

Internet Censorship, Everywhere All at Once

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It used to be a truth universally acknowledged by citizens of democratic nations that freedom of speech was the basis not just of democracy, but of all human rights.

When a person or group can censor the speech of others, there is – by definition – an imbalance of power. Those exercising the power can decide what information and which opinions are allowed, and which should be suppressed. In order to maintain their power, they will naturally suppress information and views that challenge their position.

Free speech is the only peaceful way to hold those in power accountable, challenge potentially harmful policies, and expose corruption. Those of us privileged to live in democracies instinctively understand this nearly sacred value of free speech in maintaining our free and open societies.

Or do we?

Alarmingly, it seems like many people in what we call democratic nations are losing that understanding. And they seem willing to cede their freedom of speech to governments, organizations, and Big Tech companies who, supposedly, need to control the flow of information to keep everyone “safe.”

The locus for the disturbing shift away from free speech is the 21st-century's global public square: the Internet. And the proclaimed reasons for allowing those in power to diminish our free speech on the Internet are: “disinformation” and “hate speech.”

In this article, I will review the three-step process by which anti-disinformation laws are introduced. Then, I will review some of the laws being rolled out in multiple countries almost simultaneously, and what such laws entail in terms of vastly increasing the potential for censorship of the global flow of information.

How to Pass Censorship Laws

Step 1: Declare an existential threat to democracy and human rights

Step 2: Assert that the solution will protect democracy and human rights

Step 3: Enact anti-democratic, anti-human rights censorship fast and in unison

Lies, propaganda, “deep fakes,” and all manner of misleading information have always been present on the Internet. The vast global information hub that is the World Wide Web inevitably provides opportunities for criminals and other nefarious actors, including child sex traffickers and evil dictators.

At the same time, the Internet has become the central locus of open discourse for the world’s population, democratizing access to information and the ability to publish one’s views to a global audience.

The good and bad on the Internet reflect the good and bad in the real world. And when we regulate the flow of information on the Internet, the same careful balance between blocking truly dangerous actors, while retaining maximum freedom and democracy, must apply.

Distressingly, the recent slew of laws governing Internet information are significantly skewed in the direction of limiting free speech and increasing censorship. The reason, the regulators claim, is that fake news, disinformation, and hate speech are existential threats to democracy and human rights.

Here are examples of dire warnings, issued by leading international organizations, about catastrophic threats to our very existence purportedly posed by disinformation:

Propaganda, misinformation and fake news have the potential to polarise public opinion, to promote violent extremism and hate speech and, ultimately, to undermine democracies and reduce trust in the democratic processes. –[Council of Europe](#)

The world must address the grave global harm caused by the proliferation of hate and lies in the digital space.–[United Nations](#)

Online hate speech and disinformation have long incited violence, and sometimes mass atrocities. –[World Economic Forum \(WEF\)/The New Humanitarian](#)

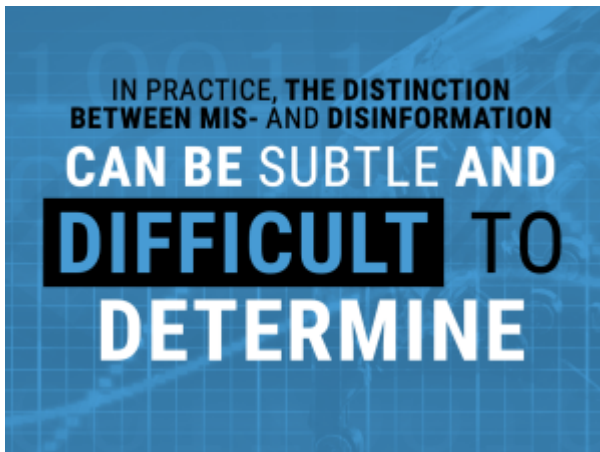
Considering the existential peril of disinformation and hate speech, these same groups assert that any solution will obviously promote the opposite:

Given such a global threat, we clearly need a global solution. And, of course, such a solution will increase democracy, protect the rights of vulnerable populations, and respect human rights. –[WEF](#)

Moreover, beyond a mere assertion that increasing democracy and respecting human rights are built into combating disinformation, international law must be invoked.

In its Common Agenda Policy Brief from June 2023, [Information Integrity on Digital Platforms](#), the UN details the international legal framework for efforts to counter hate speech and disinformation.

Image is a screenshot from the [UN Report](#)



First, it reminds us that freedom of expression and information are fundamental human rights:

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and article 19 (2) of the Covenant protect the right to freedom of expression, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, and through any media.

Linked to freedom of expression, freedom of information is itself a right. The General Assembly has stated: "Freedom of information is a fundamental human right and is the touchstone of all the freedoms to which the United Nations is consecrated." (p. 9)

Then, the UN brief explains that disinformation and hate speech are such colossal, all-encompassing evils that their very existence is antithetical to the enjoyment of any human rights:

Hate speech has been a precursor to atrocity crimes, including genocide. The 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide prohibits "direct and public incitement to commit genocide".

In its resolution 76/227, adopted in 2021, the General Assembly emphasized that all forms of disinformation can negatively impact the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals. Similarly, in its resolution 49/21, adopted in 2022, the Human Rights Council affirmed that disinformation can negatively affect the enjoyment and realization of all human rights.

This convoluted maze of legalese leads to an absurd, self-contradictory sequence of illogic:

- Everything the UN is supposed to protect is founded on the freedom of information, which along with free speech is a fundamental human right.
- The UN believes hate speech and disinformation destroy all human rights.
- THEREFORE, anything we do to combat hate speech and disinformation protects all human rights, even if it abrogates the fundamental human rights of free

speech and information, on which all other rights depend.

- Because: genocide!

In practice, what this means is that, although the UN at one point in its history considered the freedom of speech and information fundamental to all other rights, it now believes the dangers of hate speech and disinformation eclipse the importance of protecting those rights.

The same warping of democratic values, as delineated by our international governing body, is now occurring in democracies the world over.

Censorship Laws and Actions All Happening Now

If hate speech and disinformation are the precursors of inevitable genocidal horrors, the only way to protect the world is through a coordinated international effort. Who should lead this campaign?

[According to the WEF](#), “Governments can provide some of the most significant solutions to the crisis by enacting far-reaching regulations.”

Which is exactly what they’re doing.

United States

In the US, freedom of speech is enshrined in the Constitution, so it’s hard to pass laws that might violate it.

Instead, the government can work with academic and nongovernmental organizations to strong-arm social media companies into censoring disfavored content. The result is the [Censorship-Industrial Complex](#), a vast network of government-adjacent academic and nonprofit “anti-disinformation” outfits, all ostensibly mobilized to control online speech in order to protect us from whatever they consider to be the next civilization-annihilating calamity.

The Twitter Files and recent court cases reveal how the US government uses these groups to pressure online platforms to censor content it doesn’t like:

- [Twitter Files on Covid](#)
- [Discovery in Missouri v Biden Covid censorship lawsuit](#)
- [Potential discovery in Berenson v Biden lawsuit](#)

1. THREAD:

THE TWITTER FILES: HOW TWITTER RIGGED THE COVID DEBATE

- By censoring info that was true but inconvenient to U.S. govt. policy
- By discrediting doctors and other experts who disagreed
- By suppressing ordinary users, including some sharing the CDC’s *own data*

— David Zweig (@davidzweig) [December 26, 2022](#)

Google

In some cases, companies may even take it upon themselves to control the narrative according to their own politics and professed values, with no need for government intervention. For example: Google, the most powerful information company in the world, has been reported to fix its algorithms to promote, demote, and disappear content according to undisclosed internal “fairness” guidelines.

This was revealed by a whistleblower named [Zach Vorhies](#) in his almost completely ignored book, [Google Leaks](#), and by Project Veritas, in [a sting operation against Jen Gennai](#), Google’s Head of Responsible Innovation.

In their benevolent desire to protect us from hate speech and disinformation, Google/YouTube [immediately removed](#) the original Project Veritas video from the Internet.

European Union

The [Digital Services Act](#) came into force November 16, 2022. The [European Commission](#) rejoiced that “The responsibilities of users, platforms, and public authorities are rebalanced according to European values.” Who decides what the responsibilities and what the “European values” are?

- very large platforms and very large online search engines [are obligated] to prevent the misuse of their systems by taking risk-based action and by independent audits of their risk management systems
- EU countries will have the primary [oversight] role, supported by a new European Board for Digital Services

Brownstone contributor [David Thunder explains](#) how the act provides an essentially unlimited potential for censorship:

This piece of legislation holds freedom of speech hostage to the ideological proclivities of unelected European officials and their armies of “trusted flaggers.”

The European Commission is also giving itself the power to declare a Europe-wide emergency that would allow it to demand extra interventions by digital platforms to counter a public threat.

UK

The [Online Safety Bill](#) was passed September 19, 2023. The UK government says “It will make social media companies more responsible for their users’ safety on their platforms.”

