

YouTube censors David North's lecture on the death of Aaron Bushnell

Evan Blake
14 March 2024

On Thursday, YouTube politically censored the *World Socialist Web Site* by flagging as “age-restricted” a video of the lecture given by WSWS International Editorial Board Chairman David North at the University of Michigan on March 12, titled, “The Gaza genocide and the death of Aaron Bushnell: What are the political lessons?”

Despite multiple protests and appeals, YouTube has not reversed or in any way justified this act of censorship, which is clearly aimed at preventing the platform's 2.7 billion active users from accessing the political content of North's lecture. By “age-restricting” the video, all those who see it on YouTube or wherever it is embedded, including on the WSWS itself, are greeted with a black box warning that “Viewer discretion is advised,” as shown below.

The aim was clearly to obstruct the viewing of North's lecture. For tens of thousands of people accessing the WSWS on their cell phones or laptops, this was disruptive and confusing. Whereas the viewership of a clip from the lecture has surpassed 4,000 on TikTok and 6,000 on Twitter/X, a small fraction of those numbers have viewed the lecture on YouTube. As a result, the WSWS was forced to swap out the YouTube video with a Twitter/X post of the full lecture.

Furthermore, only users “verified” as older than 18 who are logged into their accounts can even view the video, preventing hundreds of millions of the platform's users, who are under 18, from accessing the lecture altogether.

At 8:22 a.m. EDT Thursday morning, the WSWS initially appealed YouTube's decision to flag the video as “age-restricted.” At 8:45 a.m. EDT, the WSWS received the email below from YouTube rejecting our appeal and claiming, “We reviewed your content carefully, and have confirmed that it violated our self harm policy.”

The dishonesty of this statement is self-evident, given that YouTube replied to the WSWS's appeal only 23 minutes after it was sent, during which time it is impossible that they “carefully” reviewed the contents of the 49-minute video.

More fundamentally, anyone who watches the lecture “carefully” would recognize it as the most sensitive and thoughtful analysis of the suicide of 25-year-old Aaron Bushnell, which places this event in its broader objective and historical context. There is no one of any age who would not

benefit from a serious examination of these questions and, in particular, young people who have higher rates of mental health conditions.

In the course of his report, North meticulously documents the phenomenon of ever-rising rates of suicide in the United States, particularly in the military, rooting this in the eruption of US imperialism, the suppression of the class struggle and the toxic promotion of individualism following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

He then critiques an essay by Chris Hedges, who unequivocally endorsed Bushnell's suicide, “making himself, in effect, not only an accomplice after the fact in the young man's death, but also an instigator of future protest suicides.” North characterizes Hedges' essay as consisting of a “mixture of religious mysticism, middle class utopianism, political disorientation, historical falsification and the glorification of irrationalism.”

Sharply summing up the significance of Hedges' promotion of suicide as a viable political strategy, North states, “Hedges' essay speaks to the pessimism, intellectual bankruptcy and essentially reactionary character of middle class pseudo-leftism, i.e., the ideological conceptions that generally predominate on university campuses.”

In opposing suicide as a tactic, North stresses the need for young people to study the classics of Marxism and take up the fight for revolutionary socialism, concluding, “transform your anger and outrage into effective political action, into the determination to master Marxist theory, to learn the lessons of history, to acquaint yourself with the great revolutionary struggles of the last century.”

At no point in his lecture does North in any way promote or justify Bushnell's suicide, and it is entirely unclear what caused the video to trigger YouTube's censorship algorithm. Scenes or photos of Bushnell's self-immolation do not appear at any point in the video. The video briefly shows the well-known 1963 photo of the self-immolation of Thích Qu?ng ??c, which won the World Press Photo of the Year, but there are numerous videos on YouTube which show this photo and are not “age-restricted.”

