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# BIG BAD TECH

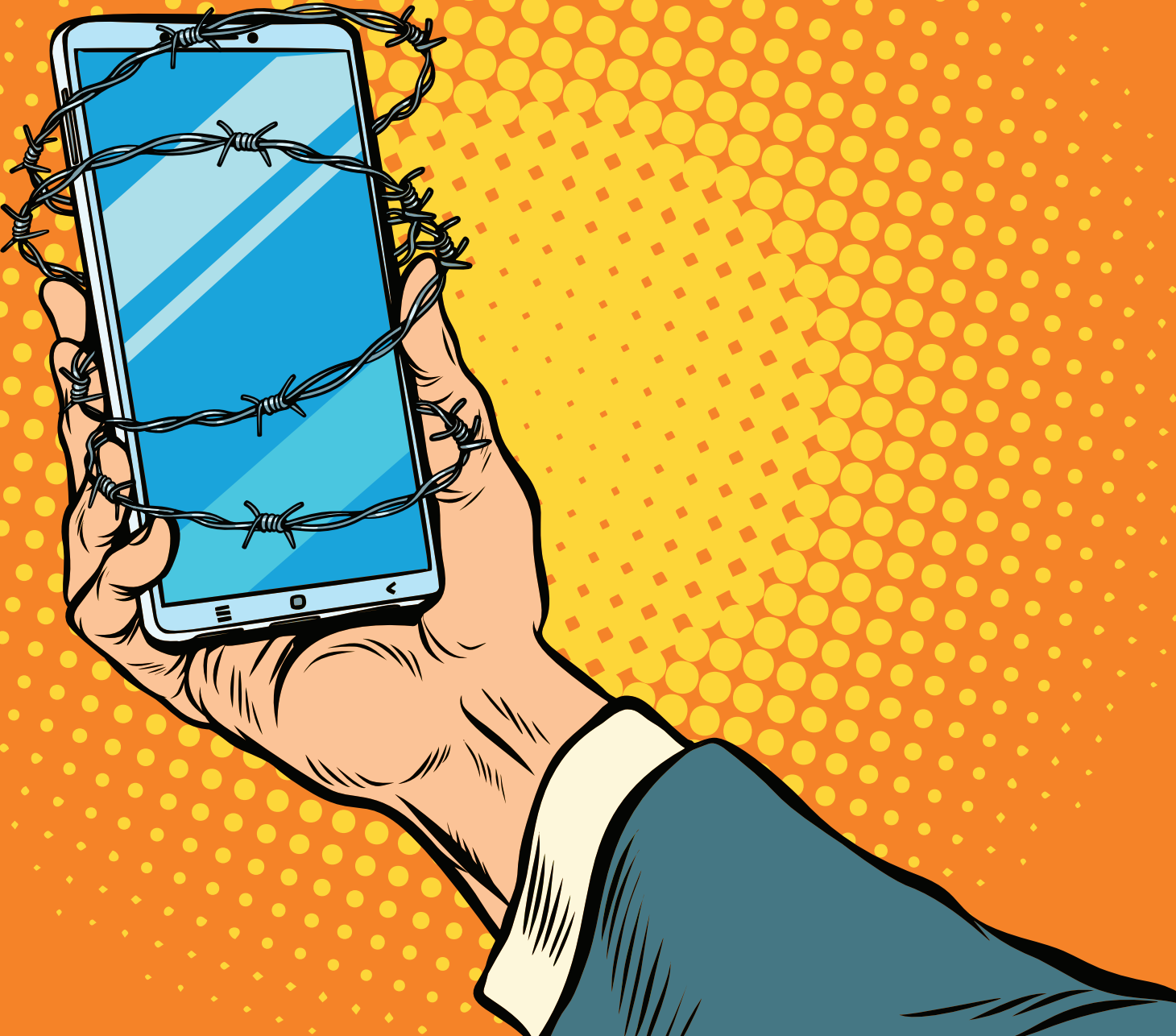
WHEN CENSORSHIP GOES CORPORATE

Donna Laframboise

# Big Bad Tech: When censorship goes corporate

Donna Laframboise

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## **Executive summary**

Large technology companies are now in the ascendant. Their size eclipses every UK-based publicly traded corporation. Pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline ranks 97th on a list of the world's largest firms. Apple ranks 6th, Google 10th, Amazon 13th, and Facebook 33rd.

Google earns more advertising revenue than all US television and radio stations combined. The most visited destination on the Internet is Google. The second most visited is YouTube, owned by Google. That search engine used to behave like a librarian, directing people to the section of the Internet that might answer their question. Today, like a vampire, Google 'scrapes' third party websites for shortcut answers, depriving those websites of traffic and funding.

Other business entities, large and small, live in fear of Big Tech. With a push of a button, Apple, Amazon, Facebook, or Google can make them disappear from the marketplace. A recent report by a US Congressional antitrust subcommittee concludes they are 'the kinds of monopolies we last saw in the era of oil barons and railroad tycoons.' They must 'be reined in and subject to appropriate oversight.'

Big Tech doesn't just dominate commercial markets, it increasingly distorts the marketplace of ideas. These corporations ghettoise all manner of non-conformist thought, including climate scepticism. They demote individuals to second class status by depriving them of an online presence. Unlike landlords in the physical world, no rules compel Big Tech to behave reasonably. No meaningful, independent appeals process exists. It is within the power of Big Tech to purge any number of accounts, at any moment, for any reason. These companies have already acted in concert to silence the democratically elected leader of the world's most powerful nation during a moment of national crisis.

Governments are constrained by common law, strong free press traditions, document retention rules, Freedom of Information legislation, and elections. In stark contrast, censorship by corporations is a free-for-all. Nothing prevents Google from obliterating historically significant YouTube videos. Nothing prevents Amazon from vaporising years of other people's business records. Nothing stops Big Tech from manipulating the social media accounts of world leaders, undermining their authority and threatening national security.

## **About the author**

Donna Laframboise is an investigative journalist. She is a former *National Post* and *Toronto Star* columnist, and a past vice president of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association.

An enthusiastic early adopter, Donna learned to code HTML in 1996. She published her email address at the bottom of her *Toronto Star* columns before newspapers had websites, and before journalists acquired corporate email addresses. She blogs regularly at BigPicNews.com.





In July 2019, Internet entrepreneur Brian Warner submitted a written statement to a subcommittee of the US House of Representatives examining large technology companies. It read, in part:

If someone came to me with an idea for a website or a web service today, I would tell them to run. Run as far away from the web as possible. Launch a lawn care business or a dog grooming business – something Google can't take away...

Warner had founded a successful website eight years earlier. *CelebrityNetWorth.com* publishes 'fun stories about money and wealth', and lightheartedly describes itself as the website 'future billionaires read every day'. Years of work, and investments totalling 'over a million dollars' paid off. What began as an after-hours sideline became a full-time business. By 2014, twelve people besides Warner were on the payroll.<sup>1</sup>

The key to successful Internet publishing is traffic. Advertisers pay a trifling fee whenever a website displays one of their ads to a visitor. The more traffic, the more ad impressions, the more revenue. To earn good money, a web publisher needs 500,000 visitors a day, rather than 500.

Technology journalist Adrienne Jeffries explains that, early on, search engine Google 'was like a librarian. You asked a question, and it guided you to the section of the web where you might find the answer.'<sup>2</sup> Research staff at *CelebrityNetWorth* were satisfying the curiosity of large numbers of people. They tallied up the salaries, royalties, endorsements, and real estate holdings of football players, film stars, and tennis pros. They examined court filings and other public documents. The result was well-informed estimates of the net worth of more than 25,000 famous people. Since this information isn't readily available elsewhere, traffic was brisk. The website earned significant advertising revenue.

*CelebrityNetWorth* is, in effect, an online reference guide. If this material were published in a book, there'd be no confusion. It has been created by known individuals, and is protected by copyright laws. Anyone republishing this material without permission is stealing intellectual property.

But some corporations behave as though they are above the law. Google is the most visited online destination in the world.<sup>3</sup> It is the front door of the Internet and, approximately a decade ago, it changed course. In journalist Jeffries' words, rather than remaining a librarian, Google began experimenting with being 'an oracle' by presenting 'a box at the top of the search results page with the answer in large bold type'.

