

The Disinformation Fraud: How America's Most Powerful Institutions Joined Forces to Crush Speech & Silence Dissent, with Jacob Siegel

By Glenn Greenwald | May 9, 2023



Good evening. It's Thursday, May 4. Welcome to a new episode of System Update, our live nightly show that airs every Monday through Friday at 7 p.m. Eastern, exclusively here on Rumble, the free speech alternative to YouTube.

Tonight, we'll devote the entire show to examining one of the most important and consequential hoaxes in our current politics, not just in the United States, but in the wider democratic world, namely, this sprawling, multi-headed, extremely well-funded scam that was created in the wake of the 2016 election that calls itself the anti-disinformation industry. We have devoted several shows and I've written several articles to investigate the genesis of this industry, who is funding it and the rotten ways in which it functions. In September 2021, the still somewhat heterodox Harper's produced one of the most comprehensive examinations of this fraudulent industry in an article by Joseph Bernstein, entitled "Bad News. Selling the Story of Disinformation" but the single most important and comprehensive investigation of this fraudulent and deeply menacing industry was published several weeks ago by the journal Tablet, entitled "A Guide to Understanding the Hoax of the Century." In it, the writer Jacob Siegel, devoted 13,000 extremely well-researched words to describe, in his words, "a sprawling leviathan with tentacles reaching into both the public and

private sector, which the government uses to direct a “whole-of-society” effort that aims to seize total control over the Internet and achieve nothing less than the eradication of human error.” (Tablet. March 28, 2023).

We will examine this industry, dissect the key elements of Siegel's groundbreaking article, and then in our interview segment, speak with him about its most important components.

It is really hard to overstate how consequential and how nefarious this disinformation industry is. It received woefully inadequate attention until the emergence of these articles. It is one of the greatest threats to a free Internet yet manufactured. It is rapidly spreading as a result of the backing of some of the world's most powerful governments and most influential neo-liberal billionaires. And without hyperbole or melodrama, its goal is nothing less than the end of the Internet as one of our last instruments for expressing and organizing meaningful dissent.

Due to ongoing family commitments, we are unfortunately unable to do our aftershow on Locals tonight, which ordinarily takes place on Thursday. We will do our best to be back on both Tuesday and Thursday of next week. With that, to join our Locals community, simply click the join button and you'll have exclusive access to that.

As a reminder, System Update is also available in podcast form, it appears 12 hours after the show is first broadcasted, live, here on Rumble. You can follow us on Spotify, Apple and every other major podcasting platform to help spread the visibility of the show.

For now, welcome to a new episode of System Update starting right now.

In 2016, the neoliberal order suffered two devastating and traumatic defeats, made even more traumatizing because establishment forces did everything possible to stop them, yet failed. First, was the decision by the British people to ratify Brexit and leave the European Union, despite an avalanche of nonstop propaganda about why doing so would be so destructive to their interests. That was followed months later by the obviously shocking election of Donald Trump, against the ultimate establishment candidate, Hillary Clinton. Numerous other similar traumas against neoliberal stability

in Italy and Scandinavia, in Brazil and elsewhere deeply alarmed Western power centers in ways that cannot be exaggerated. The conclusion they drew from these events was quite simple: allowing the Internet to be free, for ordinary citizens to continue to use it to speak, debate and organize freely was simply no longer tolerable. The consequences of a free Internet had proven, in 2016, to be too unpredictable, too decentralized, and too free to allow it to persist any longer. As a result, there was a very conscious, deliberate and multisector campaign to end what we had all known as a free Internet.

To accomplish that, some pretext, some justification, was required even in Western Europe and certainly in the United States, we are all too inculcated with the value of free debate and free expression to simply accept a candid admission by Western states and their power centers that they intended to censor the Internet to eliminate dissent – the real motive of what they were doing.

The pretext that they had long given for creeping censorship, namely the need to stop hate speech, was far too limited and narrow for the much more ambitious goals they adopted for stifling free debate in 2016. What was needed was a term that was at once extremely elastic to the point of being meaningless, yet sufficient to encompass any ideas they wanted to suppress, and the word they invented to justify this new censorship regime was disinformation. Though this tactic had a clear rationale, we must protect the Internet to protect you – or rather, we must censor the Internet to protect you – from the dangers of disinformation, the problems were obvious. What is disinformation? How is it determined? And most importantly of all, who decides what counts and does not count as disinformation? To resolve those problems a fake expertise was invented out of whole cloth. Seemingly overnight, we became inundated with “disinformation experts.” There is no academic institution in the United States that issues degrees in Disinformation. It is a completely false credential, a fake expertise, but it proliferated very quickly with prominent social media stars bestowing themselves with the title of disinformation expert and the newly materialized groups – always with deliberately benign-sounding names but shady, yet substantial funding – suddenly appearing to employ these disinformation experts and to insist that the process for determining what is and is not disinformation was not politicized or ideological, perish the thought, but rather apolitical, scientific and data driven. The bet that they made was that as long as this field could be presented as residing above politics, rather than where it actually resides which is deep within it, enough people would be deceived to accept superior authority, and presto, censorship would no longer be about suppressing political ideas or dissent. No, it was a deeply earnest and scientific endeavor to do nothing more or less benign than protect people, all of you, from damaging falsehoods. Who doesn't want to live in a world where falsehoods are identified and then eliminated?

Dissecting this fraud of disinformation and the industry that now supports it is not an easy task. There are hundreds of billions of dollars from the U.S. Security State and other Western security agencies, from George Soros and Bill Gates, and Pierre Omidyar – not Boogeymen but the documented funders of these organizations and virtually every corporate media outlet, always seeking ways to maintain their decades-old but finally evaporating stranglehold on the flow of information. These media outlets are now endorsing this fraudulent industry, recognizing the value it presents to equate their narratives with proven truth, and then any critics of their narratives as purveyors of the dreaded disinformation.

The reporting we have done over the last few years has delved deeper into this industry. The Harper's article, though, that I alluded to at the start, advanced this story by identifying the core fraudulent premises at the heart of the entire project. Let's take a quick look at some of the key points that Harper's article exposed. The title is “Bad News Selling the Story of Disinformation” and here are its key revelations from 2021.

The Commission on Information Disorder is the latest (and most creepily named) addition to a new field of knowledge production that emerged during the Trump years at the juncture of media, academia and policy research: Big Disinfo. A kind of EPA for content. It seeks to expose the spread of various sorts of “toxicity” on social media platforms, the downstream effects of this spread, and the platform's clumsy, dishonest and half-hearted attempts to halt it.

As an environmental cleanup project, it presumes a higher model of content consumption. Just as, say, smoking causes cancer, consuming bad information must cause changes in beliefs or behavior that are bad by, some standards. Otherwise, why care what people read and watch?

The most comprehensive survey of the field to date, a 2018 scientific literature review titled “Social Media Political Polarization and Political Disinformation,” reveals some gobsmacking deficits. The authors fault disinformation research for failing to explain why opinions change; lacking solid data on the prevalence and reach of disinformation and declining to establish common definitions for the most important terms in the field, including disinformation, misinformation, online propaganda, hyperpartisan news, fake news, clickbait, rumors and conspiracy theories. (Harper's Magazine. Sept. 2021).

Of course, they don't want to define those terms. It's precisely the lack of definition that bestows the terms and those who wield them with all the power. The article goes on:

The sense prevails that no two people who research disinformation are talking about quite the same thing. This will ring true to anyone who follows the current media discussion around online propaganda. “Misinformation” and “disinformation” are used casually and interchangeably to refer to an enormous range of content, ranging from well-worn scams to viral news aggregation; from foreign-intelligence operations to trolling; from opposition research to harassment. In their crudest use, the terms are simply jargon for “things I disagree with.”

Attempts to define “disinformation” broadly enough as to rinse it of political perspective or ideology leave us in territory so abstract as to be absurd. As the literature review put it: “Disinformation” is intended to be a broad category describing the types of information that one could encounter online that could possibly lead to misperceptions about the actual state of the world. The term has always been political and belligerent. An even more vexing issue for the disinformation field, though, is the supposedly objective stance media researchers and journalists take toward the information ecosystem to which they themselves belong. Somewhat amazingly, this attempt has taken place alongside an agonizing and overdue questioning within the media of the harm done by unexamined professional standards of objectivity.

Like journalism, scholarship, and all other forms of knowledge creation, disinformation research reflects the culture, aspirations, and assumptions of its creators. (Harper’s Magazine. Sept. 2021).

It is nothing scientific. It is deeply subjective.

A quick scan of the institutions that publish most frequently and influentially about disinformation: Harvard University, The New York Times, Stanford University at MIT, NBC, the Atlantic Council, the Council on Foreign Relations etc. That the most prestigious liberal institutions of the pre-digital age are the most invested in fighting disinformation reveals a lot about what they stand to lose or hope to regain.

Whatever the brilliance of the individual disinformation researchers and reporters, the nature of the project inevitably places them in a regrettably defensive position in the contemporary debate about media representation, objectivity, image-making, and

public knowledge. However well-intentioned these professionals are, they don't have special access to the fabric of reality.

This spring, in light of new reporting and a renewed, bipartisan political effort to investigate the origins of COVID-19, Facebook announced that it would no longer remove posts that claim that the coronavirus was man-made or manufactured. Many disinformation workers who spent months calling for social-media companies to ban such claims on the grounds that they were conspiracy theories have been awkwardly silent as scientists have begun to admit that an accidental leak from the Wuhan lab is an unlikely, but plausible, possibility. (Harper's Magazine. Sept. 2021).

That was, again, 18 months ago. The possibility of a Wuhan lab has become much more probable. We know that the leading and most elite teams of scientists within the Department of Energy and the FBI both believe it's by far the most likely explanation for the COVID pandemic. But what that Harper's article showed was the core fraud of this industry, the conceit that there are somehow a group of people who have now elevated themselves to reside above political ideology and political agenda, who have somehow become trained, experts, in decreeing what is and is not information to the point where that should be censored off the Internet, when in reality, as the Harper's article so brilliantly demonstrated, there is nothing objective about it, is every bit as politicized and subjective and subject to manipulation as journalism and political debate. It is a fraudulent industry and a fraudulent expertise.

What made The Tablet's article so definitive in terms of the understanding it presented for this industry beyond the reporting I had done, beyond the Harper's article, is that it traced the history, the genesis of where this all came from, and how it was formed, and then where it took hold. We will in our interview segment in just a few minutes, speak with the author of this brilliant and vitally important article, Jacob Siegel, and he will explain a great deal about the work he did in tracing the roots of this industry but I just want to show you a few key segments from the article to set this context for the discussion that I'm about to have with him. Let's take a look at the article:

In 1950, Sen. Joseph McCarthy claimed that he had proof of a communist spy ring operating inside the government. Overnight, the explosive accusations blew up in the national press, but the details kept changing. Initially, McCarthy said he had a list with the names of 205 communists in the State Department; the next day, he revised it to 57. Since he kept the list a secret, the inconsistencies were beside the point. The point

was the power of the accusation, which made McCarthy's name synonymous with the politics of the era.

For more than half a century, McCarthyism stood as a defining chapter in the worldview of American liberals: a warning about the dangerous allure of blacklists, witch hunts and demagogues. Until 2017, that is, when another list of alleged Russian agents roiled the American press and the American political class. A new outfit called Hamilton 68 claimed to have discovered hundreds of Russian-affiliated accounts that had infiltrated Twitter to sow chaos and help Donald Trump win the election. Russia stood accused of hacking social media platforms, the new centers of power, and using them to covertly direct events inside the United States.

