

Democrats downplay Google censorship at congressional hearing

By Andre Damon
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Google CEO Sundar Pichai denied allegations that the company was engaged in political censorship Monday at a hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Throughout the hearing, Republicans repeatedly claimed that the company was censoring search results to the detriment of right-wing viewpoints, while Democrats either denied the company's censorship or justified it.

The fundamental reality—completely ignored at the hearing—is that the real targets of censorship by Silicon Valley, working with the US intelligence agencies and with the consent of both political parties, are left-wing, anti-war and socialist political organizations.

In August 2017, Google announced that it would implement changes to its search algorithm to promote “authoritative” news sources to the detriment of what it called “alternative” viewpoints. This action led to a massive decline in search rankings and traffic to left-wing, anti-war and progressive websites.

The campaign to implement this censorship regime was spearheaded by the Democratic Party, which, based on claims of Russian “meddling” in the 2016 election, sought to pressure the technology giants to block and suppress left-wing opposition, which it branded as “extremist viewpoints.”

The narrative of both parties is strikingly at odds with reality. Compared to April 2017, the far-right Breitbart.com had its search traffic increase by 25 percent. By contrast, search results for the *World Socialist Web Site* are down by 76 percent over the same period, and other left-wing sites remain down by 50 percent or more.

At the hearing, Pichai made one of Google's most explicit denials to date that it was carrying out political censorship.

“I lead this company without political bias and work to ensure that our products continue to operate that way,” Pichai declared. “To do otherwise would go against our core principles and our business interests. We are a company that provides platforms for diverse perspectives and opinions,” he said.

He added, “It's not possible for any employee or groups of employees to manipulate our search results.”

In fact, the changes implemented in 2017 by the company were intended to empower “search evaluators” to impact Google search results. These individuals, whose input was added to Google's more impartial PageRank algorithm, were told to respond negatively to pages displaying “alternative” viewpoints unless users explicitly specified they were looking for such views.

While some political organizations aligned with the Democratic Party were affected by Google's actions, they either ignored or supported the censorship regime. The far right, meanwhile, made opposition to censorship a rallying cry.

US President Donald Trump, setting the tone for substantial sections of the Republican Party, has prominently accused Google of censoring search results. Republican members of Congress repeatedly held hearings accusing the company of suppressing right-wing and conservative political views.

“Google has long faced criticism for manipulating search results to censor conservatives,” Representative Lamar Smith declared at Monday's hearing.

The Democrats, for their part, used Pichai's testimony to alternately deny and justify the company's censorship. In his remarks, committee chairman Jerrold Nadler declared that “no credible evidence supports this right-wing conspiracy theory.” In effect, Nadler and the other Democrats used the

Republicans' accusations about Google's 'liberal' bias as a straw man, arguing, by extension, that all claims that Google is manipulating search results are a "conspiracy theory."

Nadler then proceeded to justify Google's censorship, which he had just denied. "Even if Google were deliberately discriminating against conservative viewpoints, just as Fox News and Sinclair broadcasting and conservative talk radio hosts like Rush Limbaugh discriminate against liberal points of view, that would be its right as a private company to do so, and not to be questioned by government."

This, too, is a straw-man. In carrying out their censorship of left-wing views, Google and the other technology giants are acting at the instigation of the US intelligence agencies and leading political figures, serving as the state's accomplice in violating the Constitution.

Responding to the Republicans' claims, *The Washington Post* wrote in an editorial, "Members of the conservative majority on the House Judiciary Committee spent much of their time hammering Mr. Pichai with baseless accusations that Google rigs its search results to censor conservative content. Black-box algorithms will inevitably prioritize some content over other content, and to the extent companies can be transparent about how their systems work, they should be. But a single-minded and mindless focus on a nonexistent left-wing conspiracy within Google has had the paradoxical effect of discouraging companies from properly policing their platforms, as they hesitate to remove content that should be removed for fear of unfounded criticism."

In other words, the *Post* is concerned that the Republican's grandstanding about what they allege to be a bias against right-wing viewpoints might undermine the plans by the US intelligence agencies to intensify their censorship of left-wing opposition.

As working class-opposition throughout Europe and around the world continues to mount, the American political establishment is ramping up demands for censorship. Responding to the Yellow Vest demonstrations against social inequality in France, the *New York Times* wrote an editorial warning that "the power of social media to quickly mobilize mass anger, without any mechanism for dialogue or restraint, is a danger to which a liberal democracy cannot succumb."

The clear implication is that a growing international upsurge of the working class will be met with even further repression and censorship.

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