Warner explained to the US Antitrust subcommittee that, beginning in 2015, whenever anyone queried the financial status of 'roughly 1,000 of the most popular celebrities in the world' Google 'scraped' material from his website and displayed it within these boxes. This meant people no longer needed to visit *CelebrityNetWorth* to have their questions answered. Warner says his traffic dropped by 20%.

The following year, Google went further. Warner says it 'began displaying net worth results – copied whole cloth – for every single celeb-

*ity in our database'* (original italics). Combined with a tweak to Google's search algorithm, the consequences were catastrophic. 'Our traffic plummeted by 50% overnight'. He continues:

With the flip of a switch, Google turned our original content into its own content...Today our traffic is 80% lower than it was in 2014. Our revenue and profits have dropped accordingly, which has forced me to cut our staff down to a bare bones team...We simply do not have the money to employ full-time researchers...

When people ask Warner why he doesn't sue Google for copyright infringement, he responds: 'I do not have the financial resources to go to war with an \$800 billion company...'<sup>4</sup>

Under the headline 'Google is jeopardizing African-American literature sites,' journalist Jeffries describes how the search engine similarly obliterates other Internet destinations. In her words, 'More and more it's delivering direct answers so people do not need to dive into primary sources. Google argues that this is a better experience for users, and in many cases that is true.' But the cost of these shortcuts is that third party websites are losing 'life-threatening amounts of traffic'. Some are disappearing altogether.<sup>5</sup> Google the oracle is actually Google the vampire. It sucks the lifeblood out of other people's efforts, leaving them limp and gasping at the side of the information highway.

Even prominent brands have no means of protecting themselves. The News Media Alliance represents 2000 US newspapers. Executives associated with News Corporation (owner of the *London Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*), the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *USA Today* sit on its board of directors. A month before Warner told the Antitrust Subcommittee about his experiences, News Media Alliance spokesperson David Chavern explained to its members that Facebook and Google 'scrape news organizations' content and use it to their own ends, without permission or remuneration for the companies that generated the content in the first place'. Continued Chavern (emphasis added):

One question that might be asked is '...why don't news organizations do something about it?' The answer is that they cannot...It is in their interest to resist scraping, to demand attribution for their content... But no news organization on its own can stand up to the platforms. *The risk of demotion or exclusion from the platforms is simply too great...*<sup>6</sup>

Google isn't merely successful. It has enjoyed 'profit margins greater than 20% for nine out of the last 10 years, close to three times larger than the average for a US firm.'<sup>7</sup> Since no competitors of similar size exist online, Google and other Big Tech behemoths have effectively become monopolies. They are 800-pound gorillas that no one dares cross. Even media conglomerates know they'll be crushed. In its own submission to the subcommittee, the US National Association of Broadcasters pointed out (original italics):

...advertising revenues of a single company – Google – are projected to exceed the *combined* ad revenue of *all* TV and radio stations in the country by over \$8 billion [in 2020]. The market capitalizations of the largest radio and TV station groups are but a fraction of one percent of

the market caps of Google, Facebook or Amazon and stations increasingly struggle to compete...against entities of this scale and scope.<sup>8</sup>

Big picture, three UK-based firms appear in the top 100 of *Forbes'* list of the world's largest public corporations. HSBC Holdings ranks 40th, Unilever is 90th, and pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline ranks 97th. Each of those is smaller than Apple (6th), Amazon (10th), Google (13th), and Facebook (33rd). Twitter, discussed later in this report, while immensely influential, isn't in the same league. It holds down the 1582nd spot on *Forbes'* list.<sup>9</sup>

In October 2020, the US Antitrust Subcommittee released a 450-page report titled *Investigation of Competition in Digital Markets*. The word 'fear' is used 18 times in that report to describe how other online businesses perceive Big Tech.<sup>10</sup> The report cites David Heinemeier Hansson, a Danish-born Le Mans race car driver and inventor of Ruby on Rails – a free, open source web toolkit that undergirds enterprises such as Airbnb and Kickstarter. He calls the power now wielded by Big Tech 'terrifying'. His own written submission says that early excitement about entities such as Google and Facebook has been 'replaced by a mixture of fear and loathing'.

