Davos says world must 'wake up to threat from delusional monopolistic tech giants'

Mr Benioff, founder and boss of cloud computing firm Salesforce, believes the tech giants need more regulation

Ben Marlow, IN DAVOS

Silicon Valley billionaire Marc Benioff has compared the current crisis of trust facing the tech giants to the financial crisis of a decade ago, urging regulators to wake up to the threat from Google, Facebook, and the other dominant firms.

The outspoken entrepreneur accused some of the industry's most influential bosses of "abdicating responsibility" and being ignorant to how powerful and sophisticated they had become. Regulators now had "have no choice" but to intervene, he said.

"We are in a new world. A decade ago, you had the banks talking about collaterised debt obligations and credit default swaps, saying they were great for the economy but regulators weren't paying attention. The government needs to come in and point 'True North'," Mr Benioff said at a panel session at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

Ruth Porat, CFO of Alphabet and Google

An Inside Look At The Accounts Twitter Has Censored In Countries Around The World

BuzzFeed News has identified more than 1,700 Twitter accounts that have been blocked in at least one country. The list provides an unprecedented glimpse into Twitter's collaboration with national groups and governments — democratic and authoritarian alike — and provides new details about a surge in blocked accounts in Germany, France, and Turkey.

Craig Silverman
BuzzFeed News Media Editor

Jeremy Singer-Vine
BuzzFeed News Reporter

The second half of 2017 saw an unprecedented number of Twitter accounts banned in Germany and France thanks to an increase in removal requests from governments, NGOs, and other entities, according to data gathered by BuzzFeed News. The data also reveal that demands from the Turkish government have led Twitter to block hundreds of users for what appear to be political reasons.

Twitter refers to the process of blocking accounts (and individual tweets) in specific countries as "withholding." All content from withheld accounts in Germany, for example, cannot be seen by Twitter users in Germany, but remain accessible to all other users.

Twitter regularly publishes a transparency report in which it shares the number of requests received from different governments, as well as from "trusted flaggers/reporters" such as NGOs and other social or industry groups in Europe that help report violations of the EU's Code of Conduct against online hate speech. The company's policy for withholding accounts and tweets says it will take action in response to court orders, or requests from government officials and law enforcement that meet the company's criteria.

Twitter's transparency report lists statistics about accounts and tweets that were withheld — but the company has never published a list of the specific accounts it has muzzled, and it almost never comments on individual decisions.

In order to gain insight into the withholding program, BuzzFeed News built a data set of more than 1,700 Twitter accounts observed to have been withheld in at least one of seven countries — Germany, France, Turkey, Russia, the United Kingdom, Brazil, and India — between October 2017 and early January 2018. Because Twitter publishes no official list of such accounts, and because many historically

withheld accounts have since disappeared from the platform, the data set is incomplete. It does, however, appear to be the the most detailed and globally diverse list of withheld accounts ever published. (For an explanation of how the data was collected, see the "How we got the data" section at the end of this article.)

BuzzFeed News' data and analysis offer an unprecedented glimpse into Twitter's collaboration with national groups and governments — democratic and authoritarian alike — and provide a stark reminder of Twitter's ability to shape political conversations, and of governments' attempts to influence that process. It also illustrates that the Twitter experience for users is not the same from one country to the next, and that a range of accounts ranging from malicious to harmless be blocked, especially when it comes to reading opposition voices in Turkey or viewing Nazi and white supremacist content in France and Germany.

Accounts @Duffys44 and @SteveRo56399233 are withheld in Germany and France, and @Adolf_Hess1488 is withheld in Germany. They can be seen by Twitter users in all other countries.
BuzzFeed News

In the second half of 2017, German authorities and trusted flaggers significantly increased the number of requests submitted to Twitter to block specific accounts and content, and that the company complied with hundreds of these requests.

At the end of June last year, just 35 Twitter accounts had been withheld in Germany, according to the company's transparency report.

