



## **INTERVIEW: Matt Taibbi on Israel-Gaza Censorship, New Govt "Disinfo" Schemes, & More**

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**Glenn Greenwald (GG):** Let me ask you about this recent article that you have, which involves this entity called Newsguard, which is used by the Pentagon and other American institutions to decree who is and is not a reliable source of news. There's the headline on the screen of your article that you published at your Substack, Racket News. *Newsguard Case Highlights the Pentagon's Censorship End-Around*. How is this Newsguard case illustrative of the Pentagon's attempt to censor in a way that the Constitution wouldn't permit?

**Matt Taibbi (MT):** Well so this case comes about because of the website Consortium News. I'm sure you're familiar, right? It's Bob Parry's, the investigative reporter Bob Parry's site, which he founded in 1995, because he felt the mainstream media was suppressing too many stories. Consortium got a very negative rating by this supposedly independent rating service, Newsguard. They called it a purveyor of disinformation, of Russian disinformation, and I think worst of all, anti-U.S., because of six articles out of a library of 20,000, most of them having to do with American foreign policy, questions about Ukraine, Russia, Middle East. And the insidious part, Glenn, is that Newsguard has a \$750,000 contract from the Department of Defence, U.S. Cyber Command, to do a, quote, "misinformation fingerprinting program". So this is how the Pentagon gets around the accusation that it directly censors organisations. It just pays a quasi private middleman organisation to slap big red labels on sites. And, you know, this ends up having a direct impact on the bottom line of these little independent news sites because they will be shown less, their circulation is less, they have fewer ads and that's just the way they win in the end. It's really insidious.

**GG:** Talk a little bit more in detail about how specifically you're harmed when Newsguard gives you a negative rating. And first of all, I found it interesting when you went through the laundry list of labels applied to Consortium News, they seem very familiar to me, and I know

to you as well; pro-Russian propaganda as a source of disinformation, anti-American, those are the labels that get slapped on anybody automatically these days who doesn't praise Vladimir Putin or the Kremlin may even hate Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin, but simply opposes U.S. foreign policy. But in this case, what would a negative rating from Newsguard actually do? Who uses the site and what's the implications of that kind of a rating?

**MT:** Well, this is one of about 100 different ways these private anti-disinformation sites work. Newsguard system is that they have roughly 40/45,000 subscribers. A lot of them are big institutional customers like libraries and universities. So basically, imagine students at a big state university will plug in to the library or maybe even just through their dormitory system, and they'll go looking for research about, say, the Mайдan revolution in Ukraine and they'll call up one from CBS News, which has a big healthy nutrition label from Newsguard on it – they actually call it nutrition labels – and if they call up Consortium, which says the United States was involved in the Mайдan coup, it will say it's anti-U.S., unreliable, unsafe, disinformation, and so and so on and so on. And of course, the user never knows that this is sponsored essentially by the United States government, which is maybe upset that it's disagreeing with their policies. So this has an effect on the revenue of these independent news companies because they're distributed less, fewer ads will advertise once they see that label. And again, as you know, from being around independent media, the margins are really, really small to begin with. So this kind of thing can be crippling.

**GG:** Yeah, absolutely. I mean, and of course, that is the goal as well as just giving a general sense of kind of making a site radioactive if it descends from U.S. government policy. That's what I want to ask you, so certainly you have demonstrated over the years and so have I – it's a major focus of ours– that the real ideology or the real bias of the American corporate media, the largest media corporations, is not so much the left versus right, although they have that, too, it's this kind of subservience to the U.S. security state, to the most powerful institutions of authority in the United States. They carry out their agenda, they treat their pronouncements as gospel and I wanted to, in general, when you see things like this, this attempt to define who is a reliable site and who isn't, it's almost never done based on what stories end up being vindicated or what stories or claims end up being debunked. That would almost be at least I wouldn't want the Pentagon doing it at all, but at least if they were trying to do that, it would be a good faith attempt. But what it seems to be the case is that in every case, what is the determining factor is the extent to which you recite and ratify and affirm the claims of these institutions, including the Pentagon and the CIA, and advance rather than impede their agenda. Is that the sort of thing that you're seeing here in terms of a correlation with regard to who gets the kind of cookie and the little pat on the head and the gold star and who gets the avoid warning?