The only relevant clause from their “self-harm policy” is that the lecture could qualify as “Content that is meant to be

educational, documentary, scientific, or artistic” or “Content that is of public interest.” These broad categories are listed among those that can trigger the “age restriction,” underscoring the entirely arbitrary and anti-democratic character of these rules.

Following the rejection of our appeal to lift the “age restriction” flag, the WSWS corresponded with two “YouTube Support Assistants” and a “supervisor of the YouTube Support Experience team,” who could very well have been AI-generated chat-bots presented as real people.

In a Kafkaesque manner, each “assistant” repeatedly assured the WSWS that the matter had been “thoroughly investigated” while refusing to provide any details as to what triggered the censorship, a decision they repeated was “final and conclusive.” Part of the correspondence included the following:

WSWS: This is clearly an act of censorship of a left-wing, socialist news outlet which has no justification. The timing of our protest and the email from Youtube makes clear that the “reviewers” spent only 23 minutes, or less than half the time of the video, supposedly reviewing it.

YouTube: I can sense how difficult this can be for you, and I can assure you that we have thoroughly investigated your request. [...]

YouTube: Upon reviewing the details, I can confirm that your video was carefully evaluated by our internal reviewers and confirmed that it falls under our age-restriction policy, specifically with our suicide/self-harm policy. Therefore, the age-restriction will remain on your video. I totally understand this can be worrisome on your end, given that the decision was after around 20 minutes, while the video is around 49 minutes.

WSWS: That is not a real answer, you’re simply repeating the same baseless assertion as the other two customer service representatives I corresponded with, as well as the original email we received after our appeal. We have not been informed of anything specific that triggered this censorship and demand to be provided with those details.

YouTube: Please note that our internal team is composed of experienced professionals who have been trained to make objective and fair evaluations of all the appeals particularly with Community Guidelines. [...]

YouTube: Unfortunately, the decision is final and conclusive. [...]

YouTube: I appreciate your interest in reversing the decision. However, our internal team which specializes in reviewing content in line with our policies confirmed the decision and this is conclusive.

The censorship of the WSWS is fundamentally a political attack against the basic democratic rights of the global population, above all, the rights to free speech and freedom of the press. The suicide of Aaron Bushnell is an enormously significant event of great public interest, which has been viewed and discussed by millions of people throughout the world.

The underlying aim of censoring David North’s lecture—which uniquely examines Bushnell’s death from a Marxist perspective—is to bury this event and keep it hidden from the public. It is being done as part of efforts to censor all opposition to the imperialist-backed Israeli genocide of the Palestinian people.

It is abundantly clear that this was a targeted censorship. When one searches for “Bushnell suicide” on YouTube, almost every video does not include the “age-restricted” flag, including some which show the graphic suicide video. The only other video that was censored in the same manner as the WSWS was a news report on Bushnell’s suicide by the left-wing program *Democracy Now!*

This is the first time that YouTube has directly censored a video from the *World Socialist Web Site*. It takes place just three months after the WSWS posted David North’s previous lecture given in Berlin, which also examined the genocide in Gaza and was viewed over 12,000 times. Undoubtedly, the popularity of that lecture influenced YouTube’s decision to directly censor the WSWS.

YouTube is owned by Google, which has developed an apparatus of internet censorship since the spring of 2017, first exposed by the *World Socialist Web Site*, which was its chief target. At an October 2020 Senate hearing, Sundar Pichai, the CEO of Google’s parent company Alphabet, admitted that the company had censored the WSWS.

YouTube, along with every other social media outlet, has imposed an expanding censorship regime on all criticism of the Israeli government and its imperialist backers, including through the demonetization of MintPress News (MPN) shortly after the genocide in Gaza began.

The censorship of the WSWS and all other left-wing outlets must be opposed. As world capitalism descends ever further into barbarism and dictatorship, all democratic rights are under relentless assault. Only the building of a revolutionary movement of the international working class can stop these processes and overthrow this outmoded social order, creating the conditions for a vast expansion of social and democratic rights internationally.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact