



Chris Hedges: Ukraine, Iran, Twitter Files, Media Censorship & Assange

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Zain Raza (ZR): Thank you guys for tuning in today and welcome to another episode of The Source. I'm Zain Raza and today we'll be talking to Chris Hedges, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, bestselling author and the host of The Chris Hedges Report on The Real News Network. Chris, thank you so much for your time today.

Chris Hedges (CH): Sure. Thanks for doing it.

ZR: Let us begin this segment with the war in Ukraine. Denazification, demilitarisation were the reasons given by the Russian state to go inside Ukraine and start a war. It said that it would like to eliminate any threats that it poses to its own security and the existence of the Russian state. Do you think that these reasons had any legitimacy?

CH: Yes, completely. That doesn't justify the war, which under post Nuremberg laws is a criminal war of aggression, which all preemptive war is. But I think it's fair to say that Russia was baited into the war going all the way back to 1989. I was in Eastern Europe in 1989, I covered the revolutions in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Romania. I was there when the promises were made to Gorbachev by Hans-Dietrich Genscher, the German Foreign Minister, Margaret Thatcher, James Baker, who was then the US Secretary of State, that NATO would not be expanded beyond the borders of a unified Germany. Indeed, NATO was rendered obsolete. NATO founded in 1949, was designed to prevent Soviet expansion into Central and Eastern Europe. Gorbachev not only did not pose a threat, the new Russian Federation did not pose a threat in the wake of the Soviet Union, the collapse of the Soviet Union. But Gorbachev, like Yeltsin, and people forget, like Putin in the early years, wanted to build a security alliance with Europe and the West. But of course, you had powerful forces; I would say two. One, the weapons industry, which saw in the expansion of NATO billions in profits, which came to pass. And you also saw the arrogance and the hubris of Washington, which at

the end of the Cold War began to speak about what they called a unipolar world. And by that, it meant total US domination, total US hegemony. They saw, correctly, that the Russian state was battered, weak, not a threat to its neighbours, much less to the United States. And it felt that it could do anything it wanted, including expanding NATO up to Russia's borders. So I think it was those two forces. There were frequent protests by Moscow, coupled with frequent breaking of promises by Washington under the Clinton administration, for instance, promised not to station NATO troops in the New NATO countries. We now, I think, have upwards of 100,000. There's a NATO missile base now a hundred miles from the Russian border. And then we have to talk about Ukraine. So Ukraine, which Barack Obama recognised as within Russia's sphere of influence, the US meddled in the 2014, let's call it a coup or overthrow of a government that had good relations with Moscow, and then that triggered a kind of civil war. I think there were 14,000 casualties. Remember, much of that eastern part of Ukraine is ethnically Russian. And then Ukraine became a kind of de facto NATO country. 100,000 Ukrainian soldiers were trained by NATO, there were American advisors, British advisers, they were sending weapons. So all of these were clear provocations that Russia had warned against. And we know, for instance, from the WikiLeaks diplomatic cables that were released, fully understood by Russian experts, including the now head of the CIA, who was then the ambassador to Moscow, Burns, who said that meddling in Ukraine would provoke Russia across the political spectrum. It was interpreted across the political spectrum in Russia as a threat, and perceived as a threat. So the forces that pushed Putin to invasion and again, I am not in any way endorsing or defending- to understand is not to condone. I'm not there to support the invasion of Ukraine, but it was totally predictable. In fact, I wrote a column at the inception of the invasion called Chronicle of a War Foretold. So you had Sovietologists, just like George Kennan, who called the expansion of NATO the greatest blunder of post-Cold War history. You've had figures like Henry Kissinger, not a figure I have much admiration for, but he certainly understood or understands the danger and has called for swift negotiations and arms shipments. And even The New York Times, which has been very pro-war, wrote an editorial a couple of months ago, said, this idea of allowing Kiev to reconquer territory was folly, that there would have to be a kind of land-for-peace deal. But as long as billions in arms shipments continue to pour into Ukraine, you're not going to see a cessation of the war. And of course, this has made the arms manufacturers staggering profits. You also have internal forces in Ukraine. I don't think the neo-Nazi elements are very large or it's hard to estimate, let's say 10%, but they have militias, armed militias, the Azov battalion, etc.. And remember, Zelensky ran as a peace candidate. He announced that he spoke Russian and he would rebuild relations with Moscow, etc.. And from all I can read is that these kind of proto fascist, neo nazi forces made it very clear to Zelensky that if he wanted to remain in power and perhaps remain alive, he better change his attitude towards Moscow, which he did. So these are all the forces that led to the tragedy. And of course, the people who are suffering the most are the Ukrainians. They are essentially pawns in this power play because the reason Washington is providing the billions in weaponry and support has very little to do with Ukraine and has to do with degrading Russia's military capabilities. So who's going to piece Ukraine back together? Well, you can look at past conflicts going all the way back to the war