But by mid-October, just a few weeks after the German federal election, BuzzFeed News was able to identify more than 600 accounts withheld in the country, a massive increase. (Click here for the code

Both Twitter and the German agency responsible for making requests to remove content declined to comment on the spike in blocked accounts around the election. However, a source familiar with Twitter's policies told BuzzFeed News that globally the company typically sees a spike in requests for account and content removals around elections, in the wake of terrorist attacks, or during periods of civil unrest. Twitter has operated its withholding program since 2012. (The company withheld its first account in November that year, when it blocked a neo-Nazi group from being seen in Germany.)

Like Germany, France went on a withholding spree in the fall of 2017. Through the end of June, Twitter had withheld fewer than 25 accounts in France. But by mid-October, BuzzFeed News had identified more than 200 accounts withheld there.

BuzzFeed News identified 119 accounts that have been withheld in both Germany and France together, by far the most common combination of any two countries in the data set. An examination of the usernames, bios, and some of the content posted by the accounts withheld in those two countries found that a significant portion of them espouse Nazi and white nationalist ideology and related imagery. France and Germany each have relatively strict hate speech laws, but accounts can also be blocked in those countries for running afoul of legislation unrelated to hate speech.

collected by BuzzFeed News between October 2017 and early January 2018.

More than 100 withheld accounts in the data set overall have included swastikas, "Nazi," or "Hitler" in their username or bio. (Additional accounts have used allusions to Nazism, such as "14/88" and "ϟϟ.")

Rather than ban these accounts outright, Twitter chose to withhold them when authorities made requests to do so. This aligns with the frequent criticism that Twitter has allowed these groups to flourish on its platform, and also fits with the company's stance first articulated in 2011 that "we keep the information flowing irrespective of any view we may have about the content," unless laws in specific countries prevent the company from doing so.

"Twitter together with Facebook have become the long-arm of the Turkish law enforcement machinery."

Another country of note in the data is Turkey, which stands out for its use of the content withholding policy as a means to silence opposition voices on the platform. Twitter's own transparency reports also show that between 2014 and mid-2017, Turkey made more requests to remove accounts or content than any other country — by far.

"Twitter together with Facebook have become the long-arm of the Turkish law enforcement machinery," Yaman Akdeniz, a cyber-rights activist and law professor at Istanbul Bilgi University, told BuzzFeed News.

Twitter has not yet released transparency data for the second half of 2017. But the most recent data indicates that Turkish authorities inundated the company with more than 2,700 removal requests in the first six months of 2017 alone. (Twitter withheld 204 accounts and 497 tweets in response to those requests.) Turkey has in total made at least 11,887 requests to withhold accounts or specific tweets since the creation of the program, according to Twitter's transparency reports.

A review of more than 700 accounts withheld in Turkey found that more than 600 belonged to those connected with militant pro-Kurdish movements as well as accounts affiliated with exiled Islamic Turkish preacher Fethullah Gülen. The Turkish government blames Gülen and his followers for having a role in the failed 2016 coup, and also declared his movement a terrorist organization.

Another notable group of accounts on the withheld list are journalists. The third-most-popular withheld account identified by BuzzFeed News belongs to Ekrem Dumanlı, who was editor-in-chief of the Gülen-linked newspaper Zaman until Turkish authorities commandeered the publication in 2015.

That year, Akdeniz coauthored a letter to Twitter that called for it to stop blocking accounts and tweets in Turkey. He is particularly critical of withholding entire accounts, as opposed to specific tweets. "Once an account is withheld everything that is written through or shared through that account, past, present and future is withheld. So, in my view that amounts to censorship," he said.

Twitter declined to answer questions sent by BuzzFeed News, and did not comment on the data set and related findings. It also declined to explain why it does not list specific accounts withheld in different countries. The Turkish government agency that makes requests to remove accounts and content did not respond to multiple emails or phone calls, or a request via Twitter. The German body responsible for account removal requests also did not respond to multiple emails and phone calls.

A Twitter spokesperson pointed to Twitter's transparency report and cited its "country withheld content" policy available online.

"Many countries, including the United States, have laws that may apply to Tweets and/or Twitter account content. In our continuing effort to make our services available to users everywhere, if we receive a valid and properly scoped request from an authorized entity, it may be necessary to reactively withhold access to certain content in a particular country from time to time," the policy states.

collected by BuzzFeed News between October 2017 and early January 2018.

Based on data collected by BuzzFeed News between October 2017 and early January 2018.
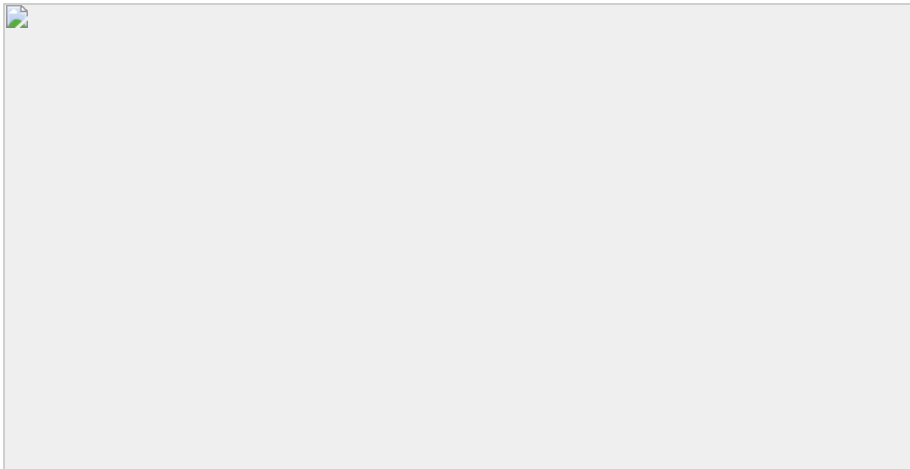
Withheld around the world

The country with the most withheld accounts in the data set is Germany with 758, followed by with Turkey with 721, and France with 261. BuzzFeed News also identified 78 accounts withheld in Russia, 11 in India, 4 in the United Kingdom, and 2 in Brazil.
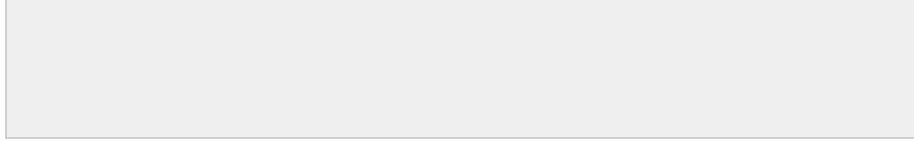
The most popular "withheld" account identified in the data belongs to Gurmeet Ram Rahim, who has more than 3.5 million followers. He is withheld from users in India.

Rahim's account was blocked in early September at the request of police in the state of Haryana, according to the Times of India, shortly after the spiritual leader was convicted on two counts of rape. Apart from Rahim, at least five of the 10 other withheld accounts in India identified by BuzzFeed News make a reference to the disputed region of Kashmir in their Twitter bios.

The second-most-popular account in the data, with more than 1.4 million followers, is Twitter's very own @PeriscopeCo, which has been withheld in Turkey since March. At the time it was reportedly blocked due to a copyright/trademark complaint filed against the service by a Turkish ad agency that was already operating under the name Periscope.The most popular account that's withheld in multiple countries belongs to "Amy Mek," who is withheld in both Germany and France. The account's bio identifies her as a psychotherapist from the US, and her timeline is full of anti-Muslim videos, images, and messages. She has also shared fake stories such as the fabricated claim that the leader of ISIS told people to vote for Hillary Clinton. Often the account shares videos and gives false or misleading descriptions of them. The frequency of its posts and other details have caused some to accuse it of using a fake name and identity, and of being a Russian sock puppet. The Mek account was once quoted in the New York Times.

