Forbes writer says Google censored report on manipulation of search traffic

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Google forced *Forbes* magazine to remove a story documenting the tech giant's manipulation of search results to promote Google Plus, its social media network, according to a former writer for the magazine.

Kashmir Hill, a longtime technology reporter for *Forbes* and current contributor to *Gizmodo*, went public with the revelation last Thursday in a post titled, "Yes, Google Uses Its Power to Quash Ideas It Doesn't Like—I Know Because It Happened to Me"

In 2011, Hill participated in a meeting between Google salespeople and *Forbes* employees, in which representatives of the search giant sought to encourage *Forbes* to integrate its web site with Google Plus, Google's failed competitor to Facebook.

The salespeople told her that adding a "share" button for Google Plus would boost their domain's results in search rankings. Hill wrote, "This sounded like a news story to me. Google's dominance in search and news gives it tremendous power over publishers. By tying search results to the use of Plus, Google was using that muscle to force people to promote its social network."

"I asked the Google people if I understood correctly: If a publisher didn't put a +1 button on the page, its search results would suffer? The answer was yes."

Hill then asked Google's press office, explicitly identifying herself as a reporter, to confirm what she had heard in the sales meeting. "They didn't deny what their sales people told me: If you don't feature the +1 button, your stories will be harder to find with Google," she wrote.

Google responded to the publication of the story by demanding that Hill withdraw it, saying that the sales meeting was covered under a non-disclosure agreement. This was despite the fact, Hill said, that "I had signed no such agreement, hadn't been told the meeting was confidential, and had identified myself as

a journalist."

Google officials demanded that the article be removed, implying that Google might demote *Forbes* in search results if the magazine did not do what it wanted. "The implication was that it might have consequences for *Forbes*, a troubling possibility given how much traffic came through Google searches and Google News," Hill wrote.

Hill eventually agreed under pressure from *Forbes* to remove the article. Even more surprisingly, all cached versions of the article were almost immediately removed from Google's servers, a phenomenon that other technology writers commented on at the time, with some implying that Google deliberately deleted the cached versions.

Initially, Google's PR team told Hill "there was no way to know whether Google was responsible for deleting the cache," and declared that the story was removed because it was "not reported responsibly."

Google's vice president of global communications, Rob Shilkin, then gave her a different story, explicitly telling her "we had nothing to do with removing the article from the cache."

While whether the meeting was actually covered under a non-disclosure agreement is an issue of legal controversy, Google's demand that the story be removed in its entirety (instead of being amended), and *Forbes*' compliance, points to the degree of monopolistic power wielded by the search giant over not just its clients and competitors, but the press.

Hill's account is just one of many similar reports of Google using its weight and influence to intimidate public discourse.

Hill's revelation followed less than two weeks after press reports documented the fact that Google pressured the New America Foundation to fire its Open

Markets team after they posted a statement supporting anti-trust action against the technology giant.

Even more significant is the ongoing efforts by Google to block access to political views it sees as antithetical to the interests of its billionaire shareholders and their political allies.

Beginning last month, the WSWS extensively documented the fact that changes to Google's search algorithms, justified on the basis of promoting "authoritative" content, led search traffic to left-wing and anti-war sites to plummet, with search traffic to the *World Socialist Web Site* falling by over two thirds.

Google's attempt to censor the WSWS and other left-wing sites has led to a broad international response. So far, the WSWS's petition calling for Google to end its censorship of the Internet has received over 3,400 submissions from more than 80 countries.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact