Planet of the Censoring Humans

- The campaign to remove Michael Moore's new documentary from the Internet – led by Moore's erstwhile progressive "allies" – is a significant advance in the censorship revolution. Silicon Valley oligarch's get their green-washing campaign exposed by Moore.

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On April 21st, 2020, just before the 50th anniversary of the first Earth Day, Oscar-winning director/producer Michael Moore [released a new movie](#) called *Planet of the Humans.* Directed by Jeff Gibbs, the film is a searing look at the ostensible failures of the environmentalist movement, to which Moore and Gibbs both belonged.

"Jeff and I were at the first Earth Day celebrations," Moore laughs. "That's how old we are."

Distributed for free on YouTube, the film's central argument is that the environmentalist movement, fattened by corporate donations, has become seduced by an industrialist delusion.

"The whole idea of the film was to ask a question – after fifty years of the environmentalist movement, how are we doing?" recounts Moore. "It looks like, not very well."

Moore and Gibbs challenged the idea that both the planet and humankind's current patterns of industrial production can be saved through the magic bullet of "renewable energy." The film shows lurid examples of various deceptions, like the oft-used trick of replacing coal plants [with new natural gas plants](), which are then called "clean" or "green," or the hideous trend of [describing the burning of trees as a "renewable" energy source]().

Environmentalists denounced the film as riddled with "lies" and "misinformation," claiming among other things that Moore used old data to discredit green technology. A campaign to remove the film from circulation immediately took shape.

"Within 24 hours of it going out on YouTube, people got to work on trying to take the film down," explains Moore. He immediately started hearing about emails denouncing the film that were being circulated to what seemed like "everyone on the left."

An "action letter" composed by environmentalist Josh Fox was circulated, describing the film as "dangerous, misleading, and destructive" and demanding an "immediate retraction." Films for Action, an online archive of progressive movies, initially bent to Fox's demands by taking the film out of its library, only to put it back up a half-day later out of a desire to avoid a "[messy debate about censorship]()."

An intense campaign of editorials followed, and a roughly month later, YouTube [actually removed the film](). The platform cited a four-second piece of footage shot by filmmaker Toby Smith that supposedly was a copyright infringement. Moore, who says all his films are "heavily lawyered," insists the footage was legal under Fair Use laws, which allow the use of portions of copyrighted work without the permission of the owner. (In one of

many ironies, Fair Use laws have long been celebrated by progressives as an invaluable tool for journalists and artists).

The significance of the Moore incident is that it shows that a long-developing pattern of deletions and removals is expanding. The early purges were [mainly of small/fringe voices](#) on either the far right or far left, or infamously fact-challenged personalities like Alex Jones. The removal of a film by Moore – a heavily-credentialed figure long revered by the liberal mainstream – takes place amid a dramatic acceleration of such speech-suppression incidents, many connected to the coronavirus disaster.

A pair of California doctors were [taken off YouTube](#) for declaring stay-at-home measures unnecessary; right-wing British broadcaster and trumpeter of shape-shifting reptile theories David Icke was [taken off YouTube](#); a video by Rockefeller University epidemiologist Knut Wittknowski was [taken down](#), apparently for advocating a "herd immunity" approach to combating the virus. These moves all came after the popular libertarian site Zero Hedge was [banned from Twitter](#), ostensibly for suggesting a Chinese scientist in Wuhan was responsible for coronavirus.

In late April, the *World Socialist Web Site* – which has been one of the few [consistent critics](#) of Internet censorship and algorithmic manipulation – was removed by Reddit from the r/coronavirus subreddit on the grounds that it was [not "reliable](#)." The site was also [removed from the whitelist for r/politics](#), the primary driver of traffic from Reddit to the site. Then in early May, at least 52 Palestinian activists and journalists were [removed from Facebook](#) for "not following community standards," part of a

years-long [pattern of removals](#) made in cooperation with the Israeli government.

