



Written by [C. Mitchell Shaw](#) on July 17, 2020

## Twitter Hack Dupes Liberals, Threatens National Security, Shows Need for Better Security

In a shockingly brazen and wildly successful hack, the Twitter accounts of prominent politicians, celebrities, billionaires, and companies were hijacked for four hours Wednesday. Those responsible made off with more than \$120,000 in cryptocurrency. Experts warn that if the hackers had wanted power instead of money, they could have crashed the stock market, swayed elections, or even started a major war.



Dozens of high-profile accounts were compromised in the attack, including those of former president Barack Obama, presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden, Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates, Tesla CEO Elon Musk, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, entertainer Kanye West, liberal darling Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg, according to a [report](#) from Digital Trends.

Twitter reports that the attackers did not compromise the accounts themselves, at least not one at a time. Instead, the hackers [gained access to Twitter's internal systems and tools](#). Twitter claims that ground zero of the hack was what is known as a “social engineering” attack, where employees are tricked into providing information or clicking a link that allows the hacker to deliver a “payload” allowing access to increasingly deeper parts of a system.

The company released a statement, saying:

We detected what we believe to be a coordinated social engineering attack by people who successfully targeted some of our employees with access to internal systems and tools.

But, someone claiming to be involved in the attack claimed in an online post that a Twitter employee was bribed to provide access.

The attack consisted in a series of posts across the accounts of well-known users. For instance, at 4:48 p.m. Wednesday, the verified account belonging to Bill Gates tweeted:

Everyone is asking me to give back, and now is the time. I am doubling all payments sent to my BTC [Bitcoin] address for the next 30 minutes. You send \$1,000, I send you back \$2,000.

The tweet included a link to a bitcoin account and ended with, “Only going on for 30 minutes! Enjoy!”

The verified account belonging to Amazon head honcho Jeff Bezos tweeted a similar promise:

I have decided to give back to my community. All Bitcoin sent to my address below will be returned doubled. I am only doing a maximum of \$50,000,000.

Remember that sage advice you received as a child — delivered by your parents and McGruff the Crime Dog — If it seems too good to be true, it probably is? Well, some 300 people forgot that simple rule and responded to the tweets from Gates, Obama, Bezos, Musk, and others by sending money.

It goes without saying that they never got the 100 percent return they were promised.



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While this writer is sympathetic to the victims of this scam/hack/attack, he is also amazed at the gullibility of people. The tweet from the account belonging to Gates was liked more than 2,200 times and got more than 1,600 retweets.

There are a couple of points in this that are important. First, since the attack focused on Twitter, and not the individual users, there is nothing those users could have done differently that would have protected their accounts from being hijacked. Keep in mind that some of the victims were Big Tech CEOs and companies, such as Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, Apple, and Uber.

This writer writes and [podcasts](#) about ways to protect privacy and stay safe online. One thing I emphasize is using tools, such as two-factor authentication (2FA), to protect accounts. This means that when logging into an account, the user has to use two methods of authentication (usually the password and a text message or other method requiring that the user has his phone with him at the time). But since the hackers had access to Twitter's system, that would not have prevented them from logging in as Gates, Bezos, Obama, or Biden. Or anyone else.

The underlying problem here is that Twitter maintains control over users' accounts. If the company took the "zero-knowledge" approach of companies such as [ProtonMail](#) and other privacy-minded companies, no one at the company could log in as the user, since the login credentials (password, etc.) would not be known by anyone except the user.

The second issue is the one experts are talking about. With the success of this attack and the huge response rate of those whose gullibility so quickly separated them from their money, one can only imagine the damage if this attack had been motivated by something other than money.

[The FBI is reported to be investigating the attack](#), but officials downplay the idea that the attack was launched by a foreign power. The *New York Times* [reported](#) that "one senior American intelligence official" told the paper that the attack was "effective, but also amateurish." The *Times* went on to paraphrase the unnamed official as saying that if Russia, China, or North Korea had been behind the attack, the consequences could have been dire, indeed.

From that report:

Had it been Russia, China, North Korea or Iran, said the official, who would not speak on the record because they were not authorized to discuss an intelligence investigation, the effort would have probably focused on trying to trigger stock market havoc, or perhaps the issuance of political pronouncements in the name of Mr. Biden or other targets.

Another unnamed official told the *Times* that in a world where leaders of nations increasingly use Twitter to communicate with citizens and other nations, it is a "scary possibility" to consider what could have happened. And Alex Stamos, director of the Stanford Internet Observatory and the former chief security officer at Facebook, said, "It could have been much worse. We got lucky that this is what they decided to do with their power."

Besides the obvious possible outcomes of a wrecked economy, skewed elections, or even war, there is another outcome that only time will tell. Several reports show that the hackers appear to have gained access to private messages stored on Twitter's servers.

Kevin Mitnick, a former hacker who now works as a security consultant, told [BBC Radio 4](#) that those messages could open the victims up to blackmail. That would make this a serious national security issue. It also underscores a point this writer makes in his podcast: Once something is stored on a server



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you don't control, it is at risk. This is another reason to only use open-source, encrypted, zero-knowledge messaging services, such as ProtonMail and Signal.

The final point that needs to be made is that all of the accounts that were hacked appear to have one thing in common: They were all accounts with largely liberal followings. In fact, *all* of the politicians whose accounts were hijacked were Democrats. President Trump's account — with a huge following — would present an enticing target to many hackers, but was not breached in this attack.

This writer offers the following conjecture for your approval: Conservatives would not likely fall for a something-for-nothing scam wherein liberal billionaires appear to have suddenly seen the light and decide to redistribute their own wealth. Instead, conservatives recognize that promise for what it is. This writer imagines that the scam would have had far fewer takers if the accounts tweeting promises of free money were those belonging to Republicans who have consistently talked and walked a message of hard work, keeping the fruits of one's own labor, and self-reliance.

*Photo: BrianAJackson/iStock/Getty Images Plus*

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