This is how the government-created “war against disinformation” became the great moral crusade of its time. CIA officers at Langley came to share a cause with hip young journalists in Brooklyn, progressive nonprofits in DC, George Soros-funded think tanks in Prague, racial equity consultants, private equity consultants, tech company staffers in Silicon Valley, Ivy League researchers and failed British royals. Never Trump Republicans joined forces with the Democratic National Committee, which declared online disinformation a “whole-of-society problem that requires a whole-of-society response.” (Tablet. March 28, 2023).

That is exactly what happened. The Democratic Party after 2016 decided that the reason they lost that election was because the Internet was too free and they implemented a plan that became their top priority. A whole-of-society problem that requires a whole-of-society response, to gain control of the Internet by concocting, manufacturing, in partnership with their Never Trump Republican allies, this fraudulent industry called the disinformation industry that would then be used to justify control of the Internet. The article goes on:

In a technical or structural sense, the censorship regime's aim is not to censor or to oppress, but to rule. That's why the authorities can never be labeled as guilty of disinformation. Not when they lied about Hunter Biden's laptops, not when they claimed that the lab leak was a racist conspiracy, not when they said that vaccines stopped transmission of the novel coronavirus.

Disinformation, now and for all time is whatever they say it is. That is not a sign that the concept is being misused or corrupted; it is the precise functioning of a totalitarian system. (Tablet. March 28, 2023).

As I said at the start, the lack of definition, the lack of anything concrete was intended. That's what bestows it with its power. The article goes on:

The false yet foundational claim that Russia hacked the 2016 election provided a justification – just like the claims about weapons of mass destruction that triggered the Iraq War – to plunge America into a wartime state of exception. With the normal rules of constitutional democracy suspended, a coterie of party operatives and security officials then installed a vast, largely invisible new architecture of social control on the back end of the Internet's biggest platforms. (Tablet. March 28, 2023).

That is exactly what happened. That is the censorship regime that we face. There has been a lot of great work and reporting done none better than this article by Jacob Siegel, who is our guest tonight. And I'm about to show you the interview we conducted with him that I think shines even further light on what this journal called Tablet aptly calls “the hoax of the century,” meaning this fraudulent, fake but deeply nefarious disinformation industry. Here's our interview.

G. Greenwald: Jacob, first of all, congratulations on writing an article that, at least in some quarters, has received so much attention and praise, and thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me about it.

Jacob Siegel: I'm glad to be here.

G. Greenwald: Sure. So, there are a lot of odd things that have happened in the world of politics. Let's start with the fact that I not only am praising an article in Tablet magazine but encouraging everybody to read it on the grounds that it's one of the most important stories of the year. Something I think would have been unimaginable for me even seven or eight years ago. There's a lot of other weird things like that, including the fact that you're talking to me and that, you know, the favorite operative of liberals is Rick Wilson and they worship the Bush-Cheney spokeswoman, Nicolle

Wallace, who comes on their TV every day at 5 o'clock, so where do you fit in into this kind of whirlwind? Just talk a little bit about your post-9/11 trajectory, how you ended up in Afghanistan and just more broadly, your kind of political journey as you see it.

Jacob Siegel: Yeah, I would say I wound up in the military shortly after 9/11, not with any great political conviction necessarily, but with a strong patriotic sentiment, a sense that if the country was going to war, I should be involved in that, I shouldn't be exempt, somehow, that if other people are going, I should go as well. And, you know, I had volunteered at Ground Zero shortly after the 9/11 attacks, and I just felt like I should be a part of that. And I was deployed to Iraq in 2006, 2007. That was a difficult, then sobering, experience, to say the least. Whatever illusions I'd had about the war, which were probably already gone by then, certainly didn't survive 15 months in Iraq. Then in 2012, I was deployed to Afghanistan and that was quite a different experience. But it was one that allowed for more kind of contemplation and reflection on my part, in no small part because the conditions in Afghanistan where I was, in western Afghanistan, in 2012, as an army intelligence officer, were, you know, less chaotic, less violent than they had been in Iraq during the civil war and surge years in 2006, 2007. And so, there was more opportunity for me to take stock and to think about what was actually happening and to assess what seemed to be a just unbridgeable gap between the official declarations about the war and what I, or for that matter, anybody else, could have observed on the ground.

I should just make clear that I was nothing special. I didn't have any high-level access to anything. I was a very average – an average battalion-level intelligence officer. So it wasn't that I had any special access, it was just that I had the opportunity to take stock and when I did that, I couldn't reconcile myself to why these enormous lies were being told about the war. It was obvious to me that they were being told, and I couldn't justify that. That being said, I didn't have any grand political awakening at the moment. There was just this sort of creeping disillusionment and reassessment, and I couldn't honestly tell you exactly where it led me or where it wound up. I've always thought of myself primarily as a writer and an observer more than as somebody with very strong political convictions.

G. Greenwald: You know, it's interesting. I had kind of an eye-opening experience when I worked on both reporting, on WikiLeaks stories and, then, also working with Edward Snowden, whom himself joined the Army after 9/11 and wanted to go fight

in the war in Iraq, believing that it was just a noble cause. He broke his legs in basic training, ended up in the CIA and the NSA, and then kind of discovered while he was doing that, that there was a gap between what the government had made people believe it was doing and what it was doing. But also, even as part of that reporting, I so often would hear from people who had been in the military or who worked inside the intelligence community, who were most open to the notion that a lot of these secrets needed to be unveiled, not because they were fans of Chelsea Manning or Edward Snowden even, but just because they were much more open to the fact that the government lies about the reality because they saw it up close and, say, very militaristic and uber patriotic pundits who say it's never justifiable to criticize what the U.S. government is doing. And in terms of this kind of political change I had referenced in the beginning, to me, it seems like one of the most significant parts of this change is that the people who are very skeptical of and concerned about the behavior of the intelligence community used to be found, I think, primarily on the left, and now they're more often found on the right. And that has kind of... I feel like I'm sort of sitting in the same place and things have swirled around me.