After CNN's Jake Tapper shared a link to a story that raised questions about its authenticity, the Mek account responded by offering to appear on his program. Tapper did not respond to the offer.
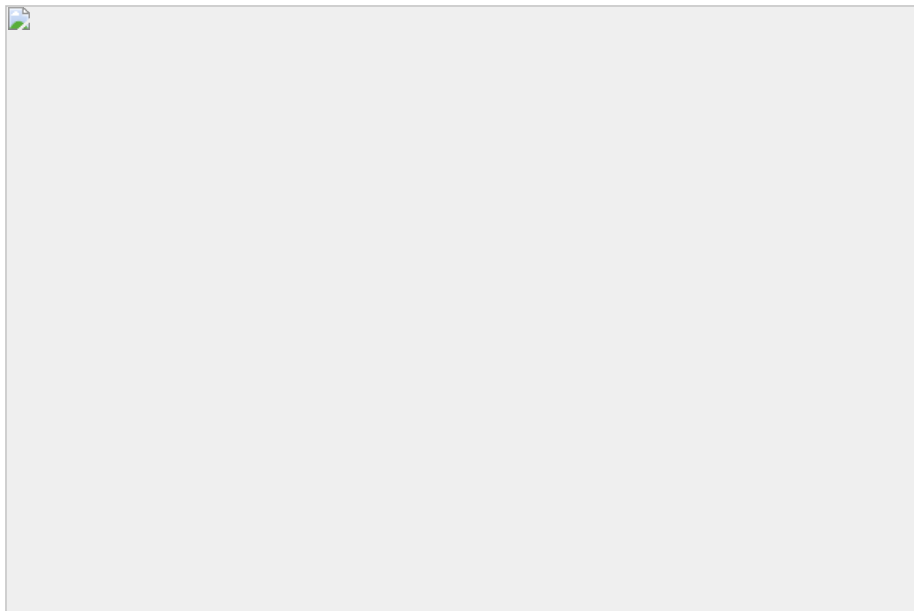
The Mek account did not respond to direct messages from BuzzFeed News asking to speak for this article. The account, however, has tweeted many times about being withheld:

When Twitter decides to withhold an account, its owner is notified by email about why and where it's being restricted.

Accounts that are withheld often tweet about their status when they are first notified. BuzzFeed News also identified that the word "withheld" has appeared in at least 105 bios of accounts that have been blocked in specific countries. The majority of the accounts use this text (with their specific country) in their bio: "This account has been withheld in: [country name]." That is the same language that Twitter uses to inform users that an account has been withheld in their country, suggesting many users copy and paste it into their bio.

Some accounts wear their status as a badge of honor, while others cite it to protest what they see as unfair censorship.

According to the data Twitter has published in its transparency reports, as well as examples gathered from other sources, the company rejects many official requests to block accounts or tweets. For example,

late last year the Russian government [contacted the platform to demand](#) that it remove the account of OpenRussia, the leading opposition party whose leader was recently blocked from running in the upcoming Russian presidential elections. Twitter was provided with a court order and informed OpenRussia of the demand. But Twitter took no action against the account. (OpenRussia has since transitioned to a new account, [@MBKhMedia](#).)

Twitter's withholding program for the most part operates under the radar. But it recently attracted a measure of attention when some US users claimed they saw fewer Nazi and white nationalist accounts in their mentions after changing their Twitter settings to say they are based in Germany. Author and Los Angeles Times columnist Virginia Heffernan went viral with a [tweet](#) telling people they could disappear Nazi accounts by changing their settings.