[According to Internet watchdog Reclaim the Net](#), this bill constitutes one of the widest sweeping attacks on privacy and free speech in a Western democracy:

The bill imbues the government with tremendous power; the capability to demand that online services employ government-approved software to scan through user content, including photos, files, and messages, to identify illegal content.

The [Electronic Frontier Foundation](#), a nonprofit dedicated to defending civil liberties in the

digital world, warns: “the law would create [a blueprint for repression around the world](#).”

Australia

The [Communications Legislation Amendment \(Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation\) Bill 2023](#) was released in draft form June 25, 2023 and is expected to pass by the end of 2023. the Australian government says:

The new powers will enable the ACMA [Australian Communications and Media Authority] to monitor efforts and require digital platforms to do more, placing Australia at the forefront in tackling harmful online misinformation and disinformation, while balancing freedom of speech.

Reclaim the Net [explains](#):

This legislation hands over a wide range of new powers to ACMA, which includes the enforcement of an industry-wide “standard” that will obligate digital platforms to remove what they determine as misinformation or disinformation.

Brownstone contributor Rebekah Barnett [elaborates](#):

Controversially, the government will be exempt from the proposed laws, as will professional news outlets, meaning that ACMA will not compel platforms to police misinformation and disinformation disseminated by official government or news sources.

The legislation will enable the proliferation of official narratives, whether true, false or misleading, while quashing the opportunity for dissenting narratives to compete.

Canada

[The Online Streaming Act \(Bill C-10\)](#) became law April 27, 2023. Here’s how the Canadian government describes it, as it relates to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC):

The legislation clarifies that online streaming services fall under the Broadcasting Act and ensures that the CRTC has the proper tools to put in place a modern and flexible regulatory framework for broadcasting. These tools include the ability to make rules, gather information, and assign penalties for non-compliance.

[According to Open Media](#), a community-driven digital rights organization,

Bill C-11 gives the CRTC unprecedented regulatory authority to monitor all online audiovisual content. This power extends to penalizing content creators and platforms and through them, content creators that fail to comply.

World Health Organization

In its proposed new Pandemic Treaty and in the amendments to its International Health Regulations, all of which it hopes to pass in 2024, [the WHO seeks to](#) enlist member governments to

Counter and address the negative impacts of health-related misinformation, disinformation, hate speech and stigmatization, especially on social media platforms, on people's physical and mental health, in order to strengthen pandemic prevention, preparedness and response, and foster trust in public health systems and authorities.

Brownstone contributor [David Bell writes](#) that essentially this will give the WHO, an unelected international body,

power to designate opinions or information as 'mis-information or disinformation, and require country governments to intervene and stop such expression and dissemination. This ... is, of course, incompatible with the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), but these seem no longer to be guiding principles for the WHO.

Conclusion

We are at a pivotal moment in the history of Western democracies. Governments, organizations and companies have more power than ever to decide what information and views are expressed on the Internet, the global public square of information and ideas.

It is natural that those in power should want to limit expression of ideas and dissemination of information that might challenge their position. They may believe they are using censorship to protect us from grave harms of disinformation and hate speech, or they may be using those reasons cynically to consolidate their control over the flow of information.

Either way, censorship inevitably entails the suppression of free speech and information, without which democracy cannot exist.

Why are the citizens of democratic nations acquiescing to the usurpation of their fundamental human rights? One reason may be the relatively abstract nature of rights and freedoms in the digital realm.

In the past, when censors burned books or jailed dissidents, citizens could easily recognize these harms and imagine how awful it would be if such negative actions were turned against them. They could also weigh the very personal and imminent negative impact of widespread censorship against much less prevalent dangers, such as child sex trafficking or genocide. Not that those dangers would be ignored or downplayed, but it would be clear that measures to combat such dangers should not include widespread book burning or jailing of regime opponents.

In the virtual world, if it's not your post that is removed, or your video that is banned, it can be difficult to fathom the wide-ranging harm of massive online information control and censorship. It is also much easier online than in the real world to exaggerate the dangers of relatively rare threats, like pandemics or foreign interference in democratic processes. The same powerful people, governments, and companies that can censor online information can also flood the online space with [propaganda](#), terrifying citizens in the virtual space into giving up their real-world rights.

The conundrum for free and open societies has always been the same: How to protect human rights and democracy from hate speech and disinformation without destroying human rights and democracy in the process.

The answer embodied in the recent coordinated enactment of global censorship laws is not

encouraging for the future of free and open societies.

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