in El Salvador, which I covered, but Afghanistan, Iraq, anywhere else. So it's Ukrainian blood and it's Ukrainian devastation. And I think we have to be fair to the poor families of the Russian conscripts. So it's a very, very cynical move and very dangerous, as Kissinger and others have pointed out, to corner and humiliate Putin; although that's not gone particularly well because we're dealing with a very significant nuclear power.

ZR: I talked to Noam Chomsky over the summers and he said the same thing as you did, that there was plenty of provocation but no justification. I've talked to others on the left, for example, Paul Jay and even Daniel Ellsberg and they stated that -to provide a counter argument- that the NATO presence did not threaten Russian existence. Because NATO is also present in Latvia, which is very close to Russia, shares a border. We see that in the Scandinavian countries and NATO is also present in Poland. So if that didn't pose a threat to the Russian state and Ukraine, didn't give NATO a strategic advantage, there was no justification or legitimacy to the war. So how do you counter this argument? Because we also see this in mainstream media being made. And how do you see that as somebody who's been covering this issue for such a long time?

CH: Well, there was a steady encroachment of NATO on Russian borders, which Moscow vigorously protested. But I think Ukraine was just a step too far, understandably. Ukraine is an extremely large country. It was used twice in the last century to invade Russia. At the end of World War One and then, of course, with the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, and then in the century before, of course, Napoleon. So there is historical trauma. But I don't think any or I don't think the United States would have reacted much differently if, for instance, this was happening in Mexico or Canada. And we can go back and look at Cuba. The Cuban Missile Crisis, which was solved through almost daily contact between Khrushchev and Kennedy. Whereas Washington doesn't really want to talk to anybody. I mean, there have been communications with the Russian defence minister, etc. but the one attempt we had in negotiations that were set up by Turkey, were scuttled by the United States. They made it very clear to Zelensky that they didn't want him to go.

ZR: Let's talk about the recent developments in Ukraine. Ukraine's military has gained significant momentum, according to the mainstream media, since September, in pushing Russia out of the northeast and southern part of the country, reclaiming 54% of Russian controlled territory, including strategic cities. Russia is up the ante by targeting power and energy infrastructures in Ukraine. How do you assess the war at this stage, do you think the tie is changing in favour of Ukraine and that the sanctions as well as the US military aid is having an effect?

CH: Well, it's a kind of ebb and flow. It's a war. It's largely a massive artillery duel along hundreds of miles of front lines. The Russian military has proved to be rather inept from the inception of the invasion. But by destroying the infrastructure, especially the power infrastructure, this will have crippling effects on Ukraine. It's precisely, by the way, what the

United States did before the invasion of Iraq. And if Putin continues to prosecute this war, he has numbers and resources that Ukraine just can't match. And there are stories now of Russia raising a 200,000 man force to begin an offensive. But I think there is a kind of push and pull that we're seeing. We saw the Pentagon call for negotiations because, of course, they can read the military conflict in a way that perhaps the civilians cannot, and understand that this is evolving into an extremely long war of attrition. And I think that's a better way to characterise and I don't see that Moscow has lost its resolve. And with the energy infrastructure decimated, it's going to be extremely difficult- over the long term- for Ukraine to prosecute this war, as was true in Iraq.

ZR: There's a lot of talks going on about diplomacy at the moment. So beginning December, President Macron stated that the only way to end the war is negotiation. He held a joint news conference, President Biden at the White House, during which Biden said he would consider diplomacy with Putin to end the war, if Putin is ready for it. The German chancellor Olaf Scholz also reportedly spoke to Vladimir Putin for an hour. It seems that the West is shifting its position from support of the Ukrainian military at all costs towards diplomacy. How do you assess the shifting rhetoric and do you think this a tactic by the West or do you think there is some genuine intention to halt this war?

