How Katie Hobbs Abused Government Resources To Censor Her Political Opponents

Arizona Capitol Oversight
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An interactive copy of this research report is available at azcapitol.org
Introduction

On July 4, 2023, a federal judge granted a preliminary injunction after determining that the federal government had “likely violated the First Amendment by censoring unfavorable views on social media.”

Today, Arizona Capitol Oversight is releasing exclusive internal emails that reveal an extensive and sustained campaign by then-Secretary of State Katie Hobbs’s government office — including Hobbs herself — to unconstitutionally censor her critics online.

The targets of Hobbs’s year-long censorship campaign included the Arizona Republican Party, a state lawmaker tasked with oversight of her department, and others. Many takedown requests submitted by Hobbs’s office were not related to public safety, governance, or election administration but rather served to suppress valid criticism and improve her political posture ahead of announcing her campaign for governor.

The internal emails offer unique insight into Hobbs’s office during the 2020 and 2022 elections — including when she was a candidate for governor — while raising several questions about just how far her taxpayer-funded staff went to silence opponents. Many of these outstanding questions can only be answered through further discovery, legislative subpoenas, and other third-party investigations. This document contains research leads for those who wish to do so.

The ‘Nazi’ Tweet

On August 15, 2017, while serving as a member of the state legislature, Hobbs hopped on Twitter and decided to compare Trump voters to Nazis. “@realDonaldTrump has made it abundantly clear he’s more interested in pandering to his neo-Nazi base than being @POTUS for all Americans,” she said.

The tweet would later pose a problem for Hobbs, with her critics (agree or not) using it to question whether she was too partisan to fairly administer the 2020 election as secretary of state, a position to which she had been elected by a 0.8 percent margin in November 2018. She didn’t like the criticism.

So, on November 13, 2020, Hobbs — using her government email address, in the middle of a government work-week — personally emailed Twitter to pressure the company to take action against her critics. Twitter’s support team had requested additional information from Hobbs (“Are there specific Tweets you can share with us?”) after her initial complaint was deemed too vague. In response, Hobbs expressed frustration that her “alt-right” critics had somehow “got a hold of a 3-year old tweet on my account” and were “harassing” her about it:

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I am not sure I can provide the information you are asking for because I reported and then blocked multiple users at the same time. The alt-right got a hold of a 3-year old tweet on my account and have been sending harassing, abusive, and threatening tweets and direct messages for the last 2 days.
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How did we identify the specific “3-year old tweet” that Hobbs was referring to above? A mistake by Murphy Hebert, her longtime communications director.

The previous evening, Hebert attempted to pressure Facebook into removing an unrelated social media post … but she pasted the wrong URL into the email, accidentally requesting that the company delete Hobbs’s ‘neo-Nazi’ tweet from 2017 (highlighted in yellow for emphasis), the URL for which Hebert had copied for some other reason:
Of particular note, this “3-year old tweet” came from Hobbs’s campaign Twitter account — she had a separate Twitter account, @SecretaryHobbs, for official business — which suggests that the secretary’s taxpayer-funded staff had begun to use their government emails for campaign purposes.

Through at least April 2021, only weeks before announcing her gubernatorial campaign, Hobbs herself would continue to personally report alleged ‘misinformation’ to Twitter, occasionally forwarding her reports to staff for awareness about what she had done:

The Arizona State Senator-Elect

Hobbs’s misuse of government resources to censor her critics was not limited to the campaign trail. She also attempted to silence a sitting state lawmaker who had been tasked with legislative oversight of her department.

State Representative Kelly Townsend had long been a thorn in Hobbs’s side. The Republican from legislative district 16 chaired the House Elections Committee throughout 2020, where she advocated for increased transparency in the Secretary of State’s Office and introduced bills to improve Arizona’s elections process, including bills that Hobbs actively lobbied against. Even worse, Townsend had just been elected to a seat in the Arizona Senate.

On November 12, 2020, the state senator-elect criticized Hobbs on Facebook for having improperly “denied” a request from the legislature and for using rhetoric that had “eroded any hope that the Secretary of State could approach Arizona’s elections in a non-partisan, non-biased manner.”
Less than one hour later, Hobbs’s government office responded by secretly reporting Townsend’s post to the Facebook misinformation team:

Facebook rebutted Hobbs’s attempt to censor the sitting lawmaker outright (“Our team has reviewed the content you reported and it is not against our Community Guidelines”) but attempted to assuage the secretary by “placing a banner below the content that links to our Voting Information Center.”