**MT:** Yeah, Glenn, I mean, I think you're exactly right. People, I think, they misunderstand the censorship issue. It's not really a left and right issue at all. It's really an insider outsider issue. It's a class issue. It's a credentialing issue. When you have independent media that's on the

outside, they're not part of the club. They haven't paid their dues. This whole anti-disinformation network, it's essentially a big merry go round system where one NGO gives a good rating to one news organisation, the news organisation may give a good rating to a site like PolitiFact, which may in turn give a good rating to another news site and Google may therefore elevate these sites and their search engines because they have a standard called Authority, which is based on, you know, which sites are considered more attractive by quote unquote "reputable news organisations". So ultimately, the whole thing is about driving traffic away from independent organisations or just sort of mere contributors and towards these big credentialed corporate institutions. And a great example of this is like take for instance, there's an independent videographer named Jon Farina who was briefly famous because he took the video on January 6th that was very famous of people trying to get into the door. Well, he sold his footage to CNN and a whole bunch of other networks. They get to use his footage, but he's an independent. When he tries to post it on his own site or when the status quo's employer does, they get suppressed because they're independent. So it's a total double standard. And that is built into every level of the system.

**GG:** Yeah. I want to ask you about this thing with Amy Klobuchar on Amazon, but I just have one more question about this story, which is – we did a show on Wikipedia, and this is how Wikipedia is manipulated as well. I mean, if you look at Wikipedia, it isn't even just biased. It is just a neoliberal propaganda arm. Like if you're somebody who descends from neoliberal orthodoxy, your Wikipedia pages are going to be defaced and vandalised, every sentence is going to be written to be negative, there's going to be falsehoods. You might even just get labelled a conspiracy theorist right in the very first sentence, as happens to a lot of people, whereas those who support neoliberal ideology have these glowing sorts of biographies that make them seem like they're these honoured, highly accomplished people, even when they aren't. And the way that's all done is by playing games with what is considered a reliable source, that could be the basis of a Wikipedia entry and what can't. And it's very similar to how this is sorted. The thing that just drives me insane is that we have had a lot of disinformation in the media and it's almost all come from, at least in the most harmful forms, the largest media corporations. They're the ones who sold the Iraq war and told people that Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction, is an alliance with al-Qaeda, they're the ones who sanctioned Russiagate and made it our number one political story for years, this insane conspiracy theory that Putin had taken over the U.S. by blackmailing Trump with sexual videos and that the Hunter Biden laptop is Russian disinformation. On some level is there any way to...

**MT:** No...

**GG:** Yeah. These sites that get labelled the most reliable ones have the biggest record of deceit and error and failure and fabrication.

**MT:** Yeah, you're exactly right. Again, you can go back historically too, right?! Think of, I mean, all the way back to remember the Maine or the Gulf of Tonkin or the missile gap. I mean, the most harmful disinformation almost by definition is always official disinformation. And the only defence the public has against this is absolute, unfettered free speech, because a free press is designed in our system to be the one thing that can keep the government honest and keep it from being basically untrammelled deception all the way through. If you impose all of these controls and only do it on the independent press, or only do it on the press and not on the government, then what you get is a government that has a monopoly on disinformation, which will make it even worse. Then there will be no fear whatsoever of doing another WMD style exercise or, you know, doing another Russiagate or any of the many deceptions that happened during COVID. It's a huge problem. And I think people, again, they misunderstand what the purpose of the First Amendment is. It's to protect us against that kind of thing, not to enable it.

**GG:** Yeah, you know, I think probably the best example is COVID, where there was one official pronouncement after the next that got debunked. And all of these media outlets that have the stamp of approval, the like “trust them”, were the ones just constantly mindlessly spreading every one of those claims from Fauci and from the health institutions that got debunked and these independent sites that I'm sure Newsguard is saying, beware of and stay away from, were the ones that were questioning the whole time and ended up getting vindicated. And yet these rankings don't change because they're not about determining reliability but controlling information.

Let me ask you about this other story that you've been writing about. You had an article. We covered this story, too. We didn't have the same title on our report as you, but yours was: *Amy Klobuchar, you suck*. And it was about the fact that Amy Klobuchar and some other Democrat in Congress who's a ranking member of some committee, I think the Elections Committee, wrote to Amazon, basically insisting that Amazon exclude from its services any news that comes from Rumble and Substack. Our two platforms, which would mean that Amazon would be barred from using anything that we report in whatever it's telling people to believe. For those of you, for those people who didn't hear, who didn't see that show or who don't remember it, talk about what Amy Klobuchar did. There's the headline: *Twitter Files Extra: Amy Klobuchar Went Too Far, Even For Pro-Censorship Media*. And you're talking about the Twitter files here who were cheering when one of her proposals for censorship was banned. There's something in the Twitter files about Amy Klobuchar and then this other case of her going to Bezos and Amazon.

**MT:** Yeah. I mean, the Bezos case that targets Substack and Rumble is a classic example of that sort of merry go round – I mean, there are other analogies there that are probably too rude to use on the air. But look...