CH: No, the West is completely divided. So Europe, which is paying the price in terms of energy bills and inflation and everything else; the German industry has taken a tremendous hit. But the United States is not paying the price. So there is this sentiment within Europe, but that sentiment doesn't exist in Washington. And Washington is quite happy to sacrifice both Europe and Ukraine for its geopolitical ends, and that's what we're seeing. So this division within the West if it continues and if Europe suffers economically at the level that it is suffering now, I think that will exacerbate these divisions between Washington and Europe. So there is no unification within the West. That's just lip service. Washington has made no effort nor shown any inclination to negotiate.

ZR: I want to rewind a few months. In September, the Nord Stream pipeline was sabotaged. Basically, somebody bombed that pipeline. Western nations, as well as the media, blamed Russia for the attack, whereas the Russian state accused the UK Navy for doing it. Majority media, especially in Germany, did not even entertain the theory that the US could be behind the attacks and were quick to point the finger at Russia. Anybody who strayed away from this and tried to investigate any alternative theories was considered a conspiracy theorist. According to your assessment, who would have the motive to conduct this attack as well as benefit from it?

CH: I don't see why the Russians would blow up their own pipeline. But that's conjecture. I was a reporter most of my life, and I can tell you that once a war starts, both sides lie like they breathe. And I never believed even the sides I was very sympathetic with the Palestinians or the FMLN [Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional] in El

Salvador or anywhere else. Lying is part of the tactic of war for many reasons. And unless you're on the ground or unless you have hard evidence, everyone should be very sceptical. So this is total conjecture. I don't pretend that I know or have a hard opinion, but I have a hard time understanding why the Russians would have blown it up.

ZR: I would like to also talk about this justification and understanding thing that you mentioned at the beginning. In the German media landscape, at least cultural debate that's happening around this war, there's the moment you start providing reasons and background and NATO, you get put into the, I would say, drawer, which is called trying to justify Putin's war or a Putin stooge or a Russia state advocate. How do you see this? Why is this tactic being used and what purpose does it serve but putting people that are trying to provide context and understanding in the same place as where Putin is?

CH: Well, because they have to create a binary narrative of between good and evil. You know, every everybody we fight, whether it's Saddam Hussein or Vladimir Putin, becomes the new Hitler. The Ukrainians become the angels or the defenders of liberty and democracy. This is a cartoon vision, of course, of what's happening. But this happens in every conflict. But I think it's especially important for those who are prosecuting the war to maintain that narrative, because we're not directly involved in Ukraine. And at a certain point, especially with the economic suffering that is afflicting Europe and not to a lesser extent, the United States, people are going to ask, why are we pumping all this money into Ukraine? We've given more money to Ukraine, the United States, than we spend on our annual budget of the State Department. And so I think that there's special vigilance in terms of shutting down voices. But, you know, this is taking that conflict out of context; the Israelis are quite good about doing this vis a vis the Palestinians. But it's the equivalent of accusing somebody who talks about the Versailles Treaty and the onerous reparations that were imposed on Germany as leading or causing the rise of fascism as being a fascist. It didn't make any sense. I mean, if we don't understand how these processes work, then we're not going to prevent a crisis from happening.

ZR: I would like to examine militarisation, which you just briefly mentioned. The US Senate recently passed the legislation on authorising a record 858 billion in annual defence spending. Germany, just a few days ago approved 8.8 billion purchase of US F-35 fighter jets that was produced by Lockheed Martin and can carry potential nuclear warheads. Additionally, the US recently gave 400 million in military assistance to Ukraine and since the Biden administration came into power, we are close to 20 billion. When it comes to social spending we see countless hours of debates and stalemate, but when it comes to military spending we don't see the same, let alone discussion in the mainstream media that puts domestic social spending in contrast to military spending. Why do you think this is the case?

CH: Because you can't defy the war industry or your political career is finished. Even Bernie Sanders won't defy the war industry. And that's why Carl Leipnik called the military the

enemy from within. They're hollowing the United States out from the inside. I don't know if you've been recently to the states, but our infrastructure is out of the developing world. Our trains are a wreck. Our bridges and roads are decayed. Our cities are in ruins. I mean, it's a classic oligarch state with a concentration of wealth in the hands of a few and well over 50% of the population struggling at subsistence level. You see, of course, this is true in the UK, which has better social services. I mean, they have the NHS, which we don't have, but there's this neoliberal assault and deregulation which has distorted these countries and of course fuelled the rise of proto fascist movements in Germany and in the United States, Hungary, everywhere else. It has the same cause, these vast economic distortions and the callousness of the neoliberal state towards the citizenry.