A big part of your article talks about the role of the intelligence community in building a censorship regime. You even compare some of the things you saw in terms of intelligence activities in Afghanistan and what was being used against the Taliban or al-Qaida, or the entire country, about Afghanistan to what's being done domestically to American citizens on U.S. soil. Has your view of the intelligence community changed in the sense that it became much more skeptical, that you've become more concerned about what they're doing? Or do you think they've just gotten more menacing in terms of our rights – or some combination of both?

Jacob Siegel: More the former. My views have certainly changed. I do think that they've gotten more menacing. But to take Assange as an example, you know, my sense of Julian Assange's role in the political process in 2016, let's say, there was a more or less fair and open political contest between Democrats and Republicans, and Assange was a kind of interloper in that political process. And, you know, I might have said the same thing about some of the things you were doing at the time, Glenn, I might have seen them in the same way, because my sense was that already there were referees, there was an officiated contest, there was procedural constitutional democracy and to have people come in from the outside, whether it was Kim Dotcom or Assange, and try and influence the electorate by strategically exposing secrets, as it were, I saw that as a kind of untoward interference.

What I realize now is that there was not a fairly officiated electoral process and that the people who were keeping the secrets were the Democratic National Committee, the intelligence agencies, and that Assange – and so far, as he was pushing to open up the secrets – was actually acting more in the spirit, let's say, of a truly fair democratic process. But that was a gradual realization for me. There were a number of things, one thing after another, you know, realizing that Adam Schiff was lying over and over again. I couldn't reconcile myself to that after a while. The Russian bounties story, I couldn't reconcile myself to that. I'd always maybe had some skepticism of the, you know, unaccountable power in the intelligence agencies. I was aware of some of that history but once I saw all these things together, you know, the accumulation changed my view.

G. Greenwald: One of the things that struck me in the article when I sat down to read it was you began a paragraph devoted to the scandals of Joseph McCarthy and the controversy surrounding what he did, namely, accusing all sorts of people of being covert agents of the Kremlin, claiming that he had secret lists of people whom he could prove to hide allegiances, American citizens, well, allegiances to the Russians. And I recall the very first time I heard the Russiagate narrative presented in May 2016, which was when the Clinton campaign released this very ominous ad with that kind of heavy music and that deep intonation – “What is Donald Trump doing with the Kremlin?” You know, I immediately assumed that everybody remotely affiliated with the left or with liberalism steeped in the evils of McCarthyism would be horrified by this resurrection of this narrative. It was almost verbatim what was used and what was said. And to this very day, anyone who now stands up and questions the proxy war in Ukraine or who dissented from Russiagate was accused of being a Russian agent. Some people on the right still look at that era favorably. I think Ann Coulter wrote a whole book trying to resurrect McCarthy's reputation, but leaving that aside, why did you begin with that example? What is it about that example and what parallels do you see in what's happening now?

Jacob Siegel: I mean, for exactly the reason you just pointed out, which is that for more than half a century, the Red Scare and McCarthyism was not just one historical episode among many for American liberals, which is, you know, the tradition and the milieu that I grew up in was that kind of Cold War American liberalism and its aftermath is something I'm very familiar with. And McCarthyism was, if not the central moral allegory, then certainly the central moral allegory of the last 50 years, let's say. And it was supposed to have revealed the true face of America and what the

American political system was capable of. And all of that was supposed to be in the DNA of American liberalism. And to see all of that abandoned so quickly, to see it abandoned – abandonment is the wrong word – to see precisely the thing that American liberalism had supposedly been against – it had to find itself in opposition to – to see it so quickly and wholeheartedly embraced, seemed to me significant and to signal the kind of epochal change which is that something from the polls had reversed somehow. And north was south and south was north now. And also just the parallels were so striking with the two secret lists in narrative terms – McCarthy with his list, you know, the famous list that he brandished and then never actually produced, and then this Hamilton 68 secret list that they couldn't produce, they couldn't reveal to the public. And so, I found it – I couldn't open it any other way.

G. Greenwald: Yeah. I mean, even if people generally support the notion that there was more communist infiltration of the United States in the 1950s than was known or whatever, it's still seemingly a support for the core tenets of McCarthyism because all of that was based on things like secret list and destruction of reputation with no due process and all kinds of excessive abuses of power that we should all object to, no matter what the cause.

One of the things I think was very important that you did in telling this story was you emphasized the way in which the kind of accelerant, the steroids for all of this stuff – the regime of censorship, the involvement of the security state in our politics – was the obviously shocking election of Donald Trump in 2016, which I think people have forgotten. Almost nobody was expecting and was a huge shock to the system and caused a lot of these previously unthinkable things to just explode in power. But as you note, a lot of these things were a long time in the making well before Trump and you specifically point to the proximity of the Obama White House and Obama himself on the one hand, and Silicon Valley on the other, and the use, for example, of propaganda and disinformation over the Internet by Hillary Clinton's State Department and her use of people who then went on to work for Google, all these kind of, you know, Internet geniuses who thought they had found a real home in the Obama administration. Talk a little bit about how some of these things had their roots not in Trump's election, but back in the things the Obama administration was doing.

Jacob Siegel: Yeah. So if you look at the Obama administration in that era, the Internet freedom agenda, what you find is that many of the tools of disinformation and the disinformation apparatus had their debut during that period, either as

offensive weapons to be used against official enemies of the United States, ISIS in particular, or they were debuted because it was the Hillary Clinton State Department, in particular, that was criticizing other countries for engaging in precisely the kinds of activities that Clinton would later lead others to crusade against disinformation.

But to begin with, first, there was a very close alignment between the Obama administration and Google in particular. And because of the kind of spectacular nature of the Twitter Files and because of Facebook being such a great and easy target in a lot of ways – you know, Google has skated off in a lot of the analysis of this censorship industrial complex and that's unfortunate because Google really plays a leading role in this. And it begins not in the coercive counter-disinformation register. It begins in this kind of big data political engineering register that the Obama administration embraces wholeheartedly. Assange, we mentioned a moment ago, was writing about this quite early on, talking about Google serving as a kind of shadow State Department for the Obama administration. There was a record-setting personnel exchange between the White House and Google, with a record number of meetings being held between the two. [So, you] see this very close alignment between these powerful tech companies that are effectively private surveillance platforms and the Obama administration, which goes on to become the sort of backbone of this permanent ruling party of the United States.

G. Greenwald: One of the things that strikes me so much in the TikTok debate – whether to ban TikTok or not – and the kind of other bills to give the government even greater powers to ban platforms when they decide there are similar threats, is that – for a long time – the critique of countries like China and Iran and Russia was that these governments were despotic precisely because they refused to allow American technology platforms such as Google and Facebook to enter their country, or at least operate without a lot of constraints. Their concern was that they would be used to disseminate disinformation, they would destabilize their countries by spreading propaganda, by undermining the health of their citizenry in their country, and they would be called despotic for wanting to ban Google and Facebook, or at least requiring them to submit to a whole bunch of censorship rules in order to operate on their soil. And now, we have the United States leaving aside the merits of the debate over whether to ban TikTok, essentially, saying the same thing, that we can't allow foreign platforms, foreign social media companies to be on our soil because they'll propagandize their citizenry, they'll spread disinformation. I draw that parallel because it seems like there's a similar parallel in terms of some of the things that Hillary Clinton's State Department was doing. I remember she would go around with these two little kids, Jared Cohen and Alec Ross, who were supposedly whizz-

kids of Silicon Valley, and the work they were actually doing was designed to allow citizens of those countries to get around the censorship regime that had been imposed by countries like China and Iran and Russia by making the Internet open, by allowing them to use the Internet anonymously to get around with things like VPNs.

Given all of that, how do you see the similarities between what we have been long condemning in these countries in terms of controlling the Internet, censoring the Internet on the grounds that those countries said they had to protect their citizens from disinformation and foreign propaganda, with what the U.S. government is doing now in terms of what American citizens can and can't hear.

Jacob Siegel: Well, look, I, I guess I have a somewhat, I don't know, complicated – but my view is that governments have a right to – “right” is a wrong word – governments have the prerogative to regulate communications platforms as corporate entities, let's say [...]

G. Greenwald: The way they regulate the other, the way they regulate banks or oil companies or any other company.

Jacob Siegel: Precisely – and, in this case, a company or a sector that has monopolistic power over very key resource information which impacts directly political sovereignty. So, you know, I have a basically civil libertarian view of not infringing on speech rights on those platforms but, in terms of the kind of the corporate structure of the platforms themselves, I think there's no reason. The original argument, the original Clinton State Department argument, actually goes back to Bill Clinton. It goes back to the mid-nineties, the first dot-com boom. That argument is that we need totally unrestricted global markets for Internet companies to spread democracy everywhere and unimpeded access to the globe. You know, I think that's the argument that doesn't actually hold up but not that I'm justifying speech restrictions.

G. Greenwald: Well, what's the zero in on that? I remember after 9/11, the kind of slogan, the motto of the media, and the government, was “9/11 changed everything.” I'm not entirely sure that it actually did. I think it took a lot of things that were already existing and expanded it. I think it's actually more accurate to use that motto about

the election of Donald Trump. That actually did change everything or certainly fundamentally transformed things, making a lot of things that were once unthinkable now a reality.

And you identify the election of Trump and the decision by Democrats and the U.S. security state – and kind of the establishment, more broadly – that was playing with a bunch of different explanations. Originally, they were going to blame WikiLeaks. They wanted to blame the New York Times. They wanted to blame Jim Comey. Then, they kind of landed on blaming Russia, and Russiagate, in turn, ended up being the foundation for so much of what ended up happening that your piece talks about in terms of the dangers of Internet control. Describe why you think Russiagate and Trump's selection were so fundamental. How is that used to do all of this?

Jacob Siegel: Yeah, they blamed everybody but the Clinton camp. Right?

G. Greenwald: The people who actually paid to win that election.

Jacob Siegel: Paid to win that election, decided not to campaign in the upper Midwest. Yeah. Everybody but them.

So, what Russiagate did, I think, was it both served as this kind of coordinating mechanism that brought these various factions of the ruling party – ruling party might be a bit too strong – but various factions of the most powerful sectors of American society that might have had implicit interests in common but had not been explicitly coordinated prior to that, and it brought them together and it brought them together to oppose Donald Trump. And there was a kind of popular base to the opposition to Donald Trump, which is the resistance that portrayed him as a fascist and portrayed him as a Russian stooge and had that kind of moral dimension. And then there was the fact that Donald Trump was obviously a threat to various deep-seated business interests, defense sector interests – that he was threatening to pull out of NATO, that he was threatening to renegotiate trade terms with China – and so, were these various reasons for Trump's outward displays of, you know, at times, quite ugly nativism that really did inflame people. I don't think this was all purely cynical. I think it could only work as well as it did, in part, because Trump really did inspire a reaction from people that was outsized, that was unlike the reaction we had gotten from other politicians. And that that, together with the way in which he threatened these really core interests

of the most powerful sectors of American society, put in place the conditions for coordination between those sectors that had not previously existed. So, there was no reason, for instance, to think that Wall Street and Silicon Valley and NGO staffers and The Washington Post newsroom were all going to be aligned – that they were going to be explicitly aligned, I should say – functionally, operationally aligned, and not simply have implicit affinities with one another. But it was intrinsic to the war against disinformation, intrinsic and essential through the counter disinformation and its notion of a “whole-of-society” effort that these various powerful sectors would be lashed to one another in a common cause, in a national mobilization, very much on the model of what happens in times of war. When there's a war, we drop these divisions between the public and the private sector and we adopt that kind of central planning for the war effort, right? It was quite similar to that.

G. Greenwald: Yeah. I mean, this is one of the things – just in terms of illustrating how radical I think your critique was or your history was – you do compare the pretext that was used for the War on Terror or the war in Iraq, kind of the central falsehood about weapons of mass destruction that justified the war in Iraq, some of the fears around al-Qaida that led to a lot of the excesses of the War on Terror to what's taking place now. And so, when you say that there were parts of Trump and his nativism that were genuinely ugly and that were genuinely kind of frightening, I think, to a lot of not just establishment interests, but a lot of people who genuinely were frightened by this kind of new ideology, you know, it's also the case that people were also genuinely frightened by al-Qaida and by 9/11. I lived in Manhattan on 9/11. I remember very well, very vividly, all the sensations of anger and rage and fear and concern because our country was attacked. And the lesson of 9/11 that I really thought we had learned – maybe it's just too rational, maybe there are a lot of people who didn't live through it – was that when you actually feel a valid fear of some threat, it's important that you don't let establishment institutions, the government, the media, whomever, exploit those fears to get you to acquiesce to things that you'll later regret, either because they were worse than the fear itself or were in some other ways not related to the fear – that you kind of got manipulated into saying yes to the Patriot Act; yes to warrantless surveillance; yes to, you know, torture; yes to process-free detentions, all because we have this genuine fear of al-Qaida.

And so, when it comes to even what you might describe as valid concerns about Trump, why do you think that that lesson – and it wasn't just for 9/11, but prior historical events as well – wasn't kind of in place enough? Why was everybody – not everybody, but so many people, so many institutions – so easily manipulated by fear of this singular individual to radically change their views on almost every major

political question and really get to the point that Sam Harris said that everything – lying, censoring and even disinformation – is justified in the name of stopping Trump because he's such a singular threat.

Jacob Siegel: Just to put a finer point on what Sam Harris said – that it was okay and he would turn and look the other way if there were dead children in a basement if that's what was on Hunter Biden's laptops because that's how significant the Trump threat was – look, I don't think that societies learn lessons. Individuals learn lessons. So, I understand where you're coming from but I think that's a kind of hopeful position that isn't borne out and that certainly that unaccountable bureaucracies don't learn the lessons. And they exist in no small part to not learn lessons. And the not learning of lessons becomes a core function and a kind of a primary drive of the bureaucracies to avoid at all costs the learning of lessons, lest those lessons point to the needlessness or the excesses of the bureaucracy itself. So, I've sort of given up on this on this hope that there are collective lessons to be learned in that way. There are only carefully guarded institutions that are transparent enough and locally controlled enough that people can actually have influence and impact over them and that can preserve lessons in that way. But to the question of why people responded to Trump in this sort of apocalyptic register – leave aside for a moment why, let's say, the defense establishment or why Wall Street responded to him that way because I think that's maybe easier to understand. They saw him as a threat [...]

G. Greenwald: A genuine threat, a rational, genuine threat to their interests.

Jacob Siegel: That's right. Why did so many normal people respond to him that way? And I think tens of millions of normal people did. There are two answers. One is that he seemed to play on these very suppressed and things that people were very uncomfortable with, that they wanted to have overcome – that we had somehow moved beyond the kind of crassness and racism and nativism that Trump represented. Something like that. The best way I could put it is that he was an embarrassment. And there are few things worse in life than an embarrassment. It's like when you think about what you're really afraid of, it's not being kidnaped by al-Qaida and tortured to death. You're really afraid of being embarrassed at a party or something like that – and Trump was a kind of hideous, unavoidable embarrassment who also sort of pointed

the embarrassment back at those people by saying to them, “Oh, your niceties are foolish, you're the fool.” And so that was really difficult.

The other part of it, which became more significant over the years and really can't be discounted, is that the secrecy regime that we're talking about and that the intelligence bureaucracies propagated – and not just the intelligence bureaucracies, other federal bureaucracies also which use secrecy as a form of regulatory power, as Daniel Patrick Moynihan pointed out many years ago. That secrecy, that culture of secrecy and that culture of sort of selective information operations being used to manipulate the public drives people crazy. It is not compatible with reason and self-government. It makes people suspicious of their neighbors, suspicious of their own shadows. It makes them believe in monsters that don't exist. So, all of those things together, I think, produced this kind of singular, totally outsized reaction that Trump inspired.

G. Greenwald: Yeah, these tactics have been time-tested over many decades and have been very effectively deployed often in other countries, as you point out, and now are kind of being directed at our own population. And I think that's, for me at least, one of the most significant changes in what you're describing.

There are a couple of other questions that I want to ask you about. One paragraph, in particular, was very striking to me, both in terms of how extreme the terminology that you used is as well as kind of how it goes to the core of the matter. You wrote:

To save liberal democracy, the experts prescribed two critical steps: America must become less free and less democratic. This necessary evolution will mean shutting out the voices of certain rabble-rousers in the online crowd who have forfeited the privilege of speaking freely. It will require following the wisdom of disinformation experts and outgrowing our parochial attachment to the Bill of Rights. (Jacob Siegel. March 28, 2023).

That's some pretty extreme steps that you claim the establishment is undertaking to make America less free and less safe. What kind of concrete examples did you have in mind when you're pointing to things like silencing dissent and taking away the right of rabble-rousers or people a little too far outside establishment constraints to be able to speak or even exercise basic foundational rights in the Constitution?

Jacob Siegel: I mean, there are just dozens of examples of not fringe publications, not fringe figures, but people like former Labor Secretary Robert Reich, who is saying that, you know, what democracy really needs is to censor free speech, saying that Elon Musk's called – I'm going to mess up the quote and it deserves to be read precisely because it's so insane – but basically Reich says something along the lines that Elon Musk promising to turn Twitter into a real free speech platform fulfills the dream of Pol Pot and Stalin and every other dictator. I quote from an essay in the New York Times Magazine by a Yale graduate and writer, named Emily Bazelon, all about how disinformation and the infodemic, which was another one of these pseudoscientific terms trotted out during the COVID pandemic to conflate and erase the boundaries between disease on the one hand and war and speech, and to just erase all of these essential boundaries but, Bazelon's argument is that free speech is essentially the American version of free speech, it is obsolete and has become dangerous and is empowering radicals. And this is an argument that's made over and over and over again by people in publications like The New Yorker, The Atlantic Magazine and by, you know, high-level Democratic Party officials. It becomes the conventional wisdom. So, you know, I appreciate you calling it extreme, and I understand why it sounds extreme in that context. I have to give great credit to my editor at Tablet for never asking me to pull a single punch on any of this. And, you know, I didn't write anything to be extreme. It's not in my nature to write [...]

