

# Corporate Censorship Brought Us the America I Always Feared

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*When I was in Iran earlier this year, the government there blocked Twitter, deciding for a whole nation what they can not see. In America, Twitter purges users, deciding for a whole nation what they can not see. It matters little whose hand is on the switch, the end result is the same. This is the America I always feared I'd see.*

Speech in America is an unalienable right, and goes as deep into the concept of a free society as any idea can. Thomas Jefferson wrote of the right flowing from his notion of a Creator, not from government. Jefferson's 18th century invocation is [understood](#) now as less that free speech is heaven-sent and more that it is something existing above government. And so the argument the First Amendment applies only to government and not to all public speaking (including private platforms like Twitter) is thus both true and irrelevant, and the latter is more important.

The government remains a terrifying threat to free speech. An Espionage Act [prosecution](#) against Wikileaks' Julian Assange will create precedent for use against any mainstream journalist. The war on [whistleblowers](#) which started under Obama continues under Trump. Media are forced to [register](#) as propaganda agents. Universities [restrict controversial](#) speakers. The Trump administration no doubt will break the record (77%) for [redacting](#) or denying access to government files under the Freedom of Information Act.

But there is another threat to freedom of speech now, corporate censorship. It is often dressed up with NewSpeak terms like deplatforming, restricting [hate speech](#), or simply applying [Terms of Service](#). Corporations always did what they wanted with speech. Our protection against corporate overreach used to rely on an idea Americans once held dear, enshrined as "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend your right to say it." The concept was core to a democracy: everyone supports the right of others to throw ideas into the marketplace independent. An informed people would sort through it all, and bad ideas would be pushed away by better ones. That system more or less worked for 240 years.

For lack of a more precise starting point, the election of Donald Trump did away with near-universal agreement on defending the right to speak without defending the content, driven by a belief too much free speech helped Trump get elected. Large numbers of Americans began not just to tolerate, but to *demand* censorship. They wanted universities to deplatform speakers they did not agree with, giggling over the fact the old-timey 1A didn't apply and there was nothing "conservatives" could do. They expressed themselves in violence, demanding censorship by "[punching Nazis](#)." Such brownshirt-like violence was

endorsed by [The Nation](#), once America's clearest voice for freedom. The most startling change came within the American Civil Liberties Union, who enshrined the "defend the right, not the speech" concept in the 1970s when it defended the free speech rights of Nazis, and went on to defend the speech rights of white supremacists in Charlottesville.

Not so much anymore. The ACLU now applies a [test](#) to the free speech cases it will defend, weighing their impact on other rights (for example, the right to say the N-word versus the rights of POC.) The ACLU in 2018 is siding with those who believe speech can be [secondary](#) to other political goals. Censorship has a place, says the ACLU, when it serves what they believe is a greater good.

A growing segment of public opinion isn't just in favor of this, it demands it. So when years-old tweets clash with 2018 definitions of racism and sexism, companies fire employees. Under public pressure, [Amazon](#) removed "Nazi paraphernalia and other far-right junk" from its online store. It was actually just some nasty Halloween gear and Confederate flag merch, but the issue is not the value of the products — that's part of any free speech debate — it's corporate censorship being used to stifle debate by literally in this case pulling things out of the marketplace.

Alex Jones' InfoWars was [deplatformed](#) off download sites where it has been available for years, including Apple, YouTube (owned by Google), Spotify, and Amazon, for promoting "hate speech." Huffington Post [wondered](#) why more platforms, such as Instagram, haven't done away with Jones and his hate speech.

That term, hate speech, clearly [not prohibited](#) by the Supreme Court, is an umbrella word now used by censorship advocates for, well, basically anything they don't want others to be able to listen to or watch. It is very flexible and thus very dangerous. As during the [McCarthy-era](#) in the 1950s when one needed only to label something "Communist" to have it banned, so it is today with the new mark of "hate speech." The parallels are chilling — it was in the McCarthy-era Hollywood created its infamous blacklists, actors and writers who could not work because of their political beliefs.