Hansson describes a toxic business environment in which Big Tech behaves more brazenly than mobsters. While the Internet was once an open and creative space, he says running a business 'in the shadow of big tech today' is becoming increasingly difficult. They're 'erecting toll-booths everywhere'. Moreover, if 'your presence ends up displeasing any of these conglomerates, they can make you essentially disappear from the marketplace with the press of a button'.<sup>11</sup>

The report cites a *Wired* magazine story that describes the 'deep fear and mistrust that Facebook inspires...If Facebook wanted to, it could quietly turn any number of dials that would harm a publisher – by manipulating its traffic, its ad network, or its readers'.<sup>12</sup> Due to concerns about economic retaliation, some businesses declined to assist the subcommittee's investigations. Some were granted anonymity.

An individual identified only as 'Source 636' is quoted: 'It would be commercial suicide to be in Amazon's crosshairs...If Amazon saw us criticizing, I have no doubt they would remove our access and destroy our business'. The fate of US retailer *Diapers.com* serves as a warning. It was minding its own affairs, building a successful online company via exceptional customer service and competitive pricing. Although a tiny fraction of Amazon's overall size, the subcommittee tells us that once Amazon had identified *Diapers.com* as its 'fastest growing competitor in the on-line diaper and baby care space', executives 'took swift and predatory action' in the form of an 'aggressive price war in which Amazon was willing to bleed over \$200 million in losses on diapers in one month'.

During a public hearing, a member of the subcommittee admonished Jeff Bezos, Amazon's CEO and the world's richest individual: 'Your own documents make clear that the price war against Diapers.com worked, and within a few months it was struggling, and so then Amazon bought it'.<sup>13</sup>

'Source 146', described as a 'prominent venture capital investor', is

also quoted in the report: 'I think of Amazon as the sun. It is useful but also dangerous. If you're far enough away you can bask. If you get too close you get incinerated. So, you have to be far enough from Amazon and be doing something that they wouldn't do.' This person then acknowledged that there's no way to predict what sector Amazon will target next.<sup>14</sup>

iPhones account for 51% of the UK mobile phone market, and 60% of the US market.<sup>15</sup> In 2019 alone, Apple sold 41 million iPads, and consumers spent more than \$54 billion in its App Store.<sup>16</sup> Developers wishing to distribute/sell apps to iPhone users and iPad owners are wholly dependent on the good graces of that store. Hansson, the code-writing race car driver, says Apple's App Store operates according to 'a truly draconian set of rules', and that its retaliation is 'swift and brutal'. In his words, 'It's complete tyranny, and the rules are often interpreted differently...So we live in constant fear we may have violated these vague rules, and that the next update to our application will be blocked by Apple.'<sup>17</sup>

*Big Tech hovers near the top of the economic pyramid. Online businesses lower down that pyramid describe these companies as coercive and rapacious.*

The gist of this 450-page report, produced by a subcommittee dominated by politicians from the US Democratic Party, is that immense power is now concentrated in the hands of Big Tech, and that this power is routinely abused. These companies appropriate other people's intellectual property. They stack the deck in their own favour, writing 'one set of rules for others, while they play by another'. They alter the playing field 'with no prior consultation or meaningful notice'. They issue 'all manner of take-it-or-leave-it demands' to parties considerably smaller and weaker than themselves.<sup>18</sup>

Big Tech hovers near the top of the economic pyramid. Online businesses lower down describe these companies as coercive and rapacious. This isn't an enlightened, more equitable world. It's an unforgiving one in which people live on a knife's edge, knowing their livelihoods can be terminated at a moment's notice. The subcommittee report concludes that Big Tech firms have become 'the kinds of monopolies we last saw in the era of oil barons and railroad tycoons'. It says they 'must be reined in and subject to appropriate oversight...Our economy and democracy are at stake'.<sup>19</sup>

But Big Tech doesn't just control access to commercial markets. It increasingly distorts the marketplace of ideas. These same corporate entities now decide who will have a voice in the public square, and who will be cast out. They determine which ideas may be discussed and which are taboo. They now police the Internet. With wholly private police forces. Who write their own rulebook.

