#### The 2020 election and its turbulent aftermath fueled a powerful generation of online influencers, a Washington Post data analysis has found, producing sky-high follower counts for an array of conservatives who echoed Trump's false claims of election fraud, known as the "Big lie."

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Three days after the 2020 election, Kyle Becker, a former Fox News producer with a modest 15,000 Twitter followers, began tweeting feverishly about election fraud.“BOMBSHELL,” he wrote on Nov. 6, sharing purported revelations that software glitches could have tipped millions of votes from President Donald Trump to challenger Joe Biden.Becker’s tweetstorm quickly went viral, drawing more than 5,000 additional followers to his account in just four hours.By the time a mob of Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol two months later, Becker had vaulted into influencer territory, supercharging his Twitter audience to 177,000.Since Becker, 46, left Fox in fall 2020, he has built his brand as a right-wing pundit.These days, he curates his own online news site; appears as a guest on conservative podcasts and TV shows; and writes a steady stream of viral, often misleading tweets on a range of topics including coronavirus vaccines, the war in Ukraine and the FBI raid on Trump’s Mar-a-Lago residence.© Provided by The Washington Post  
  
Becker is not alone.The 2020 election and its turbulent aftermath fueled a powerful generation of online influencers, a Washington Post data analysis has found, producing sky-high follower counts for an array of conservatives who echoed Trump’s false claims of election fraud, known as the “big lie.” Some doubled or tripled their audiences on Twitter, while others saw even larger gains — catapulting, like Becker, from relative obscurity to online fame.These accounts amassed followers despite vows by Big Tech companies to police election disinformation, The Post found.And they have gone on to use their powerful megaphones to shape the national debate on other subjects, injecting fresh waves of distortion into such culture-war topics as transgender rights and critical race theory.“Once they’ve gained a level of influence, they can continue to leverage that influence going forward,” said Kate Starbird, a leading expert on disinformation at the University of Washington.“Manipulation becomes embedded in the network.”  
  
To conduct its analysis, The Post identified 77 of the biggest spreaders of disinformation about the 2020 election, tracked how they built large audiences online and then analyzed how they used their new power to fuel debate on other divisive topics.The list of 77 was drawn from research by disinformation experts at Stanford, Harvard and Cornell universities, as well as the University of Washington.While the details of their methodologies differed, the researchers all culled Twitter for posts that spread misperceptions about the election and then determined which accounts had racked up the most retweets, spreading the “big lie” most widely.The list includes many well-known figures, such as Trump himself, his sons Eric and Donald Jr., Trump adviser Stephen K. Bannon and others close to the administration.It includes Trump allies who gained fame specifically for their false claims of voter fraud, such as attorneys L. Lin Wood and Sidney Powell, and prominent media figures such as Fox News’s Sean Hannity, Jim Hoft of Gateway Pundit and Josh Caplan of Breitbart News.© Eric Thayer for The Washington Post Former president Donald Trump has been kicked off major social media platforms, but the "big lie" spawned a new generation of influencers.Trump pushed or interacted with their tweets more than 900 times in the frenzied period before and after the 2020 election.But it includes many lesser lights as well — conservative pundits, self-described citizen-journalists and others famous mainly for being online.Commentator Candace Owens, right-wing activist Jack Posobiec and YouTuber Tim Pool are on the list.So are QAnon proponent Tracy Diaz (a.k.a.“Tracy Beanz”), the anonymous @catturd2 account and an Arizona man who went by the handle @prayingmedic before Twitter suspended him following the Jan. 6 insurrection.By tracking follower counts on Twitter and Facebook, The Post found that this group rose steeply in popularity in the six months before the Jan. 6 riot, gaining a stunning 25 million followers on the two platforms.For those who already boasted massive audiences, most grew their followings by at least 50 percent by posting about election fraud.For those with more modest audiences — about 1 in 5 on the list — the payoff for sowing doubt in the election was even bigger.Some surged in status: Becker’s Twitter audience grew by more than 1,000 percent.Like him, some have turned selling outrage into a day job or lucrative side hustle, collecting ad dollars, donations and speaking fees for disseminating their views.© Provided by The Washington Post  
  
Most members of the 77, including Trump, either did not respond to requests for comment or declined to be interviewed.Of those who did respond, several defended their behavior online, saying they merely raised questions about complex topics worthy of public scrutiny.Some criticized the tech companies for banning users who tried to engage in public debate about controversial topics.Pool, for example, sidestepped questions about a litany of tweets pointing out instances of election fraud.In an email exchange, he noted that he has said he believes Biden won the election and that he has repeatedly stated on his podcast “that [Trump is] wrong, that the claims are unproven, and many are easily debunked.” He added: “Evidence of fraud is not proof that fraud changed the election.”  
  