BuzzFeed News also found that it's apparently possible for an account that has been withheld to have its ban lifted. As of early January, nine accounts that BuzzFeed News had previously identified as being withheld were found to have been "un-withheld" — made visible to all users regardless of location. It's unclear why these accounts were unblocked, and Twitter would not comment on specific accounts. BuzzFeed News reached out the owners of several active accounts on Twitter but did not hear back. Additionally, 193 accounts that were identified as being withheld in an earlier scan were no longer accessible as of early January — in some cases because they had been fully suspended, and in others because they had deleted their accounts. Another 84 accounts were, according to Twitter's website and data, "temporarily unavailable because [the account] violates the Twitter Media Policy."

On Dec. 18, Twitter began implementing what it said were stricter rules against accounts that spread hate. The new policy means the company is now fully suspending certain types of accounts that it may previously have only withheld. Soon after the new rules took effect, for example, Twitter banned @theAmericanNazi, @NaziParty45, and @FuckthoseJews from its platform.

Blocking the opposition in Turkey

In Turkey, the president, the courts, and the national telecommunications authority together appear to have created a state apparatus for mass blocking.

When protests against the Turkish government erupted in 2013 in Gezi Park and elsewhere, Twitter emerged as a powerful tool in helping organize and draw attention to the action. A year later, the service found itself in the government's crosshairs when users began tweeting documents and accusations alleging corruption against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and others in his government. Erdogan responded on the campaign trail by saying he would "eradicate" the service.
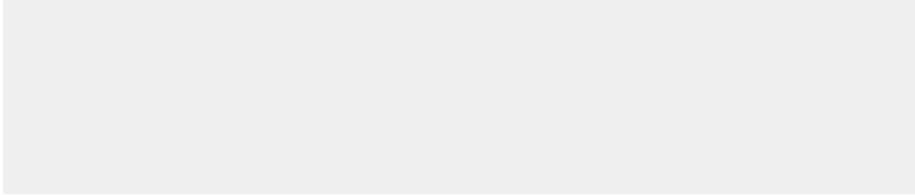
"We now have a court order," Erdogan said. "We'll eradicate Twitter. I don't care what the international community says. Everyone will witness the power of the Turkish Republic."

Not long after, and less then two weeks before the country's 2014 elections, twitter.com was reported to be down in Turkey. Twitter was also blocked in 2016 in the wake of the coup attempt against Erdogan, and after ISIS posted a gruesome online video of it killing what the terrorist group claimed were Turkish soldiers.

Prior to 2014, Turkey had made only 16 requests to Twitter that it block accounts or specific tweets, and all of those requests were rejected by the company. Then, in the first six months of 2014, the government made 186 removal requests, which resulted in Twitter withholding 17 accounts. Since then, the number of requests and withheld accounts (and tweets) have continued to grow.

Source: Twitter Transparency Reports

BuzzFeed News worked with two Turkish journalists, Engin Onder and Can Puruzsuz of 140journos, who have reported on Twitter withholdings in that country to analyze the list of more than 700 accounts in the data set. They found that the biggest portion of the withheld accounts in that country are linked to two groups: pro-Kurdish movements such as the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) militant group, and those connected to Fethullah Gülen. Both have been officially declared terrorist groups by the current Turkish government. (The PKK is also listed as a terrorist group by the EU and US.)

Of the 719 accounts reviewed by the journalists in December, 386 were determined to be pro-Kurdish or PKK, and 242 were pro-Gülenist accounts. Another 58 were identified as being aligned with leftist or left-leaning organizations. The Gülenist accounts have by far the most total followers: nearly 10 million. (The next-most-followed group, the pro-Kurdish accounts, by comparison had only 2.5 million total followers.) The Turkish journalists said they did not identify a single pro-government account that had been withheld in the country.

Akdeniz, the Turkish law professor, also reviewed the list and agreed with the journalists' conclusions. He said he believes it accurately represents the types of accounts being withheld in the country.