“Facebook Is Trash”

Hobbs and her taxpayer-funded staff spent an inordinate amount of time attempting to censor obscure, low-traffic Internet posts, and they did not appreciate when social media companies denied their takedown requests.

On August 20, 2020, Hobbs’s office tracked down a Facebook post from a Tucson-based account with just 160 followers. The post contained a rambling ‘letter’ allegedly written by a fringe write-in candidate — he received 199 votes compared to his opponent’s 93,388 — who claimed that Kamala Harris was not eligible to serve as vice president. The post garnered a grand total of 27 comments.

That was 27 comments too many for the secretary of state, whose communications director reported it to Facebook’s misinformation team, CC-ing Hobbs herself:

Facebook denied the takedown request (“We do not believe that the content is infringing local laws and as such it will remain on the site at this time”), to which Hobbs’s longtime chief of staff, Allie Bones, responded: “Facebook is trash.” “I know,” her communications director added:
Hobbs’s office also complained to the social media company about negative news coverage.

On November 13, 2020, her staff emailed Facebook alleging that “Hobbs’ (sic) was recently featured two publications that traffic in conspiracy theories” (the specific publications were not identified). The company recommended setting up a phone call to discuss “what is occurring to the Secretary on the platform.” Although the content of that call is unknown, Hobbs’s communications director told a colleague afterward that “it was a bit disappointing” what Facebook was willing to do:

Two days later, the secretary’s office complained to Facebook that “falsehoods about Sec Hobbs and her husband” had appeared somewhere on the platform. The company again denied the takedown request after finding “no violations of our Community Standards”), which her staff condemned as “disappointing, but not unexpected at this point.”

The Arizona Republican Party

On December 9, 2020, Hobbs’s office sent an email to the ‘misinformation’ team at the Center for Internet Security (CIS) — a nonprofit entity funded through the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency — hoping that CIS would “review” a controversial tweet and report it to Twitter for possible takedown action.
The target of this censorship request? The Arizona Republican Party (highlighted in yellow for emphasis):

From: C.Murphy Hebert - [redacted]@azsos.gov
Sent: Wednesday, December 9, 2020 11:21 AM
To: Misinformation Reports <misinformation@cisecurity.org>
Cc: Ken Matt - [redacted]@azsos.gov, Allie Bones - [redacted]@azsos.gov
Subject: Security Flag: Regarding the Arizona Secretary of State

Good morning,

I am bringing this account and these tweets to your attention for review. They are obviously falsely accusing Sec Hobbs of something that is insane. It is deranged and unhinged, and we are concerned it could upset a disruption of the next step in the election process.

The Electoral College convenes next week and we are under heightened security watches, in part, because of tweets amplified from this account calling for people to sacrifice themselves to prevent the Electoral College votes from being cast.

Account: https://twitter.com/all

Please consider expediting this review.
https://twitter.com/all/status/1336551286603447699?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw
https://twitter.com/all/status/1336554814833667375?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw
https://twitter.com/all/status/1336558947243653847?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw
https://twitter.com/all/status/1335591552609837664?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw
https://twitter.com/AZGOP/status/1336186818914529296?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw

Hobbs’s communications director described the tweet as “deranged and unhinged.” (That might be an understatement.
The tweet, which represented a culmination of unsubstantiated ‘voter fraud’ allegations promoted under the Arizona Republican Party’s then-chairwoman, came in response to a fringe conspiracy theorist who wrote: “I am willing to give my life for this fight.”
The party responded: “He is. Are you?” Deranged, indeed.) CIS’s misinformation team responded that it had “already forwarded your report to the Cyber and Infrastructure Security Agency at the Department of Homeland Security” and that the federal government would “submit it to the relevant social media platform(s) for review.”

As deluded as the tweet may have been, though, that is not for government officials to determine or to censor. The decision to coordinate with this federally-funded nonprofit to suppress an opposing political party — especially at a time when her office was involved in litigation with the party — was a significant escalation in the secretary’s existing social media pressure campaign.

Hobbs’s office continued to censor the Arizona Republican Party throughout her 2022 gubernatorial campaign.

On August 3, 2022, it came to light that several polling places across Pinal County had run out of ballots one day earlier (on Primary Election Day). The Arizona Republican Party wrote on Twitter that “Hobbs is failing at her current job” and asked its followers: “How can she ask anyone to give her a promotion to #AZGOV?”