On May 13, human rights activist Jennifer Zeng noted that YouTube was [automatically deleting Chinese-language references](#) to terms insulting to the Chinese government, like *gongfei,* or "communist bandit." Congressional candidate Shahid Buttar complained an interview with Walker Bragman about Democrats supporting surveillance powers [was removed](#) by YouTube. Evan Greer of the speech advocacy group Fight for the Future had a post [flagged by Facebook's "independent fact checkers](#)"—in this case, that noted pillar of factuality, *USA Today* – dinging him for a "partly false" claim that the Senate had voted to allow warrantless searches of browsing history.

These and many other incidents came in addition to a slew of moves aimed at right-wing speakers accused of varying degrees of conspiratorial misinformation and/or hate speech, from a decision by Twitter to [begin "fact-checks" of Donald Trump](#) to wholesale removals from Facebook of "anti-immigrant" sites [like VDare and the Unz Review](#).

One problem is the so-called "reputable" fact-checking authorities many platforms are relying upon have terrible factual histories themselves. There's an implication that "misinformation" by foreign or independent actors is somehow more dangerous than broadly-disseminated official deceptions about U.S. misbehavior abroad, or manufactured scandals like Russiagate. We now expect libertarian or socialist pages to be zapped at any minute, but none of the outlets which amplified the bogus Steele dossier have been put in Internet timeout.

Moreover, despite widespread propaganda [to the contrary](), the new movement to regulate speech on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube is, actually, censorship. In the United States, high-ranking politicians in both parties have held congressional [hearings]() and threatened these tech companies with tighter regulation and taxation if they do not develop policies for combating the "[fomenting of discord]()."

In response, these companies – which as recently as four or five years ago were disavowing editorial responsibilities, in the case of Facebook going so far as to [deny being a media company]() at all – are now instituting vast new controls. It's a clear symbiosis: governments permit mining of lucrative markets in exchange for access to the platforms' monitoring powers.

"That's censorship," says Andre Damon of the *World Socialist Web Site*. "That's a First Amendment issue."

Throughout the last four years, it's mainly been left to people affected by these new policies to point out the obvious, that relying on star-chambers of corporate gatekeepers to oversee information flow will have dramatic consequences. These voices seem to be the only ones interested in sticking up for the rights of political opponents.

"I don't think anyone can confuse me for a supporter of Donald Trump, but I see the danger of celebration of Twitter fact-checking him, because that's going to be the model for all of us," says Ali Abuminah, author and co-founder of Electronic Intifada, which has extensively covered the suppression of speech in Palestine by Facebook, including the recent removals.

"It's always presented as, 'We're going to crack down on white supremacists and anti-vaxxers,'" says Damon. "But the practical impact of speech controls is always to advance the interests of the ruling class."

The pseudonymous editor of [Zero Hedge](), Tyler Durden, points out that even when platform bans of sites like his are reported by mainstream press outlets, reporters rarely address the underlying rights issue. "Nobody really digs into the First Amendment angle," he says. "They're going after the far right, they're going after the middle right. They're going after the far left and the middle left. Where does it end?"

We already have a clear picture of what the endgame of public-private content regulation partnerships might look like, through the experience of other countries. In an extreme example, as far back as 2016, Israel's Justice Minister boasted that Facebook was complying with "[95 percent]()" of its requests for content regulation, deleting thousands of posts by Palestinians.

"Palestine is often the canary in the coal mine on speech issues," laments Abunimah.

In Germany, which has strict hate speech laws, Facebook maintains an archipelago of ominously-named "[deletion centers]()," with as many as 1,200 employees at a single site, to sift through content in search of "community standards" violations. Under pressure from politicians and pundits alike, platforms began moving in this direction in the U.S. years ago, with Facebook announcing mass hires of employees with Orwellian titles like "[community reviewers]()" and "[news credibility specialists]()."

The drive to step up "content control" isn't all driven from the top down. A major additional factor has been the growth of a new intellectual movement geared toward delegitimizing speech and rationalizing censorship. The Moore incident provided a clear demonstration of how this new social reflex works.