For example, the Twitter account of NBA player Enes Kanter is withheld in his home country. Kanter is a follower of Gülen and has more than 535,000 Twitter followers. As a result of his alignment with Gülen, and allegedly because of his use of an encrypted messaging app, Kanter became the subject of an arrest warrant in Turkey. That warrant may have been the legal document used by the government to have his tweets withheld in the country. (Kanter also had his passport canceled last year by the Turkish Embassy.)

Other withheld Gülenist accounts include journalists, writers, and academics linked to the movement, as well news-focused accounts created to disseminate articles about the movement to followers. The withheld Kurdish accounts include journalists, activists promoting Kurdish causes, and news accounts, according to the analysis performed for BuzzFeed News. Activist groups inside and outside of Turkey have criticized Twitter for the number and nature of accounts being withheld. Turkey is a prime example of "how an authoritarian government suppresses domestic criticism by violating international laws and uses global companies for it," Efe Kerem Sozeri, a researcher who has been documenting Turkey's censorship of Twitter, previously told BuzzFeed News.

A [2017 report](#) from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that use of Twitter as a news source in Turkey is on the decline, and cited the government's heavy hand as a factor.

> **"Social media companies like Twitter should not be aiding governments that exert political pressure on their citizens."**

Twitter's transparency reports provide examples of the company fighting the government in court over demands to withholds accounts or tweets. The reports also detail times when the company unwithheld accounts after the government failed to follow up with the necessary court orders to back up their initial demand for removal.

In 2014, for example, the company [reported](#) that it "un-withheld three accounts and 196 Tweets following the acceptance of several objections that Twitter filed in the Turkish courts in response to various removal demands."

And in 2016 the Twitter said it unwithheld an account belonging to "a high profile political party in Turkey" after the government failed to follow up with the necessary court order.

The main government agency responsible for blocking internet content and services in Turkey is the Information and Communication Technologies Authority (ICTA), a telecommunications regulator. Once a government ministry makes a demand, ICTA issues it to Twitter. Then the government has 24 hours to secure a related court order, according to Akdeniz. The failure to secure the necessary court order is often cited by Twitter as the reason for unwithholding an account or tweet(s).

ICTA did not respond to interview requests sent by email and on Twitter, and calls to its headquarters went unanswered.

Akdeniz said the increase in withheld accounts and content in Turkey is part of a larger tilt toward censorship in the country. He added, "Social media companies like Twitter should not be aiding governments that exert political pressure on their citizens."

How we got the data

Starting in early October, BuzzFeed News tried to identify as many "withheld" accounts as it could. To do so, we used Twitter's search interface, its API (its "application programming interface" provided to developers), the Lumen database of removal requests, and other resources.

So far, we've found 1,714 users who, based on Twitter's own API, have been withheld in at least one country. While this represents the most comprehensive list of withheld accounts ever made public, it's unclear how representative it is of the entire universe of withheld accounts. Twitter at times also withholds specific tweets from certain countries; this data set does not address those.

To start, we seeded a database with users listed in Twitter users' personal blocklists, such as this one published by @NaziBlocker. Many of the users on these lists are not withheld in any country, however. To broaden our database, we also added usernames mentioned in Lumen's database of legal complaints and removal requests, accounts we found through manual research, and users listed on "Cemetery of Free Speech," a website (no longer accessible at the time of publication) that tracks accounts and tweets withheld in Germany.

Then, we fed these lists of users through Twitter's API, which provides data about each account — including, crucially, an attribute named "withheld_in_countries." For accounts that were, indeed, withheld in at least one country, we then used Twitter's API to find all of the users that the account followed, and then checked whether any of those accounts had been withheld.

We continued this process until we could find no more withheld users. In all, we examined nearly 800,000 accounts.

Our database of withheld users is, unavoidably, incomplete. Some withheld accounts, for instance, may have been deactivated (by Twitter or the user) or unwithheld before we could identify them. And our approach to finding accounts likely has its own blind spots.

We encourage readers to send us examples of users we may have missed. To submit an example, click here. ●