Hobbs’s longtime chief of staff, Allie Bones, did not like how the political criticism might affect Hobbs’s campaign. So, using her government email address, Bones claimed that the party’s tweet was “disinformation” and sent a takedown request to CIS:

From: Allie Bones
Sent: Wednesday, August 3, 2022 5:22 PM
To: misinformation@cisecurity.org
Subject: Election misinformation

We would like to report this tweet as disinformation:
https://twitter.com/AZGOP/status/1559498210262917127?s=20&t=RgfXSZPsSvDmVm3qW-stZQ.

Counties are responsible for calculating how many ballots to order. Under Arizona law, counties should review their voter registration statistics by precinct and party (for the Primary) to determine how many ballots to order. See A.R.S. 16-401 & 16-508.

On July 4, 2023, a federal judge ruled that there was “substantial evidence” suggesting the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and its partners, including CIS, had improperly “assumed a role similar to an Orwellian ‘Ministry of Truth’” and engaged in “a far-reaching and widespread censorship campaign” against American citizens in coordination with state and local officials. Hobbs was not named in the court’s opinion because these emails had not been discovered — until now.

The Sharpies

On November 4, 2020, Arizona Attorney General Mark Brnovich’s office wrote a letter to the Maricopa County Elections Department requesting guidance after it “received hundreds of voter complaints regarding the use of Sharpie brand
markers” on ballots. The County Attorney’s Office clarified the following day that the ballots were “designed in such a way that any ‘bleed through’” would not cause problems. The two offices worked together in order to provide concerned voters as much information as possible to inform themselves.

Hobbs took a different approach. Hours after Brnovich’s letter, Hobbs’s office expressed frustration about not being able to “stamp them out one at a time” (social media posts questioning the use of Sharpies) and, instead, notified the National Association of Secretaries of State that it had already requested a broader censorship tool from Twitter and Facebook:

The association recommended that Hobbs’s staff contact CIS directly, which would make it easier to “remove” posts:

In the meantime, Facebook responded to the requests by “made the hashtag ‘unclickable’” and “putting warning labels on the content to limit its reach.” The company asked if Hobbs’s team wanted to “send me any links” to specific posts:

Hobbs’s staff acknowledged in an email to Facebook that the office had, in fact, been “tracking” social media content it didn’t like and offered to “get you a list” for review and takedown. The initial list of links sent by the secretary’s office included random users “questioning [a] fact-check” and the “comments” section on a news article at KTAR News 92.3.
Hi there – here are some we pulled from today

Jesse Csincsak
comments; see post https://www.facebook.com/100000211175008/videos/4130512783632387/

Bryan Long and
comments https://www.facebook.com/100000211175008/videos/4130512783632387/

Pamela Elliott and
fact-check https://www.facebook.com/100000211175008/videos/4130512783632387/

KTAR see
News 92.3 comments https://facebook.com/l.php?
1DjCOLwX03pPrHieJBejIP8mG2vileeR14kxvXZN0kDxQAQBF2A8UY7X1laGAsgeBrEcF-
IXUN5cAb_Fax7ds3FIFqCNNLWdAJs58BR68h9yBR85xKFpYrR&s=1

Sandra Silversmith
https://www.facebook.com/sandra.dee.np/posts/1020937741388693

The National Association of Secretaries of State notified Hobbs’s office that the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CIS’s direct source of federal funding) had “added” Sharpie-related information “their [rumor control page]” in response. Facebook also responded to the office’s request by adding a “false interstitial” to the social media posts.

By the way, Facebook’s representative wrote to Hobbs’s office after complying with their demands, I “love seeing updates from the Secretary live on CNN!”

We’ve actioned on the content to ensure it has the false interstitial. Let me know if you need anything else.

Also, love seeing updates from the Secretary live on CNN!

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Jannelle Watson
U.S. Politics & Government Outreach

What We Don’t Know

Facebook frequently coordinated with Hobbs’s government office outside of email correspondence. For example, her office received “training” from the company about how to “promote accurate information” in February 2020 and hosted “Elections Briefing” Zoom calls about “preventing the spread of misinformation” in June and July 2020.

The National Association of Secretaries of State also instructed Hobbs’s office on how to report “incorrect or misleading” posts to TikTok. The Chinese government-tied social media application is banned from state devices in Arizona.

Further, a number of items within the 100+ pages of emails obtained by Arizona Capitol Oversight are auto-generated responses from social media companies confirming that they had received complaints and takedown requests from Hobbs’s government office. The specific demands made by Hobbs and her staff in those complaints/requests — likely submitted to Facebook and Twitter through a back-end portal — are unknown … for now. However, while it is unclear whether those submissions (maintained by third parties) are subject to public records laws, individuals like Twitter (‘X Corp.’) executive chair Elon Musk are in a unique position to shine a light on them.

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