**GG:** We're not ready to show. But yeah...

**MT:** It's a reach around basically. I mean, like, it starts with the Washington Post article, right? Which complains about how Alexa is citing Substack and Rumble. And some of the contributors are making points about what they call election misinformation or claiming that the 2020 election, that Trump won it, and as a result of this article, Amy Klobuchar and the other congressman you mentioned, Joe Morrell from I believe it's the Rochester area in New York, they send a letter to Jeff Bezos now at Amazon in his other hand, demanding that he take measures to prevent the even accidental citing of either of our sites, you know, Rumble or Substack. And again, what's so critical about this, it's the same pattern as you saw with the Consortium case. Consortium has six articles that the Pentagon takes issue with, but it demerits all 20,000 in their library. Here, god knows how many articles in Substack they object to or Rumble they object to, but they want to ban the entire platform basically from being cited. And this comes from the Washington Post, which by the way, had to print a whole raft of corrections because of something I wrote on Substack and they didn't even credit me for that, by the way, which is another thing, but the whole thing is, it is just one establishment organisation saying to another, Help me. And then appealing to a third establishment organisation which is related and they're going to – I have no doubt that probably in the end this is what's going to happen.

**GG:** Yeah. And I mean, and also just with these newspaper articles too, so often they print these articles by consulting these disinformation experts, many of whom are often funded by big tech or by the US security state, or this handful of neoliberal billionaires like Pierre Omidyar and George Soros and Bill Gates.

**MT:** Craig Newmark.

**GG:** Craig Newmark, who's obsessed with this. And so there's this, as you say, I mean, it's a consortium and you've been describing this sort of censorship industrial complex. And you know what it reminds me of?! That time when Dick Cheney leaked to The New York Times that Saddam Hussein was trying to buy aluminium tubes that could only be used for nuclear weapons and then they printed it. And then he went on Meet the Press and said, Look, I can't share classified information that makes me know Saddam Hussein wants nuclear weapons. But oh, there's a New York Times article just out today, so I can talk about that because they got a leak that says Saddam Hussein is looking for aluminium tubes. And it was that same kind of cycle where they all work together to achieve the same end. So let's talk about this Twitter files issue with Amy Klobuchar, where apparently Twitter executives kind of were tired of her badgering over censorship and celebrated when they were basically rejecting her claims. What happened there and what's the basis for your knowledge of this?

**MT:** Well, first of all, one of the reasons, I just kind of lost it with Amy Klobuchar this week. I mean, it's been a long year, Glenn. I'm not going to lie to you. And this stuff, the number of incidents that have happened in the speech front, everything from, you know, even the jailing

recently of Owen Shroyer to the arrest in Germany of, you know, the playwright C.J. Hopkins, who I know, for a book cover. I mean, there's just a million different ways that the pressure is coming. And when she did this thing this week, it just hit me that, you know, I had seen her so much in the Twitter files that she was there – this whole thing really, I think, started to go bad in 2017 with Russiagate. And there was a moment when the Senate Intelligence Committee was heavily pressuring Twitter to change its ads policy, and they were kind of thinking about pushing back. And the response to Twitter was, Hey, if you give us a hard time about this, there's going to be new legislation that we're going to be sending your way. Twitter thought they were bluffing. Next thing you know, they wake up and there's a new Amy Klobuchar drafted bill called the Honest Ads Act, which would heavily police basically Silicon Valley. So from that point forward, they started taking, you know, Congress very seriously on the content moderation front. They created new standards, which basically said we'll decide what is and isn't disinformation on our own accord when it's normal content, but when the security state says so, you know, we'll remove it at their behest, if it's an advertisement... Then there is a whole long list of other proposals that she made over the years, you know, asking for new authority for the director of national intelligence to go after misinformation. There's a new law she was calling for to be passed, she pressures Google to adopt new standards to restrict content. Finally, she introduces something called the Health Misinformation Act of 2021. And here's what it did. It essentially would have put the secretary of the Health and Human Services Department in charge of defining all health disinformation. And from that point forward, any person who committed disinformation as defined by the secretary of Health and Human Services could face a lawsuit, any of the platforms could face a lawsuit under a new carve out under Section 230. So essentially, she wanted to grant the secretary of Health and Human Services the absolute power to decide what is and isn't true about health. Now, it's worth noting the current secretary of Health and Human Services, Xavier Becerra, is not a doctor and not a scientist, he is a trial lawyer. So that's who would be in charge of health information under that law. So she got laughed at in the media finally for this law. And the Twitter Files episode here is just a whole long list of Twitter executives basically saying, finally a "duck you" for us in this case. But it just shows how, you know, how much they got used to losing on this issue and how people like Klobuchar and Mark Warner and Adam Schiff, they just win on this, no matter how extreme they get most of the time.

