

Meet the Censored: Andre Damon

Matt Taibbi

26 November 2020

The following interview was conducted by journalist Matt Taibbi and originally posted on TK News. Taibbi is a contributing editor for Rolling Stone and the recipient of the National Magazine Award. He is the author of The Great Derangement (2009); Griftopia (2010); The Divide (2014); Insane Clown President (2017); I Can't Breathe (2017); and Hate Inc. (2019).

On November 15th, weeks after news that a *New York Post* article about Hunter Biden had been blocked by prominent social media platforms, Pink Floyd lead singer Roger Waters ripped Twitter for a less-publicized incident:

The IYSSE, a student movement affiliated with international Socialist parties, was suspended over an obscure technical violation (see explanation below). It was reinstated after nine days, which in a period of increasingly draconian tech penalties might have been a small surprise.

Less surprising was that yet another organization associated with the *World Socialist Web Site* had been hit with a punitive content moderation decision. For much of the last four years, the WSWS has been a bit of a canary in the coal mine, when it comes to new forms of censorship and speech restrictions.

Many Americans didn't pay attention to new forms of content moderation until May, 2019, when a group of prominent tech platforms banned figures like Alex Jones and Milo Yiannopolis. A legend quickly spread that such campaigns exclusively target the right. Long before then, however, the WSWS had been trying to sound the alarm about the impact of corporate speech moderation on dissenting voices on the progressive left. As far back as August of 2017, the WSWS sent an open letter to Google, demanding that it stop the "political blacklisting" of their site, as well as others.

Like many alternative news sites, WSWS noticed a steep decline in traffic in 2016-2017, after Donald Trump was elected and we began to hear calls for more regulation of "fake news." Determined to search out the reason, the site conducted a series of analyses that proved crucial in helping convince outlets like the *New York Times* to cover the issue. In its open letter to Google, the WSWS described inexplicable changes to search results in their political bailiwick:

Google searches for "Leon Trotsky" yielded 5,893 impressions (appearances of the WSWS in search results) in May of this year. In July, the same search yielded exactly zero impressions for the WSWS, which is the Internet publication of the international movement founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938.

The WSWS connected the change to Project Owl, a plan announced by Google in April of 2017 designed to "surface more authoritative content." When I called Google about a year later for a story on a related subject, they explained the concept of "authority" as an exercise in weighting some credentials over others. So, I was told, an old search for "baseball" might first return a page for your local little league, while a new one would send you to the site for Major League Baseball.

The rub was that Google was now pushing viewers away from alternative sources, such that an article in the *New York Times* about Trotskyism might be ranked ahead of the world's leading Trotskyite media organ. Queries had to be right on the nose to call up a whole host of alternative sites, all of which had seen sharp drops in their Google search results.

The WSWS listed many of them: Alternet down 63 percent, Common Dreams down 37 percent, Democracy Now! down 36 percent, down 25 percent, etc. Even WikiLeaks, in the middle of an international furor over Russiagate, was down 30 percent.

In the years since, the WSWS has been one of the only major media outlets in the U.S. to regularly focus on tech censorship issues, frequently showing an interest in constitutional principles curiously absent in traditionally "liberal" publications. This has won the site an unpleasant brand of notoriety with tech platforms. In a recent Senate hearing, Google CEO Sundar Pichai referenced the WSWS when challenged by Utah Republican Mike Lee to name one left-wing "high profile person or entity" it had censored.

TK reached out to Andre Damon, writer and editor for the WSWS, to ask about the site's experiences:

TK: There was recently an incident involving the Twitter presence of International Youth and Students for Social Equality. Can you explain what happened? Has the WSWS had any other issues with Twitter over the years?

Damon: On November 11, Twitter suspended the account of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (US) without explanation. The IYSSE is the student movement of the Socialist Equality Parties around the world, which are affiliated with the *World Socialist Web Site*.

When we wrote to Twitter to demand the reinstatement of the account, Twitter replied vaguely, hinting that the IYSSE was operating multiple accounts. We responded that the IYSSE has chapters all over the world, which are officially recognized on dozens of campuses, including New York University, the University of Michigan, and Berlin's Humboldt University, where the IYSSE holds multiple seats in the student parliament. Each of these chapters, legitimately, has its own social media presence.

Twitter's stated justification for suspending the IYSSE's account was a ridiculous pretext, and this act of censorship triggered statements of opposition. Pink Floyd co-founder Roger Waters and model Andrea Peji? made statements opposing it, as did dozens of other people. Nine days after the account was suspended, Twitter reinstated it, again without any serious explanation.

TK: When did the WSWS first become interested in the issue of platform censorship, content moderation, or whatever you want to call it? Actually, what do you call it? Is what's going on with increased content moderation a first amendment/free speech issue?

