

Wall Street Journal investigation confirms Google operates censorship blacklist

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An investigation by the *Wall Street Journal* has confirmed many of the central allegations made by the *World Socialist Web Site* in 2017 regarding Google's censorship of the internet.

In an extensive article published Friday, the *Journal* concludes that, contrary to Google's repeated assertions, the company maintains blacklists of individual websites and intervenes directly to manipulate individual search results.

On July 27, 2017, the *World Socialist Web Site* reported that changes to Google's search algorithm, internally dubbed "Project Owl," had drastically reduced search traffic to left-wing, antiwar and progressive websites.

The WSWS based its assertions on Google's public declarations that it was seeking to "surface more authoritative content" and demote "alternative viewpoint[s]," as well as detailed data from the WSWS's analytics systems and data provided by other websites and publicly available web and search traffic estimators.

Based on these data points, the WSWS concluded that Google was operating a blacklist of opposition news outlets, the primary impact of which was to restrict access to left-wing and antiwar websites.

The WSWS was a central target of this initiative. As we explained: "Google has severed links between the *World Socialist Web Site* and the 45 most popular search terms that previously directed readers to the WSWS. The physical censorship implemented by Google is so extensive that of the top 150 search terms that, as late as April 2017, connected the WSWS with readers, 145 no longer do so."

On August 25, 2017, David North, the chairperson of the WSWS International Editorial Board, published an open letter to Google asserting:

Censorship on this scale is political blacklisting. 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.

These assertions have been dramatically confirmed by the *Wall Street Journal* investigation. Its report concludes:

Despite publicly denying doing so, Google keeps blacklists to remove certain sites or prevent others from surfacing in certain types of results. These moves are separate from those that block sites as required by US or foreign law, such as those featuring child abuse or with copyright infringement, and from changes designed to demote spam sites, which attempt to game the system to appear higher in results.

The report went on to substantiate its claim that the company's actions were in contradiction to its public statements:

Google has said in congressional testimony it doesn't use blacklists. Asked in a 2018 hearing whether Google had ever blacklisted a "company, group, individual or outlet ... for political reasons," Karan Bhatia, Google's vice president of public policy, responded: "No, ma'am, we don't use blacklists/whitelists to influence our search results," according to the transcript.

But the newspaper's investigation concluded that Google takes "what the company calls 'manual actions' against specific websites," adding, "The company could also blacklist a website, or remove it altogether."

The *Journal* report argues that Ben Gomes, "one of Google's early search executives," was an early advocate of direct, manual intervention into search terms. It was Gomes who announced what would later be known as "Project Owl" in an April 25, 2017 blog post under the title, "Our latest quality improvements for Search."

In that blog post, Google claimed that its efforts to promote "authoritative" news sources were an extension of its attempts to combat efforts to "'game' our systems in order to appear higher in search results." But the investigation by the *Wall Street Journal* reveals this to be a total fraud.

"There's this idea that the search algorithm is all neutral and goes out and combs the web and comes back and shows what it found, and that's total BS," the newspaper cites an unnamed former executive as saying. "Google deals with special cases all the time."

The report documents how the company maintains its blacklists:

Engineers known as “maintainers” are authorized to make and approve changes to blacklists. It takes at least two people to do this; one person makes the change, while a second approves it, according to the person familiar with the matter.

The *Journal* reviewed a draft policy document from August 2018 that outlines how Google employees should implement an “anti-misinformation” blacklist aimed at blocking certain publishers from appearing in Google News and other search products.

Its report continues:

Google’s culture of publicly resisting demands to change results has diminished, current and former employees said. A few years ago, the company dismantled a global team focused on free-speech issues that, among other things, publicized the company’s legal battles to fight changes to search results, in part because Google had lost several of those battles in court, according to a person familiar with the change... “Free expression was no longer a winner,” the person said.

The investigation by the *Wall Street Journal* raises serious questions about the coverage of Google’s censorship in the *New York Times*. After publishing a report on September 27, 2017 on the front page of its business section concerning the WSWS’s open letter opposing Google’s censorship, including an interview with David North, the *Times* went on to attempt to discredit accusations that Google was carrying out political censorship.

In a follow-up article, Daisuke Wakabayashi, who conducted the interview with North, sought to whitewash Google’s censorship regime, echoing the company’s self-serving denials without any serious examination of the facts. Wakabayashi wrote: “Google said political ideology was not a factor in any aspect of its search results. Google said that whether a user is conservative or liberal is not part of the information collected by the company, and that it didn’t categorize web pages by political leanings.”

This, too, was a fraud. Google’s decision about which sites were “authoritative” was clearly political in nature.

In 2018, Google set up a “news initiative” to “Clean Up False News,” as the *New York Times* reported. Among its partners are the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Guardian*, all of which circulated false statements by the Bush administration regarding so-called “weapons of mass destruction” in Iraq, among countless other lies.

Google’s statements about promoting “authoritative” news outlets is code for promoting news outlets that support US foreign policy and the lies that underpin it, because, as the *Journal* writes, “search is a zero-sum game: A change that helps lift one result inevitably pushes down another.”

Aside from the initial report in the *New York Times* and a report by Matt Taibbi of *Rolling Stone*, the vast majority of corporate news outlets simply ignored the WSWS’s reporting.

But notably, before he was gagged and arrested, WikiLeaks

founder Julian Assange penned a letter to an online event organized by the WSWS warning about the dangers of internet censorship. It stated:

While the internet has brought about a revolution in people’s ability to educate themselves and others, the resulting democratic phenomena has shaken existing establishments to their core. Google, Facebook and their Chinese equivalents, who are socially, logistically and financially integrated with existing elites, have moved to re-establish discourse control... I commend WSWS for drawing attention to this phenomenon.

In the three years since Google announced its efforts to bury “alternative viewpoint[s],” the censorship drive by major technology corporations has only intensified. In multiple mass deletions, Facebook and Twitter have removed left-wing accounts and pages with millions of followers.

Last month, Twitter announced that it would ban all political advertisements on its platform, while Facebook, despite the declarations by Mark Zuckerberg that it will not carry out political censorship, announced that it would remove any posts that include the name of the alleged CIA “whistleblower” in the Trump impeachment inquiry.

The motivation for the relentless efforts at political censorship promoted by all factions of the political establishment is their fear of the growth of working-class opposition all over the world, which is bound up with the growing audience for socialism.

Andre Damon

Google is blocking the *World Socialist Web Site* from search results.

To fight this blacklisting:

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To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>