ZR: You mentioned Bernie Sanders. In the large parts of the US, the left has abandoned the antiwar stance. Even the so-called progressive caucuses are no longer questioning US involvement in Ukraine or involvement in the South China Sea. Why is this the case, especially when we take into account US military adventurism of the last 20 years? One would have thought we've learnt a lesson not just the last 20 years, but if you even look at the post-World War Two period, we should have learnt lessons from Vietnam. How come we have historical amnesia and keep on forgetting what military intervention and adventurism has on our society? Why is this the case?

CH: Well, historical amnesia is orchestrated by a compliant media, some of which is actually owned by the defence industry. It's political suicide at this point to take on the war industry, which Sanders knows. They build F-35s in Vermont. And the whole failure of the Sanders campaign is that he never addressed this rampant, uncontrolled, unchecked militarism. And that's how empires die by the way, as Arnold Toynbee and others have written. That military establishment was true in pre-World War One Germany, it was true in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, it was true at the end of the Roman Empire. Where they were, the Praetorian Guard was literally auctioning off to the highest bidder, the post of emperor. And that militarism, it kind of disembowels the country. It's a kind of cancer within. So it doesn't matter how many military debacles it orchestrates, starting with Vietnam, 20 years in the Middle East, they're never held accountable. They leap from one fiasco to the next. I mean, the only reason we continue the war in Afghanistan, we know from the leak of the Afghan papers- it wasn't a leak, actually it was obtained through a Freedom of Information Act by The Washington Post- all of the military strategists and politicians understood that the war in Afghanistan was unwinnable. But Raytheon, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, General Dynamics, they were making a fortune. And so the war just continued because they can't be crossed. And that's extremely dangerous because they set policy. And their policy is not grounded in any kind of geopolitical logic or certainly diplomacy. It's grounded in profits, which is why you see this massive expansion in the South China Sea, the baiting of China over Taiwan. It's money, but it's extremely dangerous.

ZR: We always look at politicians or the media, but I would also like to focus on society,

people in general. So, for example, when the war in Ukraine broke out, a lot of people supported the Ukrainian flag. In Germany, at least, businesses started huge drives of charity, all sorts of events which support the Ukrainian cause. But however, when we saw the US invade Iraq, although there were huge demonstrations taking place, we didn't see the Iraqi flag being touted. We didn't see a lot of businesses standing up against the US, calling the US war criminals. We've seen the same case right now with the Yemen war or what Israel is doing to Palestine, with its settlements. We don't see these flags. We don't see all of this hype. Can you talk about this cultural hypocrisy?

CH: Well, again, it's manufactured as Noam Chomsky and Ed Herman point out in their book, *Manufacturing Consent*. So you have worthy and unworthy victims. Palestinians are unworthy victims. Yemenis are unworthy victims. Ukrainians are worthy victims. And the press falls completely in line. So they celebrate the suffering or highlight or report on the suffering of worthy victims and hold them up as exemplars of morality and virtue, and then either ignore or demonise the unworthy victims. That's long been a constant within the press, the commercial media, let's say. Maybe not the alternative press that's not dependent on corporate money, but of course, they're a marginal presence. So that's why, I mean, if you really care about justice, we should all be hanging Palestinian flags on the windows of our apartments or the horror in Yemen where tens of thousands of people, if not hundreds of thousands of people, are dying of cholera and starvation and with US weapons as a Saudi run war, but it's US weapons and US logistics that make it possible. I covered the war in El Salvador for five years and not only Archbishop Oscar Romero was assassinated, but we had four American church women who were raped and assassinated by the National Guard. At the same time, in 1984, a Polish priest was killed by the communist government. And the Reagan administration used the murder of that priest to excoriate the Polish regime and whip up all sorts of support for his anti-communist rhetoric and then essentially made excuses for the murder of Romero and then the murderer, although they were all Americans. So the four church women, Jeane Kirkpatrick, who was the ambassador to the U.N. for the US, said, Well, they were more than nuns and Alexander Haig, who was the secretary of defence, said they probably ran a roadblock. And so that that's what we're seeing play out; dividing the world between worthy and unworthy victims. And the Ukrainians have been anointed as worthy victims and the press, you know, it's very compliant. It falls completely in line. Because remember, it depends on two factors: advertisers and access to the powerful. And so when those advertisers or the powerful make demands, they are heard and those demands are followed.

