

# Leaked Google document: Tech firms have shifted away from “free speech and towards censorship”

By Kevin Reed  
11 October 2018

On Tuesday, the far-right news outlet *Breitbart News* published a leaked internal briefing by employees at technology giant Google that openly discusses political censorship.

The document observes that “tech firms have gradually shifted away from unmediated free speech and towards censorship and moderation.” In the process, the document states, Google, Facebook and Twitter have sought to emphasize creating “well-ordered spaces for safety and civility” over “unmediated ‘marketplaces of ideas.’”

*Breitbart* said Google did not deny the veracity of the document, but it wrote that “an official Google source said the document should be considered internal research, and not an official company position.”

The leaked Google document quoted MIT Tech Review editor-in-chief Jason Pontin as saying, “On the global scale, the internet and the social platforms have been a wonderful boon for free speech. The internet has given platforms to billion (sic) of people to express themselves and has made it almost impossible for governments—even in highly controlled nations like China—to control people’s speech effectively.”

But the next page of the briefing declares that “recent global events have undermined this utopian narrative.”

The document explains the “shift towards censorship” by pointing to “commercial” and “government” demands. One aim of censorship is to “Protect advertisers from controversial content, [and] increase revenues,” it declares.

The briefing adds that “Google might continue to shift with the times—changing its stance on how much or how little it censors (due to public, governmental or commercial pressures).”

The document admits that there is a shift from the “American tradition that prioritizes free speech for democracy, not civility,” on the part of social media companies.

In August 2017, the *World Socialist Web Site* published an open letter to Google alleging that changes to its search algorithms had led to a massive drop in traffic to left-wing, anti-war, and socialist web sites.

“Censorship on this scale is political blacklisting,” the letter declared. “The obvious intent of Google’s censorship algorithm is to block news that your company does not want reported and to suppress opinions with which you do not agree. Political blacklisting is not a legitimate exercise of whatever may be Google’s prerogatives as a commercial enterprise. It is a gross abuse of monopolistic power. What you are doing is an attack on freedom of speech.”

The publication of the leaked document followed an October 5 report by the *Washington Post* that that Google CEO Sundar Pichai met secretly with civilian and military officials at the Pentagon during a recent trip to Washington DC.

Based on interviews with two anonymous sources familiar with the meeting, the *Post* said Pichai was “seeking to smooth over tensions roughly four months after employee outrage prompted the tech giant to sever a defense contract to analyze drone video”—known as Project Maven.

The *Post* reported that Pichai met with officials from the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence, a department that reports on matters relating to military intelligence to the US Secretary of Defense, former United States Marine Corps General

James Mattis. The office is responsible for the Project Maven program, which is developing artificial intelligence capabilities to identify cars, buildings and other objects recorded in videos by drones flying over combat zones and other landscapes.

Neither Defense Department officials nor Google representatives would comment publicly on the secret meeting. The termination of the Project Maven contract—after more than 3,000 employees signed a letter protesting the company’s participation in “the business of war,” was a blow to the efforts of Google to deepen its collaboration with the military-intelligence establishment.

In June, in response to the protest, Google management announced that the Project Maven contract would not be renewed in 2019. However, Pichai was quick to publish a blog post in which he outlined Google’s artificial intelligence objectives and explained that the company would continue work with the Pentagon on “cybersecurity, training, military recruitment, veterans’ health care, and search and rescue.”

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