**GG:** Yeah. I think as I'm sitting here listening to this, what is so disturbing is how normalised it has become for these people who are elected officials in Washington, they're elected to the Congress, and they spend a lot of their time now demanding that speech be censored on the Internet. They really think it's their job to look at the speech that's flowing and being heard and say, I don't think this speech should be heard because this isn't really convincing. This isn't really true. I think this is disinformation. I think it's hateful. You know, we had speaking of just the insanity of censorship, we had Roger Waters in our studio today because he is in Rio to perform a show and he reminded me of this story that was so insane where he got

criminally investigated early this year by the German government because he performed the wall, which he's been performing for 40 years. And it entails a costume...

**MT:** It is a satire...

**GG:** It's a satire of Hitler and of despots in general. And the Germans decided in their standard, literal, humourless and tyrannical way to act as though they thought it was some kind of tribute to Hitler and that he was committing a crime by doing it. And then the Brazilians told him, the Brazilian government, if you want to come to Brazil, you better not bring this fascism glorification here. We're going to have the federal police in all of your concerts. And this kind of thing is in the air in the West so much. And so just as the last question, let me just ask you, I know you've been reporting on this a lot, having been following the war necessarily, the covering, that a lot, but there are a lot of efforts surrounding the war in Israel to try and usher in censorship in various ways. I don't know if you saw, but Ron DeSantis this week banned a pro-Palestinian group in all of the University of Florida Systems and FIRE.org came out, vehemently denounced it, said it's a grave violation of the First Amendment. We've seen this before when it comes to this topic, given that our government is supplying arms and funds to Israel the way it's doing to Ukraine, and it's kind of a dangerous war that we should be able to debate. What are your general views of the kind of censorship sentiments that just arises around this issue in general?

**MT:** Yeah, it's a two part answer to that. Quickly, one, going back to something that you just said or actually it's something you said on the day after the Hamas attacks that, you know, to remind everybody what happened after 9/11 when suddenly the Overton window about rights shifted dramatically overnight and things that would have been ridiculously strange in the nineties to even think about – well, nobody would had a torture debate in the nineties, so it would never have come up or there would never have been a politician who came out and said, We need to throw in Habeas Corpus. But suddenly that was normal after 9/11 because of the way people talked over and over and over again. And now we have a generation that's grown up and thinks that that's okay. And in the wake of this thing, we've been talking about censorship and the need to eliminate hate speech and disinformation and any speech that could be aiding, quote unquote, "terror" for so long that people have now accepted the idea that this is normal. And so things like that you mentioned like, you know, the Ron DeSantis thing, you know, Nikki Haley, all of that has become normalised. You know, I first started writing about this issue in 2018 in Rolling Stone. And even back then, I pointed out that Palestine has always been kind of the canary in the coal mine. No matter what you think of the issue when it comes to digital censorship, they're always kind of first in line for every innovation. It's tried out first there. The Intercept, when you were there, did a great story in 2016 about a deal that was made between the Israeli government and Facebook. And this is kind of the classic quid pro quo. Facebook wanted to continue to operate in Israel, and in return, they granted 95% of the requests from the Israeli security state.

**GG:** That was actually the first time I ever reported on big tech censorship. It was exactly that story about how the Israeli government was giving Facebook censorship requests to Palestinian journalists and activists. And in 95% of the cases, Facebook was accepting it and banning the people the Israeli government demanded to be banned. That was the first reporting I ever did on big tech censorship.

**MT:** Yeah, exactly. And it was very prescient, right?! Because this turned out to be, I think, the model that a lot of other countries around the world, they looked at that and said, Hey, that now looks pretty good to us. I mean, we get a political monopoly, and my company gets to make money. It's a win-win for everybody, right? And countries around the world started adopting it first, in the kind of more autocratic third world regimes you started to see it, but then gradually in the West, we started moving towards the same model. And as we've done so, you know, the classic thing that happens with this disinformation, Glenn, this is the last thing I'll say, is they start off with a definition that sounds okay to most people. They say, Oh, we have to get rid of health disinformation. So that means when people say, you know, you're going to get a microchip implanted if you get the vaccine, we have to get rid of that, of course, right?! But behind closed doors, what they're doing is they're expanding the definition. And pretty soon they're saying anything that promotes vaccine hesitancy is disinformation. And we're going to call that malinformation, even if it's true. So if we have a true story about somebody dying of myocarditis, well, that's also disinformation because it creates the wrong political behaviour. And that's what they're going to do with this issue. They're going to define anybody who, you know, takes the side of Palestinians in this as a terrorist supporter or an aider of Hamas, even if they've vocally condemned Hamas' attack, they're going to do that. And I think it's a huge danger. That's the whole problem with all censorship regimes. It's who's doing it and what is the standard that they're creating and do they have any checks on it? The answer in this case is no.

**GG:** I couldn't agree more and I think it's incredibly disturbing, not just in this case, but as the model for every one of our debates that will be restricted in police in the same way.

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