In civilised societies, peremptory, life-altering behaviour is nor-



mally constrained. UK employers, for example, must terminate employees in a fair manner, and behave 'reasonably in the circumstances'. They must provide a 'valid reason', and can't fire someone for doing things other employees also do. Should a complaint be lodged against a staff member, employers are required to investigate the situation fully before taking action. Barring gross misconduct, employees are entitled to adequate notice, which increases in length with the duration of their employment. People who believe they've been fired due to their 'political opinions or affiliation' are automatically entitled to an employment tribunal hearing.<sup>20</sup>

Fair and reasonable treatment. Valid reasons. Consistency. Proper investigations. Adequate notice. An appeals process operated by independent third parties.

Similarly, landlords can't evict even the worst tenants in a trice. Those in 'serious rent arrears' are still entitled to two weeks' notice. Landlords need to secure a court order before evicting someone, and failing to follow the 'correct legal steps' is a criminal offence.<sup>21</sup>

In its earliest days, the Internet promised to be a uniquely democratizing force. *Time* magazine reported in 1993: 'the Internet imposes no restrictions. Anybody can start a discussion on any topic and say anything. There have been sporadic attempts by local network managers to crack down on the raunchier discussion groups, but as Internet pioneer John Gilmore puts it, 'The Net interprets censorship as damage and routes around it.'<sup>22</sup>

Thirty years on, that vision of a decentralized digital world, accessible to all and controlled by none, has faded. As technology journalist Allum Bokhari writes in his 2020 book *#DELETED*, 'a handful of corporations accountable to no one took over the web'. Google, Facebook, and Twitter now 'control the majority of our online conversations'.<sup>23</sup>

Given that many small businesses depend on Big Tech-controlled territory to communicate with their customers (Facebook business pages, mobile app developers, Amazon third party sellers), Bokhari considers the absence of safeguards scandalous. 'Digital landlords can evict you with impunity', he says. You 'have no rights to due process. You can invest millions of dollars into building a business on Facebook or YouTube...You could have spent years...building it up from nothing... people shouldn't be able to rip it away from you on a whim'.<sup>24</sup>

Nothing prevents new management (or new owners) of a tech platform from systematically purging millions of users. Currently, warns Bokhari, Big Tech can legally 'ban you for virtually any reason they can think of'. Even if competing platforms of similar size did exist, he says, that wouldn't be sufficient. The fact that there are thousands of landlords 'doesn't make it acceptable for one of those landlords to evict you because he or she doesn't like the color of your T-shirt. No amount of competition would make that state of affairs acceptable'.<sup>25</sup>

Let us now return to Google, which is more than a content vampire. And more than a search engine with the ability to relegate disfavoured people, ideas, and organizations to page 42 of its search results. Google also owns YouTube – the second most-visited destination on the Internet. While YouTube's official motto used to be 'Broadcast your-

self', the platform is now a seasoned censorship machine.

Sunetra Gupta is an Oxford University epidemiologist. In March 2021, Republican Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida hosted a round table discussion in which Gupta and three other highly-credentialed academics questioned the wisdom of what have become the dominant government responses to COVID-19. Among the matters discussed was whether young children should be compelled to wear facemasks. In Gupta's opinion, masks are inflicting deep psychological damage. During a crucial developmental stage, toddlers are being taught they're a mortal danger to others. Journalists asked questions near the end of this nearly two-hour-long event, and at least one television station live-streamed the proceedings on YouTube, after which a number of recordings remained online.<sup>26</sup>

*While YouTube's official motto used to be 'Broadcast yourself,' the platform is now a seasoned censorship machine.*

Three weeks later, YouTube vaporised those recordings. In the words of a spokesperson: 'YouTube has clear policies around COVID-19 medical misinformation...We removed this video because it included content that contradicts the consensus of local and global health authorities regarding the efficacy of masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19'. DeSantis was understandably apoplectic.<sup>27</sup> He is, after all, Florida's democratically elected leader. Any advice his government receives, whether it proves to be prudent or imprudent in the fullness of time, is part of the historical record. YouTube/Google has tampered with that historical record as surely as if it had ripped pages out of a book.