G. Greenwald: You're generally pretty moderate in your right away and in your rhetoric, which is why I think this piece was striking. And to be clear, at the end of the day, what's extreme is not what you're saying, but what the people whose behavior you're describing are actually doing. There's no way to describe what they're doing without using extreme language because it really is so extreme when you have the establishment and the key institutions of authority, now explicitly, essentially arguing that we can no longer tolerate a free Internet or even free speech because the dangers of it outweigh the dangers of curbing it. That, by nature, is kind of extreme.

Let me ask you just a little bit about that notion, though, about free speech and censorship in this prevailing mentality. I always find that it's obviously a lot easier for people to defend free speech when it comes to censorship of ideas with which they agree, or the silencing of people whom they vaguely regard as allies. Elon Musk ran into this when he was banging the table and saying he was going to usher in absolute free speech and when someone asked him what that meant, he said that means allowing all speech except that which is illegal under Supreme Court precedent and

Brandenburg and all that, even though he recognizes he's not bound by that, that's for the government. He kind of said that's going to be my guiding principles. And then, months after he took over, he's banning people like Kanye West and Nick Fuentes, not because they've said anything even arguably illegal, but because those ideas are really offensive to maybe him or to advertisers or to others. He specifically said he would ban Alex Jones because Alex Jones, his comments about Sandy Hook, really struck him personally as offensive because he had a baby who died. So, I'm wondering, where do you draw that line when you're defending free speech – when you're kind of ringing about the dangers of censorship – do you see cases like, say, Kanye West or Nick Fuentes being banned or Alex Jones being banned? There are a lot of examples of, say, Palestinian activists being banned, critics of Israel being banned. Are those issues that are concerning to you as well? Where do you draw those lines?

[00:56:09] Jacob Siegel: I mean, the kind of operative question to me is, is there a collusion between the state and the corporation involved in the banning? You know, I think that's a bright red line. So, what would I personally advise Elon Musk to do with Twitter? I would say allow for more sort of local community-based moderation. Seems to me an approach that might work rather than trying to have – I don't think this model of centralization, vertical centralization, is good, personally. But, you know, I start to get outside of my depth with some of this stuff and I can be persuaded to take different views.

In general, I think the more speech, the better. I think that where there is a case for banning private platforms, it's best when it's done at the most local possible level and most dangerous when it's done in a kind of top-down manner, and especially when it's done at the whim of a single owner. You know, Elon Musk having a personal connection to Sandy Hook is compelling for Elon Musk, but it's a very bad precedent for policy at a company that controls the core political speech rights of tens of millions of voters. That being said if there is no direct connection with the government – and let's pretend for a second that that's possible, and I don't actually think that that is possible because I think whoever owns Twitter, whether it's somebody like Musk who's done something incredible by disclosing this stuff with the Twitter files or somebody else who's more willing to go along with the dictates of the FBI, let's say – whoever owns it, it still functions as a surveillance platform in some way, still collecting user data on the backend. And we don't know how these decisions are being made and they're still fundamentally opaque. But, you know, if you can say that there is no direct coordination with the government and then not try and parse that too closely for the moment, I think, you know, it's the platforms having some

kind of speech guidelines is a reasonable and probably a necessary thing for them to do, to maintain the kind of communities or user bases that are going to allow them to grow. But, you know, this is something where I don't get into policy prescription stuff. It's not my strong [...]

G. Greenwald: Right. The focus of the article is on the role the government is playing in imposing this regime.

We're just getting out of time, so just going to pick a couple of questions that I absolutely have to ask you. One of which is you devoted an entire section of the article – you had 13 parts or chapters – to the case of how the media and Big Tech treated the question of Hunter Biden's laptop. It's amazing that liberals have been trained the minute you even mention the phrase Hunter Biden's laptop, they've automatically been conditioned to believe you're talking about something trivial. Why did you decide to devote an entire chapter to that episode and you emphasize the importance of it when doing so, what importance do you see in it?

Jacob Siegel: What could possibly be less trivial than 49 senior U.S. intelligence officials and the FBI lying openly to the American public and pressuring these social media platforms to censor reporting, weeks before a presidential election, and censoring the second oldest newspaper in the United States? I mean, I can't think of a more direct, more brazen assault, not only on freedom of speech. We're talking about what people think voting is. What do they think their voting rights and their political sovereignty are? You know, if you're kept in the dark and spun around and then, released at the last second and presented with two false choices and allowed to pick one, that's not exactly self-government. And so, I look at the way in which people have been – sort of the liberals in particular – have been conditioned to sort of yawn and parrot the AOC line about how this is still a half-baked story or whatever, as a reflexive response that also demonstrates the power of this sort of memetic propagation of attitudes that in a sense is the flipside of censorship. So, if censorship exists to eliminate certain forms of information [...]

G. Greenwald: Disinformation. Disinformation. You mean if censorship exists to elaborate disinformation...

Jacob Siegel: Well, what they call disinformation. I call it information.

G. Greenwald: Okay. Okay. Yeah, Yeah, exactly. Exactly. Which is what this case illustrates, right, is that the people who claim to be fighting against disinformation were the ones who spread it as they did in so many other cases.

Jacob Siegel: But the flipside of that is that there's also a powerful way to create a kind of conformity of opinion on critical issues like the Biden laptop, for instance, where you have first, you know, the press all falls in line. Virtually the entire press establishment falls in line. It becomes verboten to talk about this. And how does this work? Again, through kind of embarrassment, you know, you're mocked. If you take this seriously, you're scorned by your peers and your colleagues. You're conditioned to treat this as if it's no big deal and anybody who says otherwise is a right-wing fanatic but I think that it's as big a deal as one can find.

G. Greenwald: Yeah. I recently said on one of my shows that not only will I likely talk about the Hunter Biden laptop story until the day I die, but I'll probably request there be something about it on my tombstone because it's not only so gargantuan but what infuriates me the most, aside from the fact that the people who constantly claim to be the warriors against disinformation are the ones who spread those lies, as they so often did in the COVID case and so many others, including examples you mentioned, is that, even though we now have the definitive proof from the media institutions, they tell us to trust that the Hunter Biden laptop was authentic all along and was never Russian disinformation. Not a single media outlet that spread that lie has gone back in the wake of this new evidence and confronted what they did or even explained it, let alone retracted it. And the same thing happened in the story that you mentioned in your article where Jeff Gerth, who was at the belly of the beast. In the main, you cannot get more mainstream media than him, he worked for 30 years at The New York Times and then went to ProPublica and he was writing in Columbia Journalism Review, the most mainstream journalism outlet, a media criticism. He wrote a four-part indictment of the media's lies and recklessness in Russiagate, and not a single target or object of his critique even bothered to acknowledge it, just like they did with the Hunter Biden story.

And so, I want to ask you, in terms of the repercussions of your story, which is this opus about, you know, touching every major institution of American political life, is it the case, as I perceive now, the only people who have really talked about it and acknowledged it is people who were already concerned about it in the first place. And given this kind of ability that these media outlets have to silo off any information that's negative – they don't care that they got caught lying in the hundred batting cages because they know their audience doesn't care if they confront it or apologize for it, they probably want them not to. What hope is there to be able to reform these institutions, if you have any?

Jacob Siegel: I don't have too much hope to reform these institutions. I am afraid that I think some of them are probably too far gone. But maybe we just need new institutions. I think that this has become the overriding institutional imperative, precisely to never face up to the failures, and that creates this escalating cycle where, by refusing to face up to these failures, you then double down on the idea that it's everybody else's fault. So, you lock yourself into a fraudulent analytical framework because you won't acknowledge what you've done wrong. You blame other people, you declare them extremists or conspiracy theorists, which is itself an error and specious and fraudulent. So now, you've made another error, by refusing to confront your original error, you've not doubled down on another error. Meanwhile, trust in the media plummets as a result. How do you metabolize trust in the media? You say it's due to disinformation and domestic extremism, and so then you have to go get more disinformation and domestic extremism orders, and this sort of goes on in perpetuity. There are still great reporters and almost all are there. [...]

G. Greenwald: For sure. For sure.

Jacob Siegel: Doing very good. Right?

G. Greenwald: These are institutional critiques.

Jacob Siegel: But as institutions and, you know, maybe – I just don't know enough – maybe, in a longer cycle, I would be able to see how they would escape from this. It's difficult for me to see, frankly.

G. Greenwald: Yeah, I agree completely. I think they're largely irredeemable. I think their business model kind of depends on this polarization, which is why, for me, the only solution is, as you said, kind of constructing new institutions. But that depends upon the ability to do so with the free Internet. And I think censorship has become not only a way of kind of shielding their disinformation but also preventing competitors from emerging, because anyone who wants to compete, not just compete with them in a business sense. We have lots of new media outlets that kind of click into the same narrative. But anyone that wants to present an alternative way of seeing the world is instantly labeled “sewers of disinformation” and then a kind of censorship regime is unleashed against it precisely to prevent that from merging. I think that's the thing that they fear most, knowing how widely they're hated.

Jacob Siegel: And, you know, the great example of this is something you wrote about Glenn. It's what happened with Parler right after January 6. That's an incredible story because it shows the way that these interests converge. Parler emerges right after the Capitol riot. I forget the statistic you had in your piece, but it was [...]

G. Greenwald: The number one most downloaded app in the Apple Play Store and in Google Play Store more than Instagram, more than TikTok, they all migrated there when they saw Trump being censored from Big Tech.

Jacob Siegel: And shutting down this fast-growing new number one is both something that the established tech companies want, and it's something the intelligence agencies want, and it's something the Democratic Party wants, and it's something that the press wants because they have been yoked together into this kind of monolithic entity with a shared set of core existential interests. And, if you push hard enough on that, you'll see the divisions but it's incredible and difficult to pull apart once you recognize the independence of the press and the kind of imperatives of the security agencies are at this point very difficult to pull apart.

G. Greenwald: Yeah, absolutely. It's a merger of major parts of both the public and the private sector. Public and private power which, ironically, is one of the academic definitions of fascism, as they claim that they're fighting fascism. But you're absolutely right. It's a consortium of institutions aligned, at least to a very large extent. And I actually think, at the end of the day, what your article does better than anything is illustrating the way in which they are actually working in collaboration toward a common goal. So, I really want to thank you for that article. I think it was incredibly illuminating. I'm going to badger everybody and on every platform to go read it. It's worthwhile. And I also appreciate your taking the time to talk to us tonight. Thanks so much.

Jacob Siegel: It was great being here. Thank you for having me. Great.

G. Greenwald: Have a nice evening.

So that concludes our show for this evening. For those of you who have been watching on our Local's platform, every Tuesday and Thursday, we have our live aftershow where we take your questions and respond to your feedback. To be able to be a part of that, simply join our Locals community where you also have exclusive written journalism that we post there and all kinds of community features as well as exclusive access to the transcripts for every show that we post within 24 hours of each show appearing.

For those of you who've been watching this show here on Rumble, we're very appreciative of that. We hope to see you back every night, Monday through Friday, at 7 p.m. Eastern, exclusively here on Rumble.

Have a great evening, everybody.