Becker defended his messages online and denied knowingly spreading misinformation about the election or other topics.Via LinkedIn messages, he criticized The Post’s efforts to scrutinize influencers who discuss election fraud, saying it “furthers the persistent media bias that ‘right is bad’ while ‘left is good.’ ”  
  
“I never used the words the ‘election was stolen’ or that ‘Trump won, Biden lost’ or anything like that.I highlighted articles that appeared to be evidence of election malfeasance,” Becker wrote.“ ‘Rigging an election’ can mean many things, by the way, and that includes changing laws without the proper legal channels.”  
  
The tech companies say they took action to penalize spreaders of election misinformation, especially those who promoted the insurrection.But Twitter banned only 12 of the 77 “big lie” influencers in the period around the 2020 election and the Jan. 6 riot, The Post found, including Trump.(Eight others already had been banned or were banned later.)YouTube — the only major tech company to prohibit claims that the 2020 election was rigged — banned just four of the 77, while Facebook banned only two: Trump and Bannon.Twitter and Facebook declined to comment on The Post’s findings.The companies have said they use other means, short of full bans, to penalize problematic accounts and maintain a strikes system to deal with repeat offenders.YouTube spokeswoman Ivy Choi provided a statement: “We remove videos that spread violative ‘Stop the Steal’ narratives and terminate channels that receive three strikes in a 90-day period.As a result, we’ve removed tens of thousands of videos and terminated a number of channels for violating our Community Guidelines and Terms of Service.”  
  
Of the 77 figures, 57 remain active on Twitter.**To gauge their ongoing influence since Jan. 6, The Post measured their follower counts on Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms, along with shares and retweets of posts containing misinformation on an array of topics that have shaped the national conversation since the 2020 election.**The analysis found that the massive megaphones built by posting about election fraud have given the 57 an outsize role in pushing other false and divisive narratives.For example, members of this group wrote five of the top 20 most-shared tweets about “grooming,” a homophobic meme that falsely equates teaching children about sexuality with befriending them for purposes of sexual abuse.© Provided by The Washington Post  
  
In March, Owens had the fourth-most-shared tweet on the subject, a post that urged her 3.1 million followers to #boycottDisney because the company’s opposition to a Florida law banning teachers from discussing sexuality amounted to support for “Child groomers and pedophiles.”  
  
She added: “They have now openly admitted they have a not so secret agenda with your children.This is the death of Disney.” Owens declined to comment.Also in March, members of the group of 77 produced eight of the top 20 tweets about “biolabs,” a pro-Russian conspiracy theory that falsely alleges the United States developed dangerous bioweapons in Ukraine.The U.S. State Department has acknowledged funding biological research in the region to prevent disease outbreaks, but in a statement called the bioweapons narrative “outright lies.”  
  
And in June 2021, this group helped shape the critical race theory narrative, which involved conservative attacks on public school offerings about America’s history of racism.A tweet from Benny Johnson, creative director of the pro-Trump youth group Turning Point USA, was the sixth-most popular on the topic that month.Johnson claimed he had obtained “LEAKED DOCUMENTS” showing Iowa teachers being forced to classify Trump’s “Make America Great Again” slogan as racism.Another tweet by Turning Point USA founder Charlie Kirk about Virginia parents “being arrested” for opposing critical race theory was the 21st-most popular, with 3,700 retweets.Neither Johnson nor Kirk responded to requests for comment.© Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post Commentator Candace Owens, among the figures whose online followings have skyrocketed since the 2020 election, speaks at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Orlando in February.All told, these 57 figures have composed roughly a quarter of the most-shared tweets across Twitter on those hot-button topics plus two others — drag queens and ballot harvesting — The Post found.On Facebook, those still active posted more than 10 percent of the top posts on those issues.Members of the group also continue to seed unproven claims about election fraud, writing about a quarter of the most-retweeted posts on that topic since January 2021, The Post found.The issue continues to resonate with the public: A recent Monmouth University poll found that 29 percent of Americans say Biden won the election because of voter fraud.After reviewing The Post’s findings, Angelo Carusone, president and CEO of Media Matters for America, a liberal group that tracks right-leaning accounts, compared the soaring popularity of the 77 figures to the reshaping of the information landscape in the late 1990s, when Rush Limbaugh and other Republican cable and radio stars rose to prominence.“What was unleashed during the ‘big lie’ was nothing less than the next wave of right-wing media figures, influencers, leaders and organizers,” Carusone said.The “big lie” was like “a piñata bursting, and these figures were able to repurpose the candy they collected for the next big event.”  
  