A decade ago, during an address to the Cambridge Union Society, Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, drew attention to this 'privatization of censorship'. Information of 'historical importance and political importance...is disappearing', he warned. When public discourse takes place on 'private land' controlled by Big Tech, historically important records can be 'ripped out from under us'.<sup>28</sup>

Anna Eskamani, one of 42 Democratic members of the Florida House of Representatives (versus 78 Republicans), appears indifferent to the historical record. But she did choose to insult DeSantis' panelists. It felt, she said, 'like I was watching a bunch of climate deniers acting like they were the experts on climate change. These are not folks who should be given a powerful platform to give public health information'.<sup>29</sup>

Gupta earned her PhD in 1992. Eskamani was aged two at that time, and likely still in diapers. In 2009, honoured by the Royal Society for her scientific achievements, Gupta delivered a lecture titled 'Surviving pandemics: a pathogen's perspective'.<sup>30</sup> Yet a 30-year-old Florida politician, who claims to be a feminist, says that Gupta – a woman-of-colour feminist pioneer in the sciences – isn't the kind of person who should 'be given a powerful platform' to talk about a pandemic.

Eskamani's mention of climate scepticism is instructive, as is YouTube's claim to be censoring material in the service of a public health

'consensus'. We are currently in the midst of an alarming societal shift. Bedrock, default positions are melting away. Free and open debate is no longer acknowledged as a public good, as a necessary precondition of a well-informed electorate. Gone are the days when leftists defended minority voices swimming against the tide. Now, left-wing politicians applaud when massive Silicon Valley corporations target anti-establishment thought. In fact, they demand it.

In January 2020, Kathy Castor, a Democratic Party congresswoman and chair of the US House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis, wrote to Google CEO Sundar Pichai about 'the spread of dangerous climate misinformation on YouTube'. Stopping short of demanding their outright removal, Castor urged Pichai to blacklist videos containing *climate denial*, *climate misinformation*, *climate disinformation*, as well as those promoting 'falsehoods about the causes and effects of the climate crisis'. Her letter fails to define any of these terms, and neither she nor Pichai are climate scientists. That she expects him to nevertheless know which videos she means implies that her real target is non-conformist climate thought per se. Castor wants Pichai to ensure these videos are never recommended to viewers by YouTube's internal mechanisms. She wants him to de-monetize them, preventing their creators from earning advertising revenue. In short, she wants YouTube to bury non-mainstream climate thought so deep no one will stumble across it by accident.<sup>31</sup>

There is no acknowledgment in Castor's letter that free speech and open debate are necessary to a functioning democracy. There is no acknowledgement that the Internet is the public square, a place where ordinary people talk to each another. There will always be mainstream opinions, and alternative opinions. Human beings respond to the world via myriad lenses, including cultural and religious ones. Only in authoritarian regimes is conversation in the public square limited to a single, official perspective.

Google loudly proclaimed its support for free expression in 2017.<sup>32</sup> Two years later, its CEO told an interviewer that YouTube had deleted 9 million videos during the previous three months alone.<sup>33</sup> Where YouTube video channels are concerned, YouTube issues a warning, then suspends a channel (Strike 1), suspends it again (Strike 2) and finally deletes it altogether (Strike 3).

In February 2021, *LifeSiteNews*, an anti-abortion, non-profit Christian information service founded in Canada, announced that its YouTube channel had been deleted. Editor John-Henry Westen says his organization posted 2000 videos on YouTube over the course of a decade, and had never received as much as a warning until after the November 2020 US presidential election.<sup>34</sup>

YouTube temporarily suspended the channel after it posted, in video form, a five-minute audio track in which a Canadian pathologist delivered a statement to a committee of Edmonton City Council explaining that he thought many of our COVID-19 responses were pointless. In his opinion, 'This is the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on an unsuspecting public. There is absolutely nothing that can be done to contain this virus other than protecting older, more vulnerable people...'<sup>35</sup>

YouTube's position is that a physician criticizing *responses* to COVID-19 violates its medical misinformation policy. According to that policy, the profoundly flawed World Health Organization is a font of wisdom that shall not be gainsayed.<sup>36</sup> YouTube has deleted more than 800,000 COVID-related videos.<sup>37</sup>

*LifeSite* received another suspension for a video in which a Catholic bishop explained his reasons for opposing certain brands of COVID-19 vaccine.<sup>38</sup> 'It may sound like a bad joke', writes *LifeSite* editor Westen, 'but we were first given warnings and strikes from YouTube for videos by a nun, a medical doctor, and a bishop...The final couple of strikes leading to our ban were for comments by a vaccine expert and then for...my reading out of a tweet by Bishop Strickland on my show.'<sup>39</sup>

Six weeks after *LifeSite* was obliterated, YouTube slaughtered *theDove*, an Oregon-based non-profit Christian media outlet. 'This removal included over 15,000 videos of our guests and news broadcasts...they are now permanently gone', declares its website.<sup>40</sup> YouTube told a television station it had terminated the channel for violating not only its COVID-19 rules, but its new election integrity policy. The TV station reports that *theDove* appealed each YouTube strike, but lost. It further says YouTube has 'denied *theDove* access to retrieve' its extensive video library.<sup>41</sup> Imagine, if you will, a physical landlord barricading the doors and denying a religious organization the opportunity to recover its worldly possessions.

*Imagine, if you will, a physical landlord barricading the doors and denying a religious organization the opportunity to recover its worldly possessions.*

For years, YouTube has hosted numerous videos alleging Russian interference in the 2016 US election, Russian infiltration of the US government, and an illegitimate Donald Trump victory.<sup>42</sup> Those videos remained online even after the Mueller investigation exhaustively debunked these allegations in 2019. That is how it should be. Everyone should have the opportunity to examine these videos firsthand. Researchers of all stripes require ongoing access to this historically significant material.

YouTube admits, in a blog post titled 'Supporting the 2020 US Election', that 'problematic misinformation represents a fraction of 1% of what's watched on YouTube in the US'. It nevertheless expresses renewed determination to ghettoise non-mainstream perspectives while boosting authoritative sources.<sup>43</sup> YouTube's idea of authoritative is the mainstream media – the same sources that six out of ten Americans no longer believe report the news 'fully, accurately, and fairly'.<sup>44</sup>

The blog post said YouTube would 'start removing any piece of content uploaded today (or anytime after) that misleads people by alleging that widespread fraud or errors changed the outcome of the 2020 US Presidential election.'<sup>45</sup> In other words, a monstrously wealthy multinational corporation has declared that certain arguments and opinions are not to be uttered on Internet territory under its control.

If misleading people is a serious offence, this is a good time to remember that Google earns the vast majority of its income from an activity that misleads the public daily. 83% of its 2019 revenues came from advertising.<sup>46</sup>

Several US states implemented mail-in voting for the first time in 2020. In the real world, things don't work perfectly the first time around. The notion that no anomalies occurred in an election in which a record-breaking number of votes were cast, is difficult to believe. Among the people whose videos have been deleted for unapproved election commentary is Scott Adams, the mild-mannered creator of the *Dilbert* comic strip.<sup>47</sup> He poses this rhetorical question: if someone genuinely believed, as many left-wing Americans do, that Trump is the moral equivalent of Adolph Hitler, would they not feel justified in doing illegal things to prevent his re-election?

Rather than permitting the public to hear a range of arguments and to make up its own mind, Big Tech is adamant there's nothing to discuss. These corporate entities are now working together, in unison, to stamp out debate. Facebook ruled such concerns out-of-bounds 48 hours after the election, when it deleted a 350,000-member Facebook group called Stop the Steal. It said the group 'was organized around the delegitimization of the election process, and we saw worrying calls for violence from some members of the group'.<sup>48</sup>

As tech writer Bokhari reminds us, Silicon Valley companies are full of 'rabid political partisans' who speak openly about orchestrating 'positive social change'. They're 'the ones who define "abuse"...They're the ones who define "misinformation". They're the ones who define "hate speech". They're the ones who define "violence"'.<sup>49</sup>

In early January 2021, Facebook's 36-year-old CEO played judge, jury, and executioner. Blaming Trump for the behaviour of a group of rioters, adults who are legally responsible for their own actions, Mark Zuckerberg declared (*italics added*):

*...we have allowed President Trump to use our platform...at times removing content or labeling his posts when they violate our policies...We believe the risks of allowing the President to continue to use our service during this period are simply too great. Therefore, we are extending the block we have placed on his Facebook and Instagram accounts indefinitely...<sup>50</sup>*

It is not the business of any corporate entity to review and expunge the proclamations of any world leader. Citizens have a right to hear the unedited words of their presidents and prime

ministers – whether those words be fair or foul. Nor should there ever be any doubt amongst world leaders themselves that they are hearing each other’s actual, intended message. Corporations who tamper with presidential communications are interfering in matters of state. They are undermining democracy. They are threatening national security. They are treading where angels dare not.

Which brings us to Twitter. With an estimated 350 million users, Twitter is the poor cousin, the straggler. Facebook, by comparison, has 2700 million users. WhatsApp and Instagram (both owned by Facebook) have 2000 million and 1200 million respectively. YouTube has 2300 million users.<sup>51</sup>

Nevertheless, observes Bokhari, Twitter is ‘a platform of profound political importance’. It’s the place where ‘grassroots activists, journalists, and members of the intelligentsia meet’. Social movements from across the political spectrum ‘have used Twitter to leap into the national discourse at a rate far faster than they had been able to do before Twitter existed’.<sup>52</sup>

On the day that hundreds of Trump supporters violently stormed Congress following what had been a much larger, peaceful rally, Big Tech companies acted in concert in real time. Twitter disabled retweets, likes, and replies associated with a one-minute video posted by Trump, before deleting it altogether. Facebook and YouTube also quickly removed it. In this video, he addresses his supporters:

I know your pain. I know your hurt. We had an election that was stolen from us. It was a landslide election, and everyone knows it. Especially the other side. But you have to go home now. We have to have peace. We have to have law and order. We have to respect our great people in law and order. We don’t want anybody hurt...we can’t play into the hands of these people. We have to have peace...go home, and go home in peace.<sup>53</sup>

This calming message failed to ring out across the Internet. The corporate entities that now control vast sections of cyberspace simply won’t allow election fraud to be discussed. The topic is verboten. Taboo. So adamant is Big Tech about enforcing this taboo, it took the extraordinary step of disabling the microphone of America’s democratically elected leader, during what many have described as a moment of national crisis.



Much more might be said about Big Tech’s efforts to stifle public discourse. Facebook’s ‘fact-checking’ is a sham. Whether the topic is climate change, or US President Joe Biden’s connection to controversial legislation, these fact-checks are highly misleading.<sup>54</sup> This is just another mechanism by which Big Tech tries to convince us that conventional, mainstream thought is the One Anointed Truth.

The assault on Parler.com, a comparatively tiny social media company, further demonstrates Big Tech’s antipathy to free speech. In the words of journalist Glenn Greenwald, ‘three Silicon

Valley monopolies – Amazon, Google, and Apple – abruptly united to remove Parler from the Internet, exactly at the moment when it became the most-downloaded app’. Critics have been told for years, he says, that if they don’t like how Big Tech behaves, they should start their own companies. Writing in January 2021, Greenwald declared: ‘If one were looking for evidence to demonstrate that these tech behemoths are, in fact, monopolies that...will obliterate any attempt to compete with them in the marketplace, it would be difficult to imagine anything more compelling...’<sup>455</sup>

*...nothing limits censorship on the part of the powerful corporations who now run the Internet.*

Governments are constrained by common law, strong free press traditions, document retention rules, Freedom of Information legislation, and elections. In sharp contrast, nothing limits censorship on the part of the powerful corporations who now run the Internet.

In sum: every one of us is more vulnerable than we realize. Individuals. Businesses. Elected leaders. At any moment, Big Tech can take us offline. It can exile us from the digital public square. When that occurs, there will be no due process. There will be no neutral third party to hear our side of the story.

Important relationships end all the time, of course. Individuals, as well as businesses, go their separate ways. But Big Tech is punitive and spiteful. Like an abusive spouse, it changes the locks, burns your stuff in a bonfire, and asks what you’re going to do about it.

## Notes

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The Global Warming Policy Forum is the campaigning arm of the Global Warming Policy Foundation, an all-party and non-party think tank and a registered educational charity which, while open-minded on the contested science of global warming, is deeply concerned about the costs and other implications of many of the policies currently being advocated.

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