Damon: It's censorship, and it absolutely is a First Amendment issue.

In July 2017, we noticed that traffic to our site from Google fell by more than 75 percent. After reaching out to other sites and SEO experts we realized that the WSWS was one of over a dozen left-wing websites

whose search traffic had also plunged.

As we sought an explanation, we discovered a blog post by Ben Gomes, at the time Google's VP of engineering, announcing that Google was making changes in its algorithm to demote what it called "fake news." It explained that Google would be hiring a small army of people to review search results and score them. The reviewers were told that if a search returned "alternative viewpoints," that search should be scored poorly. This system was internally called 'Project Owl,' and later came to be known as such publicly.

It was obvious that the drop in search traffic to the WSWS and other left-wing sites was caused by this change in Google's algorithm.

The actions by Google were the outcome of a campaign, largely bipartisan but led by the Democrats and their affiliated news outlets, to claim that domestic social opposition was the product of interference by foreign countries, particularly Russia. To stop this alleged interference, it was necessary to censor domestic political opposition, which the Russians allegedly sought to "amplify."

At repeated hearings in Washington, figures like Mark Warner and Adam Schiff would demand over and over again that Google, Facebook and Twitter censor left-wing content. It was all a clear and flagrant violation of the First Amendment, which says that Congress does not have the power to limit the freedom of expression. But here was Congress instigating private companies to do exactly that, and threatening to regulate or fine them if they did not comply.

In August 2017, the WSWS sent Google executives an open letter demanding "that the anti-democratic changes to the Google search result rankings and its search algorithm since April be reversed." In January 2018, we called for the formation of an "international coalition to fight Internet censorship."

In response to our letters, Google flatly denied it was carrying out political censorship. But this makes its admission this month that it is censoring the WSWS so significant.

When Senator Mike Lee asked Google CEO Sundar Pichai, "Can you name for me one high profile person or entity from a liberal ideology who you have censored," Pichai replied that "We have had compliance issues with the World Socialist Review [sic], which is a left-leaning publication."

This was a confirmation of every claim made by the WSWS in its campaign against internet censorship.

TK: What other private platforms have tried to regulate your content?

Damon: The *World Socialist Web Site* is banned, without any justification, from R/Politics on Reddit, as well as R/Coronavirus. The latter is particularly egregious, since we have been the most consistent proponent of the position of the WHO—that COVID-19 can be contained—of any news outlet. The *New York Times* has published over a dozen articles by Thomas Friedman arguing for herd immunity—that is, for letting COVID-19 spread throughout the population—based on irresponsible quack pseudo-science.

Facebook has repeatedly prevented us from holding events. In the latest incident, it prevented the IYSSE from holding an event entitled "Trump's Electoral Coup and the Threat of Dictatorship." But when we changed the name of the event to a generic placeholder, we were allowed to set it up.

TK: Why did the WSWS decide to focus on the *New York Times Magazine's* 1619 Project, and what was the response of the platforms to this work?

Damon: The WSWS took a stand against the 1619 Project for two main reasons: Because it was a work of historical falsification, which denigrated the two great democratic revolutions—the struggle for independence between 1775 and 1783 and the Civil War of 1861 to 1865—which rank among the most progressive events in world history; and because its political purpose was to promote the politics of racial

communalism.

The 1619 Project falsely claimed that the revolution that established the United States aimed at preserving and extending slavery. This is a blatant falsification of the historical record.

Moreover, the 1619 Project's political purpose, in falsely claiming that blacks in America "fought alone" for their liberation, was to weaken the bonds of class solidarity between black and white workers. It is a fundamental and undeniable fact that hundreds of thousands of Northern whites, many of them artisans, farmers and craftsmen, sacrificed their lives in the Civil War under the banner of the Battle Hymn of the Republic: "Let us die to make men free."

This fact shows that it is possible to create a multi-racial, multi-religious and multinational movement of the working class. The slogan of Marxists, going back to the *Communist Manifesto*, is "workers of the world, unite!" not, "races of the world, divide."

Working in collaboration with the world's leading historians of the American Revolution and Civil War, the WSWS exposed the central premise of the 1619 Project to be utterly false.

In November and October of last year, the *World Socialist Web Site* published interviews with Gordon Wood, James McPherson, James Oakes, Victoria Bynum and Clayborne Carson. These historians demolished the series' central premise that the American Revolution was an insurrection to defend slavery. Moreover, they made clear that neither they nor any of their leading colleagues were ever consulted in the production of the 1619 Project.

Our coverage of the 1619 Project exposes the true role of internet censorship. Google claims that its censorship regime is aimed at promoting "authoritative" and "original" content, while demoting what it calls "alternative" viewpoints.

There exist no more "authoritative" documents on the 1619 Project than the interviews published by the WSWS with these historians. Wood and McPherson are universally regarded as the best authorities on American history, and their interviews on the WSWS are what led to thousands of other articles being written on the 1619 Project—for and against.

By contrast, the 1619 Project was based on a rejection of these "authoritative" sources, who were never consulted in its writing or publication.

So the obvious question is, why do you have to scroll to the third page of Google results in a search for "1619 Project" to see a single article from the WSWS on the 1619 Project? Why don't the interviews with Wood and McPherson show up?

The answer is that Google's censorship has nothing to do with helping users find "authoritative" content. Its sole aim is to demote content to which the US political establishment objects, and promote content that it wants to promote.

TK: A lot of the more high-profile targets of deletions and suspensions have been conservatives like Alex Jones, or the followers of the Q movement. You've said that you believe the real goal of content moderation is to suppress left critiques of capitalism. Is it possible going after high profile conservatives is a way of selling the concept to liberals? Or is there another motive that you see?

Damon: The *World Socialist Web Site* does not believe that censoring fascists is an effective way to fight fascism. It lends credence to their false claims to oppose the political establishment. The fascists receive high-level support from the financial oligarchy, from within the state, the police and the military. Censorship only strengthens them.

At Berlin's Humboldt University, the IYSSE has been leading a campaign by students to oppose the far-right professors that play a leading role at the university, such as Jörg Baberowski, who told *Der Spiegel* that "Hitler was not vicious." The right-wing press in Germany has attacked us for trying to "censor" Baberowski and others. No, we have been waging this fight by telling students and the broader population what these

figures actually do, say and advocate! We fight fascism by telling the truth about the fascists and exposing their high-level connections to the state.

The real target of censorship is always the left.

TK: Do you see a connection in all of this to the long tradition of suppression of leftist speech in America (dating back to the “red flag” laws, the “criminal syndicalism” standard, etc.), or is this something different, inspired by different motives?

Damon: There is a long tradition of anticommunism in America. Most of the arguments for internet censorship are lifted straight from the arguments of the McCarthyites and Birchites, as well as the Southern segregationists, who claimed that blacks in America would be happy with Jim Crow if only “outside agitators” would stop stirring up trouble.

TK: What do you say to people whose response to this issue is that private companies have the right to do what they want on their own platforms?

Damon: Well, legally speaking, private companies do not have the right to do what they want. A restaurant owner can’t throw a patron out of his restaurant because of the color of his skin. UPS can’t say they won’t deliver your packages because they don’t agree with your political views. Technology companies provide a vital social service, just like private municipal waste collection companies and private package handling companies. They do not have the right to discriminate against people based on their political views.

TK: Have you observed changes in American attitudes toward speech recently? How about changes within the political left on this issue?

Damon: In my experience, the American working class is fiercely committed to the principles of freedom of expression.

With the affluent upper-middle class, it is a different story. For years, the parties and organizations of what we call the pseudo-left have been promoting sexual witch hunts against cultural and intellectual figures, equating an accusation with a conviction, and calling for the destruction of their careers. You can see the right-wing character of such campaigns in the witch hunt of Roman Polanski, whose brilliant film on the Dreyfus Affair has been condemned equally by bourgeois feminists and by anti-Semites.

Your readers who are unfamiliar with the record of the WSWS will be relieved to learn that we opposed the #MeToo campaign from the start and have defended figures such as Polanski, Louis CK and Kevin Spacey.

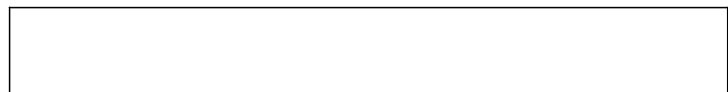
TK: Does the “content moderation” era already have a political legacy?

Damon: The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that the suppression of information is a matter of life and death. Bob Woodward’s interview with Donald Trump, in which the president said he sought to “play down” the threat of the virus, even as his cabinet and members of Congress were getting dire briefings about the looming disaster, points to a far-reaching conspiracy to suppress information about the pandemic.

Every workplace is a microcosm of this nationwide conspiracy. In the auto plants, workers are not being told when their coworkers fall ill, making contact tracing impossible.

We have tried to make the WSWS the antipode to this conspiracy of silence. The WSWS is a hub for workers to learn about the threat posed by the disease, to track outbreaks at their factories and coordinate their response. There exists no comparable resource for manufacturing workers, particularly in the American Midwest.

The decision of what is true and false, what can and cannot be said, is not for self-interested corporations to decide. Working people need to know the truth. And the only way to get there is for them to be able to read whatever they please and to make up their own minds.





To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact