

The 'Whole of Society' Censorship Industry



by Lee Smith

The release of internal Twitter documents detailing the company's recent collaboration with federal agencies to shut down dissident voices sheds new light on the nature of government-sponsored [censorship](#). But the Twitter Files barely scratch the surface, says former State Department official Mike Benz.

He says that the government has implemented "a whole of society" approach to silence dissent under the guise of fighting "disinformation." In reality, says Benz, "it's a censorship industry." Its purpose is to protect the privileges of U.S. political and corporate elites and turn the power of the federal government against Americans, strip them of their First Amendment rights, and subjugate them like an occupied nation.

The machinery that drives the censorship industry has its roots in the Cold War struggle against communism. But now, says Benz, the ruling establishment is using those instruments of political warfare internally, against those it dismissively calls “populists.” In reality, they’re targeting traditionally conservative Americans, at least half the country, increasingly angry to see their constitutional rights trampled and their country degraded by a deracinated elite.

Benz is executive director of the Foundation for Freedom Online (FFO), a non-profit organization that tracks the government’s efforts to censor Americans. We’ve spoken several times for “Over the Target Live,” and in the [latest episode](#) he explains that “whole of society” is the censorship industry’s “cute trick of saying we’re going to co-opt every institution in American society in order to instrumentalize them to censor your opinions online.”

Whole of society refers to four different categories of institutions within society, says Benz: “The government, private sector, civil society, and news media.”

Concerning the government, he explains, “We’re talking about the national security state agencies. So that is everything from the Pentagon, to the State Department and CIA, to the FBI, and DHS. And then on issue-specific censorship issues, you also have the onboarding of other federal agencies, such as HHS, CDC, NIH, for censorship of things like COVID.”

The private sector comprises the tech platforms themselves, says Benz, “as well as private-sector partners who play an assisting role [by] financing censorship activities.”

The civil-society component, often federally funded, is made up of “U.S. colleges and universities,” says Benz, “and other NGO, non-governmental, groups, which are often tightly linked with government.” Among their contributions to the censorship industry, academia and NGOs create artificial intelligence

software used by the social media platforms to identify targets for censorship.

Media is the fourth category. They “go out and detect misinformation,” says Benz. There are also, he adds, the “fact-checking organizations who go out and flag” what the social media platforms should censor.

FFO’s most [recent report](#) concerns the National Science Foundation’s financial support for the censorship industry. Since the start of the Biden administration, NSF has given away nearly \$40 million to 42 U.S. universities to stop “disinformation.” Some of the grants, according to the FFO report, explicitly target “populist politicians” and “populist communications” to determine “how best to counter populist narratives.”

In other words, the NSF is using taxpayer dollars to boost Democrats by censoring the opposition. To put that in context, says Benz, “Sam Bankman-Fried made \$40 million of contributions to the Democrats in the last election cycle.” This made the disgraced crypto-currency guru the party’s second-largest individual donor. The NSF’s grants, says Benz, are like a “matching contribution just from a single government division.”

The NSF has long been a vital “instrument of federal government research to the private sector,” says Benz. “Most people associate the National Science Foundation with federal funding for engineering or aeronautics, or computer science,” he says.

And decades ago, that research contributed to America’s almost half-century-long conflict with the Soviet Union. But there was another dimension to that struggle, one much less discussed—political warfare. In the late 1940s, says Benz, U.S. leadership resolved to do things like “control the information space, social opinions, the political leadership

of basically every country on Earth that matters to us. Or else the Bolsheviks will.”

The United States clearly held the upper hand in the information space, largely because it had long dominated media, radio, and the print press, and perhaps most crucially the motion picture industry. In the Cold War context, the purpose of promoting free speech and democratic ideals abroad was to destabilize totalitarian regimes like the Soviet Union. According to Benz, that equation still holds true today—free speech destabilizes target regimes.

And this is why the U.S. national security apparatus embraced the 21st-century revolution in information technology. “For the purposes of insurgency,” says Benz, U.S. officials saw social media “as a regime change tool.” To mobilize an insurgency, he explains, “you could simply create a hashtag, you could simply pay YouTube influencers, you could simply create Facebook groups.”

The Obama administration deployed precisely those instruments to shape the 2011 upheavals across the Middle East, also known as the Arab Spring. Together with NGOs and the media, U.S. and foreign, the White House toppled former U.S. allies it had in its crosshairs, like Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak.

And then the national security establishment turned its attention to the domestic arena. The way to understand the “whole of society” censorship consortium, says Benz, is that the U.S. officials who once fought for information space abroad have trained their sights on the Biden administration’s opponents. “Whereas free speech on the internet is useful for regime change,” he says, “internet censorship is useful for regime stabilization.”

For the establishment, 2016 was a wake-up call. It perceived the Brexit vote and then the election of Donald Trump as existential threats. “National security insiders as well as

political operatives,” says Benz, feared they “were losing control.”

In response, they “launched this whole of society push to counter ... ‘disinformation’ or to counter populism as a threat to democracy. They said, ... how can we pour tens of millions of dollars, billions of dollars, into this, in order to create this massive whole of society, well-funded, well-oiled machine to censor our opposition online.” The result is the whole of society censorship consortium.

What Benz calls “total information dominance ... is how you create a one-party state, when you have the instrumentalities of the federal government being used by the incumbents ... to stop any sort of change to the government from the voter side.”

The moment Americans are living through now, says Benz, is what many other countries around the world experienced in the 20th century.

“The United States are controlling your information ecosystems, controlling your political leadership, controlling your ability to transact in commerce in your region,” he says. “People in Boston are now experiencing what people in Baghdad did. This is what it feels like when the U.S. government deploys its military, its intelligence, and its civil society cutouts in order to do a whole of society political control operation on your region.”

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