ZR: Let us close this topic of Ukraine before we move on to other topics by talking about solutions. What do you think could be pursued by the West and also what could be done by the people to ensure that this war stops and we move along with peace?

CH: Well, the moment the West says we're going to pull the plug on the weapons, Zelinsky and the Ukrainian government will get to the negotiating table as fast as they can. And that's

really the solution. I mean, there has to be a demand, a quid pro quo with Russia, that, number one, there's a cease fire. Number two, Russian forces have to withdraw from Ukrainian territory that is not dominated by ethnic Russians. I think there is going to have to be some kind of trade of land-for-peace at this point. But as long as billions upon billions of weapons and it's more than that, there's training and the US is providing intelligence reports to Ukraine, now we're about to send Patriot missiles. I mean, it just keeps ratcheting up. And I know, I covered war for 20 years. When you open that Pandora's box of war you don't control it. It controls you. You don't know where it goes. And it could lead to direct confrontation with Russia, which would be catastrophic.

ZR: I would like to switch our focus to Iran, which is making a lot of headlines. There was a lot of hope and optimism when President Biden came into power that he's going to re-enter negotiations with Iran and revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the JCPOA nuclear deal that was agreed during the Obama administration, but abandoned by President Trump. Now we're seeing a lot of anti-government protests going on. People are asking for freedoms and rights and are pushing back against this theological, religious government. Should the US reopen negotiations while the human rights situation is deteriorating in Iran?

CH: Well, I think the Biden administration has decided not to resurrect the Iran nuclear deal because of heavy pressure from Israel. And the Israel lobby. So as far as I can read, it's dead. So there's no incentive to open negotiations for an agreement that the Biden administration isn't going to implement.

ZR: And do you think that the US is really concerned about human rights in Iran? We're seeing a lot of rhetoric coming, for example, from the Biden administration. Even recently the German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock raised a very concerning rhetoric concerning Iran. Is the West really concerned about public executions, women's rights, or how do you see that?

CH: Of course not. I mean, or what about the 140 executions of Palestinians by the Israeli Defence Force, including my colleague Shireen Abu Akleh, from Al Jazeera, who was a US citizen. No. I mean, just look at the difference between the rhetoric about the egregious human rights violations carried out by Israel and those carried out by Iran. Again, it gets into that bifurcation of worthy and unworthy victims and Palestinians in the eyes of Washington and most of the West are unworthy.

ZR: You mentioned Palestine. Some people also bring up Saudi Arabia, where public executions happen every year of dissidents, of feminists, of activists. We can also see that in other Gulf monarchies. How come the West is not concerned about the human rights situation there? What are the driving geopolitical or economic factors that hinder any sort of voicing of our politicians and media to address the situation there?

CH: Well, let's mention my friend Jamal Khashoggi, who was drugged and flayed to death and dismembered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. I spent 20 years on the outer reaches of empire. These forces only, quote unquote, care about human rights when it's to their political advantage. There is no commitment to human rights in terms of everybody having a right to civil liberties and protection from extrajudicial killings. And we carried out, look what we did in Iraq. Look what we did in Afghanistan, with the drone programme alone. And Daniel Hale, the courageous whistle blower who was a drone operator who exposed the drone files, drone documents that showed that up to 90% of the people being killed by our drones were innocent civilians. So that hypocrisy sells. It may be in the United States where most people don't understand the outer workings of empire. But I don't believe it sells in most of the rest of the world.

ZR: Some people are speculating that the West's involvement in Iran right now in terms of voicing their concerns about the human rights situation has to do more with regime change and access to their oil industry. And there's a lot of Saudi Arabian lobbying going on to ensure that Iran collapses. Is there, according to your assessment, any of that taking place behind the scenes?

CH: Yeah, well, that's completely what's taking place. They don't care about the Iranians. I mean, Saudi Arabia's human rights record is atrocious. And the few times there have been uprisings, mostly by Shiites, the Saudis have responded with disproportionate lethal force, just like the Iranians. So, yeah, this is a Saudi driven project which, along with Israel, sees Iran as a threat and they are quite happy to use the Iranians who are in the streets to further their ends. But they don't care about the Iranians in the streets.

