

Testimony by Matt Taibbi on Censorship and Free Speech
February 12, 2025

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Two years ago, when Michael and I first testified, Committee Democrats called us “so-called journalists,” suggested we were bought-off “scribes,” and questioned our ethics and loyalties. When we tried to answer, we were told to shut up, take off our tinfoil hats, and remember two things: there’s no censorship, but whatever government is doing, it’s for our own good.

I was shocked and thought the whole thing had to be a mistake. No way the party I gave votes to all my life was pro-censorship. Then last year I listened to John Kerry, who I voted for, talk to the World Economic Forum:

“It’s really hard to govern,” he said. “The referees we used to have to determine what’s a fact and what isn’t a fact have kind of been eviscerated... people self-select where they go for their news... it’s really, really hard, much harder to build consensus...”

He talked about curbing disinformation and added, “our First Amendment stands as a major block to the ability to be able to just hammer it out of existence.”

I defended Kerry when people accused him of “looking French,” but this was beyond Marie Antoinette. The peasants are “self-selecting” media. What’s next, letting them make up their own minds? And you wonder why you lost the last election!

A lack of consensus is inconvenient for politicians, and I’m sure there are times when you’d all like to “hammer” trust into place. But the First Amendment is designed to protect us from exactly that decision. Many of you forgot this.

This is an Alamo moment for the First Amendment. Most of America’s closest allies have already adopted draconian laws chipping away at it. The EU’s new Digital Services Act is the most comprehensive censorship law ever instituted in a democratic society. England, a country whose historical aversion to pure speech freedom is the reason we have a First Amendment, now has an Online Safety Act empowering government to jail people for nebulous offenses like “false communication” or causing “psychological harm.”

These laws are totally incompatible with ours. Our own citizens have been arrested in some of these countries, but our government hasn’t stood up for them. Why? Because our bureaucrats still believe in these laws.

Which brings us to USAID. Americans are in an uproar because they learned about over \$400 million going to an organization called Internews, whose chief Jeanne Bourgault boasted to

Congress about training “hundreds of thousands of people.” Her views are almost identical to Kerry’s.

Bourgault once said that to fight “bad content,” we need to “work really hard on exclusion lists or inclusion lists” and “really try to focus our ad dollars” toward “the good news.”

First of all, if you don’t know the fastest way to erode “trust” in media is by having government create “exclusion lists,” you shouldn’t be getting one dollar in taxpayer money, let alone \$476 million. And USAID is just a tiny piece of a censorship machine Michael and I saw across a long list of agencies, which have bought up every part of the news production line: sources, think-tanks, research, “fact-checking,” “anti-disinformation,” media scoring, and when all else fails, censorship.

It’s a giant closed messaging loop, whose purpose is to beat the free press into a consensus machine. There’s no way to remove the rot surgically. The whole mechanism has to go.

When Bourgault talks about pushing dollars toward the “the good news” Americans know what that means. It’s *you should get the shot, Putin is bad, J6 was an insurrection, don’t question climate change*, and so on.

Meanwhile “Bad content” is defined as “divisive rhetoric,” which often is just a synonym for uncomfortable truths: *Healthy kids don’t die from Covid, lockdowns were a bad idea, Trump isn’t a Russian agent, and Biden can’t write his name in the ground with a stick*. Some of this country’s highest-paid journalists are *still* afraid to say these things out loud. It’s pathetic.

Is there “right-wing misinformation”? Hell yes. It exists in every direction. But I grew up a Democrat and don’t remember being afraid of it. At the time, we didn’t need censorship because we figured we had the better argument.

Obviously, some of you lack that same confidence. You took billions from taxpayers and blew it on programs whose entire purpose was to tell them they’re wrong about things they can see with their own eyes. No wonder your approval ratings are lower than psoriasis.

YOU SOLD US OUT. Shame on you.

Thank you.