Twitter is perhaps the most infamous platform to censor its content. The site bans advertising from Russian media outlets RT and Sputnik. Twitter suspends the accounts of those who promote (what it defines as) hate and violence, "[shadow bans](#)" others to limit their audience, and tweaks its trending topics to push certain political ideas and downplay others. It regularly purges users and bans "[hateful symbols](#)." There are near-daily demands by increasingly organized groups calling on Twitter to censor specific users, with Trump at the top of that list. The point is always the same: to limit what ideas you can be exposed to and narrow debate.

Part of the 2018 problem is the trust people place in "good companies" like Amazon, Facebook, and Twitter. Anthropomorphizing them as Jeff, and Zuck, and @jack is popular, along with a focus on their "values." It seems to make sense, especially now when many of the people making decisions on corporate censorship are the same age and hold the same political views as those demanding they do it.

Of course people age, values shift, what seems good to block today might change. But the main problem is companies exist to make money and will do what they need to do to make money. You can't count on them past that. Handing over free speech rights to an entity

whose core purpose has nothing to do with free speech means they will quash ideas when they conflict with what they are really about. People who gleefully celebrate the fact that @jack who runs Twitter is not held back by the 1A and can censor at will seem to believe he will always yield his power in the way they want him to.

Google has a slogan reading “do no evil.” Yet in China Google will soon deploy [Dragonfly](#), a version of its search engine that will meet Beijing’s demands for censorship by blocking websites on command. Of course in China they don’t call it hate speech, they call it anti-societal speech, and the propaganda Google will block isn’t from Russian bots but from respected global media. In the U.S. Google [blocks](#) users from their own documents saved in Drive if the service feels the documents are “abusive.” Back in China [Apple](#) removes apps from its store on command of the government in return for market access. [Amazon](#), who agreed to remove hateful merch from its store in the U.S., the same week confirmed it is “unwaveringly committed to the U.S. government and the governments we work with around the world” using its AI and facial recognition technology to spy on their own people. Faced with the loss of billions of dollars, as was the case for Google and Apple in China, what will corporations do in America?

Once upon a time an easy solution to corporate censorship was to take one’s business elsewhere. The 2018 problem is with the scale of platforms like Amazon, near global monopolies all. Pretending Amazon, which owns the Washington Post, and with the reach to influence elections, is just another company that sells things is to pretend the role of unfettered debate in a free society is outdated. Yeah, you can for now still go through hoops to download stuff outside the Apple store or Google Play, but those platforms more realistically control access to your device. Censored on Twitter? No problem big guy, go try Myspace, and maybe Bing will notice you. Technology and market dominance changed the nature of censorship so free speech is as much about finding an audience as it is about finding a place to speak. Corporate censorship is at the cutting edge of a reality targeting both speakers (Twitter suspends someone) and listeners (Apple won’t post that person’s videos made off-platform). Ideas need to be discoverable to enter the debate; in 1776 you went to the town square. In 2018 it’s Twitter.

In the run up to the midterm elections, Senator [Chris Murphy](#), ironically in a tweet, demanded social media censor more aggressively for the “survival of our democracy,” implying those companies can act as [proxies](#) for those still held back by the First Amendment. We already know the companies involved [can](#) censor. The debate is over what happens when they do.

A PERSONAL NOTE: Some readers are aware I have been permanently suspended from Twitter as @wemeantwell. This followed exchanges with several mainstream journalists over their support for America’s wars and unwillingness to challenge government lies. Twitter sent an auto-response saying what I wrote “harasses, intimidates, or uses fear to silence someone else’s voice.” I don’t think I did any of that, and I wish you didn’t have to accept my word on it. I wish instead you could read what I wrote and decide for yourself. But Twitter won’t allow it. Twitter says you cannot read and make up your own mind. They have in fact eliminated all the things I have ever written there over seven years, disappeared me down the Memory Hole. That’s why all censorship is wrong; it takes the power to decide what is right and wrong away from you and gives it to someone else.

I lost my career at the State Department because I spoke out as a whistleblower against the Iraq War. I’ve now been silenced, again, for speaking out, this time by a corporation. I am

living in the America I always feared.

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