ZR: You mentioned Israel. I want to talk about the recent developments there and the Israel-Palestine region. Jana Zakarneh, a 15 year old Palestinian who was on the roof in her pyjamas playing with a cat when an Israeli sniper shot twice in their face. You already mentioned this, earlier this year, we saw a similar situation with the Israeli sniper killing journalist Shireen Abu Akleh. Now we're seeing Benjamin Netanyahu returning to power as prime minister and incorporating right wing forces that were previously banned in Israeli politics. How do you see the situation developing for Palestine going forward?

CH: I think what's happening is the mask is being lifted from the apartheid state. It's always been an apartheid state. But in order for Netanyahu to get back in power, he's had to reach out to these Jewish extremists, these fanatic Zionists and religious bigots. And that has really exposed the lie of the old tropes that Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East and hate and racism have no place within Israel, and they need to subjugate the Palestinians in order to protect themselves from terrorism. All of that is being ripped away and the real face of Israel is being exposed, especially by these figures you mentioned. You know, the old Kahane, the Ben-Gvir's party, he's an old Kahanist. He was actually rejected by the Israeli military because of his extremism. I covered [Yitzhak] Rabin. He was very involved in this right

wing, far right wing movement that called for Rabin's assassination. They used to, at Netanyahu rallies, have an effigy of Rabin dressed as a Nazi and burn it. And Leah Rabin always blamed Bibi until she died for her husband's assassination. And I think that what we're going to see is as bad as things are for the Palestinians, and they're pretty bad, especially with the numbers of killings; this is the worst death toll since 2006, if you exclude the Israeli bombardments of Gaza. That will all be ratcheted up. I mean, we saw, for instance, the murder of this Palestinian- he was caught on video where he was shot three times, then pushed to the ground and executed by Israeli soldiers. And then Gvir called the Israeli officer a hero, as, by the way, he calls Baruch Goldstein, the Jewish settler in 1994, who massacred 29 Muslim worshippers in Hebron. So I think that what we're seeing is the rise of a kind of Jewish fascism. And in some ways it's a more honest portrayal because of what the Israeli state is about, the apartheid state is about as part of the reason why figures certainly within the military and other parts of the Israeli establishment are panicking over this proposed coalition government that Netanyahu is putting together because it's just going to be impossible for them to disseminate the usual lie or lies that has worked to really cover up what Israel is and what it does.

ZR: Do you think that this will be the collapse of the apartheid state as we know it?

CH: Well, it could just become an open despotism. I don't think the apartheid state is going to collapse until we build a serious sanction movement like we did with South Africa. That's why I'm a big supporter of the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions movement. But I think that that will fuel that movement and fuel the kind of repugnance towards Israel. We've already seen splits now within the liberal Jewish wing of the Israel lobby. Jeremy Ben- Amin is the president of J Street, this liberal Zionist group issued a public statement that called the government that Netanyahu was putting together, it said it ran counter to the values of American Jews and said that unequivocal support of what he called unquestioned loyalty to Israel, no matter what, is a disservice to the health of the Jewish community. So I think that it will certainly weaken the grip that Israel has, particularly within the United States, and that will create more opening for pressure, but I wouldn't go so far as to predict the fall of the apartheid state. Although, of course, that's what I'd like to see.

ZR: I want to move back to domestic issues, censorship and free speech. Elon Musk, who took over Twitter, recently tasked journalist Matt Taibbi and writer Barri Weiss to investigate Twitter's past practices. And they've uncovered so far that the government was basically flagging certain posts that Twitter should review and that Twitter was using the power of algorithms to censor or to limit the reach of conservative voices. What is your opinion about the significance that the recent findings have and overall, what it means to free speech in the Western society?

CH: Well, it confirms what a lot of us knew, especially those of us who were hit by algorithms. But it's nice to have the documentation that proves it. Although Elon Musk is

certainly hurting his own cause by censoring journalists who have been critical about him from Twitter. I think that was a big mistake. I mean, he's a very mercurial and rather bizarre figure. But I think the upshot of those Twitter files is that it does confirm what a lot of us knew. And in that sense it's an important piece of journalism; in terms of its documentation of not just censorship, but the collaboration between the national security, state and large social media platforms like Twitter. And that's also what those files have exposed; constant communication, requests from the FBI, Homeland Security, to ban certain people, which they almost universally did, or shadow banning, various gradations of limiting access to certain people on social media, which they employed. So I think for those of us who followed it closely, there weren't any surprises but we didn't have the documentation to prove it. And now we do.