Recently, many have found a powerful new topic: Elon Musk’s on-again-off-again effort to acquire Twitter.Since Musk announced plans to buy the social media platform in late April, most members of this group have gained at least 50,000 new Twitter followers apiece, The Post found.(Donald Trump Jr. has gained roughly 850,000.)Many have tried to entice Musk to spread their content, with six of them tweeting at him more than 100 times.Until Musk’s Twitter takeover surfaced as an internet obsession, this group found it difficult to re-create the explosive audience-growing conditions of early 2020.Then, pandemic lockdowns and other emergency public health measures were driving online outrage.People flocking to anti-vaccine groups and the violent pro-Trump extremist ideology QAnon created what researchers have described as a mega-network for disinformation well ahead of Election Day.Many on The Post’s list of 77 rode that momentum.Diaz, for example, initially gained notoriety by running a QAnon account.But she soon ventured into election fraud, calling Georgia a “straight banana republic” on Nov. 29, 2020, after a court ruled that state election officials could update voting machine software rather than preserve it for investigations of purported fraud.By the next day, she had gained 7,000 followers.She did not respond to requests for comment left with the Horry County, S.C., Republican Party, where she is a high-ranking official.© Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post President Donald Trump, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar and White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany, shown reflected in a pair of sunglasses, speak to reporters on the South Lawn of the White House in May 2020.Trump was a huge help.His @realdonaldtrump Twitter account interacted with other members of the group of 77 more than 900 times in the frenzied period during and after the election, pushing their content to his 88 million followers.After Trump retweeted a Dec. 8, 2020, post calling for state legislatures to “do their jobs” and declare Trump the winner, its anonymous author, MajorPatriot, gained 7,000 followers in about seven hours.The Post was unable to find contact information for the account, which has since been suspended.On Jan. 8, 2021, Twitter permanently banned Trump, citing “the risk of further incitement of violence.” Other major social media companies soon followed, purging not just Trump but others among the 77, including 8kun co-owner Ron Watkins, “Stop the Steal” activist Michael Coudrey, Powell, MajorPatriot and Beanz.Twitter also removed more than 70,000 accounts tied to QAnon, silencing others on The Post’s list, including Gateway Pundit’s Hoft and MyPillow CEO Mike Lindell.Reaction to the purges was swift: Republican leaders decried “Big Tech censorship” and encouraged their supporters to switch to a growing crop of right-leaning social media services such as Gettr, Gab and Trump’s struggling Truth Social.But nearly two years later, virtually all of the election fraud influencers are more active on major platforms than on any of the right-wing services, The Post found.Among them is Benny Johnson, who publicly swore off Twitter in 2020 and asked fellow conservatives to defect to other platforms.Today, Johnson is a prolific Twitter user, typically tweeting 25 times a day to more than 812,000 followers.Recently, some of the “big lie” influencers have returned anew to the topic of election fraud.In May, Dinesh D’Souza, himself a member of the 77, released “2000 Mules,” a documentary that purports to expose fraud in the 2020 election.As the film gained attention online, half of the 77 posted about it on Twitter or Facebook.© Jeff Swensen/Getty Images Dinesh D’Souza’s “2000 Mules” documentary, which purports to expose fraud in the 2020 election, was a favorite among “big lie” influencers.Joan Donovan, a leading disinformation expert with the Technology and Social Change Research Project at the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University, said she worries that this group’s continuing influence on society transcends mere misinformation.Kirk, for instance, has used a Turning Point live event, streamed on YouTube, to issue a “challenge” to “every man across America” to “intervene” at women’s sporting events and physically confront transgender athletes.Meanwhile, several among the 77 have retweeted Chaya Raichik to their large audiences, helping fuel the meteoric rise of her Twitter account, Libs of TikTok.The account, which soared from fewer than 1,000 followers in early 2021 to 1.3 million today, criticizes teachers, medical providers and others who serve transgender children and teens.It was recently suspended after a post led to death threats against providers at Boston Children’s Hospital, and a bomb threat caused the hospital to be evacuated.Becker has retweeted, replied to or tagged Libs of TikTok over 300 times since August 2021.Via LinkedIn, he said: “I stand behind Libs of TikTok and her curation of the radical left’s extreme degradation of the culture and its attacks on children’s mental and physical health.”  
  
“Telling lies and distortions, propagating hateful commentary around racial justice and trans rights, has become very profitable for a small group of people for whom disinformation is now a profession,” Donovan said.“You have to keep refreshing novelty and outrage to keep people engaged.You have to refresh the constant soap opera.You have to create the news cycle — without Trump.”  
  
© Michael Robinson Chavez/The Washington Post Part of a pro-Trump mob stands next to the West Lawn of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.Two days later, Twitter permanently banned the president, citing “the risk of further incitement of violence.”  
  
Jake Kara and Taylor Lorenz contributed to this report.Graphics by Leslie Shapiro.