relationship between X/Twitter and Palantir, Babel Street Insights, the core software platform used by government and law enforcement for open-source intelligence (OSINT), combines AI-powered social media monitoring with automated threat assessments to revoke the visas of foreign individuals, including international students. High profile cases include the targeting of Mahmoud Khalil, a Columbia University graduate student detained following social media surveillance, and Rumeysa Ozturk, a Tufts University PhD student whose visa was revoked after she co-wrote an opinion piece criticizing the school’s response to the crisis in Gaza. Reports indicate that between 1,800 and 4,000 students have been targeted by this initiative, with a disproportionate impact on those of African, Arab, and Muslim backgrounds (Amnesty International, 2025).

## **Conclusion**

Musk’s takeover of Twitter and its absorption into X Corp is a milestone in the global landscape of post-national state power. It represents the successful capture of a critical piece of communication infrastructure by an oligarchical technocracy that views democracy as an impediment to corporate technological dominance. In this context, the enshittification of X/Twitter is a development in the Shallow State drive to maintain narrative control and ensure that public discourse remains superficial, polarized, and easily manipulated.

Supported by the privatized intelligence systems of Palantir and Babel Street, the Shallow State depends on a surveillant searchable super-network that weaponizes social media data for censorship and criminalization. X/Twitter provides salient, politically relevant, and up-to-date data and content for this security infrastructure. This apparatus is guided by a philosophy of elite ‘startup nations.’ The US State Department Catch and Revoke initiative, in particular, demonstrates the expansion of domestic surveillance and the consequences of this technocratic turn, in which both political expression and migration can lead to banishment, abuse, loss of legal status, and death.

Ultimately, the rise of the Shallow State indicates an attempt to redefine the technological landscape while reshaping governance. By replacing institutional governance with the reactive power of billionaires, the NRx movement threatens to reduce citizenship to a subscription and sovereignty to a product. The erosion of coherence in the public discourse is evident in the decay of meaningful interactions on Twitter, whose prior transparent and generous stance to data access was transformed into an opaque database for privatized surveillance (Bastos, 2025). The challenge for democratic societies is to recognize this ‘bunker mentality’ for what it is: an assault on the principles of public deliberation and accountability that form the bedrock of modern societies.

Finally, the Shallow State poses a challenge to democratic institutions beyond the US jurisdiction. The weaponization of social data by privatized intelligence firms is most consequential outside the US, as non-US nationals have no constitutional protections under American law, and democratic governments worldwide are prevented from regulating platforms and intelligence systems whose legal domicile is deliberately obscured or fragmented across several jurisdictions. On the whole, the operations of the Shallow State are not bound to any

jurisdiction, and user data amassed by systems like Palantir Foundry are global by design. Similarly, the Network State is explicitly designed to escape single regulatory jurisdictions, with early initiatives emerging across several countries, including *Próspera* in the Honduras' Roatán Island; *Nuanu* in Bali, Indonesia; *Zuzalu* in Montenegro; and *Liberland* in the Danube River between Croatia and Serbia.

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