ZR: Major media outlets The Guardian, The New York Times, Le Monde, DER SPIEGEL, El Pais, collaborated and published a joint statement for Julian Assange. And I quote here: "This indictment sets a dangerous precedent and threatens to undermine America's First Amendment and the freedom of the press." Why do you think it took so long for major media outlets that benefited so greatly from WikiLeaks work to band together and finally release a statement?

CH: I don't know because I wasn't on the inside. I'm glad they did it. It's very late, but it's better than not doing it. I thought it was a good statement and I think it will certainly help. Biden is a very timid figure. And I mean he was appointed by Obama as vice president because although a Democrat, he in essence voted Republican. I mean, this guy supported segregation and he was against school busing and he was against abortion. And he was one of the architects and not only of the Iraq war, but the massive expansion of our prison system, more than doubling the prison population, arming police forces with military grade weapons. This is all Biden. And the CIA wants to punish truly. And I think for Vault 7, which exposed the hacking tools the CIA has access to and our smartphones and TVs and even our cars and everywhere else. So whether Biden will stand up to them, I find that doubtful. But I certainly thought that this statement was important and probably put more pressure on the Biden administration than other supporters of Julian, such as myself, are able to do.

ZR: Julian Assange's legal team will appeal the decision. And I think they're taking the route of going to the European Human Rights Court, which the UK is still obliged to. If all of these attempts fail and Julian Assange is extradited to the United States, do you think he will receive a fair trial in the United States?

CH: No, of course not. He's been sent to the Eastern District of Virginia for a reason. That's where they lynch everyone. But we know that it's not a fair trial because I've sat in on the proceedings in London. Look, if it was a fair trial it would be dismissed. Because the CIA videotaped his meetings with his attorneys, eviscerating attorney client privilege. That alone should invalidate the trial. And then there's all sorts of other issues. I mean, let's begin with

the fact that he didn't commit a crime. He hasn't committed a crime, unless you consider jumping bail. I mean, maybe that's the only crime they could pin a pin on him, but certainly not for what he's charged with. So those proceedings have a kind of Alice in Wonderland quality to them. You know, where the Queen of Hearts says, Let's announce the sentence before you hear the evidence. So that's kind of what's happening. And Baraitser already has everything written out on a laptop. I mean, she was the lawyer in the lower court who- it's a kangaroo court, it is a show trial. It's, you know, not the best of British jurisprudence, but it stinks of the kind of Lubyanka. And I think that's why they make it so difficult to cover. For anybody who has any shred of credibility, it must be a phenomenal embarrassment because it just shows the bankruptcy of the legal system in this particular case.

ZR: Lots of supporters of Julian Assange also watch our Channel. For those who are watching right now, what do you think ordinary people can do in order to stop this extradition or at least create as much awareness as possible in this case?

CH: A protest. Because, you know, I was in the courtroom when Baraitser started complaining about the noise outside. So they know people are out there. And I was invited, as you may know, to Julian's wedding. There were six of us. We didn't get in. The prison authorities wouldn't let us in, but it didn't matter. They didn't want me to write about it, obviously. So I just went home with Stella and John and Gabriel and everyone else from his family and interviewed them and wrote about it anyway. Every effort to humanise Julian, of course, is something that they block. But I think the protests have an effect. I was in the courtroom when- she wouldn't have mentioned it if it didn't disconcert her.

ZR: Chris, to my last question, we are currently in our crowdfunding campaign to ensure that we can continue as an independent and non-profit journalistic outlet going forward in 2023. How important is it to support independent, non-profit media outlets like acTVism Munich?

CH: Well, it's key to support an independent grassroots movement that does not take money from corporations and governments, because it's the only way you're going to hear the truth at this point. The media landscape, the commercial media landscape, including The New York Times, where I worked for 15 years, does atrophy under economic pressure. Remember, their advertising is down significantly, and so they have become even more obsequious to the centres of power because they don't want to lose. They don't want to lose anymore and they're even more anaemic. So this makes alternative media that much more important.

ZR: Chris Hedges, Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, thank you so much for your time today.

CH: Thanks for doing this, Zain.

ZR: And thank you guys for tuning in today. Don't forget to subscribe to our YouTube channel and visit our alternative channels on Rumble and Telegram and to take part in our

year ends crowdfunding campaign so we can continue with our journalism in 2023. I am your host Zain Raza, see you guys next time.

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