In *Planet of the Humans*, Moore and Gibbs make a complex argument. In essence, they charge that people have become dependent upon the high-consumption lifestyles made possible by fossil fuels, and that it's our addiction to that way of life, as much as to fossil fuels themselves, that is driving humanity off a "cliff."

Their core criticism is aimed at big-name environmental leaders like Bill McKibben and Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., whom Gibbs and Moore argue have de-emphasized this truth to sell a fantasy – profitable equally to industry and environmental movements – that we can innovate our way to survival.

As is usually the case with Moore movies, *Planet of the Humans* across as a case for the prosecution. Whether he's denouncing George W. Bush or the health care industry, Moore always sails close to the wind factually, and often leaves out mitigating information a traditional journalist would feel obligated to include. This movie is no different. For instance, audiences are not told until the credits that McKibben, who is depicted on film celebrating the "beauty" of burning wood chips, eventually came out against biomass plants.

It's easy to see why McKibben would be upset at the portrayal of him in the center of an argument that the environmental movement has overstressed the possibilities of renewable

energy at the expense of changing consumption patterns. After all, he's [written books](#) and given [talks](#) addressing that problem. Then again, most of the "criticism" of McKibben comes in the form of footage of him talking, and liberal audiences never had a problem previously when Moore declined to add humanizing context to unflattering tape of the Don Rumsfelds and Charlton Hestons of the world.

Moore's movies have always been designed to gut-punch audiences, and his M.O. is being unafraid to be accused of being "unfair" when he's warning of disaster in Iraq, of a future of normalized mass shootings, of a failure to address working-class issues he (correctly) predicted would lead to [electoral victory by Donald Trump](#), etc. He's a provocateur who dares opponents to call him out on the facts (here he is [musing about a $10,000 reward](#) for anyone who can find errors in *Fahrenheit 9/11*). *Planet of the Humans* features all of these tactics that simultaneously made traditional journalists nervous but earned plaudits among committed liberals: one gets the sense that Moore, his skin leather-thick after years of media battles, is intentionally provoking a backlash in an effort to kick-start what he feels is a debate people are running out of time to have.

Still, it's easy to understand why activists who've dedicated their lives to closing coal plants and developing cleaner energies would feel betrayed at the depiction of alternative energies as failed or even counterproductive exercises in self-deception. The footage that caused YouTube to yank the film came in the middle of a brutal montage showing all the different rare industrial materials that have been mined via earth-disfiguring methods in the making of solar panels — a sequence as painful to watch as

the infamous "[Wouldn't it be Nice" montage](#) of devastated Flint in *Roger and Me.*

Is it right, as multiple critics have [wondered](#), to show such a punishing visual without noting advances that have made solar cleaner and more efficient since the early scenes in the film were shot?

If the criticisms of Moore's film stopped with questions like these, they might have been more sympathetic. Moore and Gibbs seemed anxious to engage such questions. "Maybe we're wrong," Moore says. "We'd have liked to have that discussion. That was a big reason we made the movie."

Instead, critics rolled out a now-familiar playbook to depict the movie as too villainous to exist.

The Trump era has seen the unveiling of a range of nuclear arguments against unwelcome speech. Progressives who traditionally decried censorship now often embrace it with gusto in cases of "[misinformation](#)," white supremacy and other forms of bigotry, and "conspiracy theory," among other things.

The new take is that episodes like Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, the Charlottesville tragedy, a cascade of racially-motivated mass shootings and cases of police violence, and more recently the coronavirus disaster, have all proven that incorrect speech can no longer be tolerated. It's now understood the consequences are simply too severe, especially for disadvantaged communities.

In the multitudinous critiques of *Planet of the Humans,* a creepy kind of rhetorical intersectionality is observed. Moore's film is

consistently depicted as not merely misinformation, conspiracy theory, or Trumpian hate speech, but somehow an interlocking combination of all of these things. Critics all seem to have gotten the same memo.

The biggest criticism comes in the film's focus on overpopulation. In one much-derided scene, the director Gibbs notes it took modern humans "tens of thousands of years" to reach a world population of 700 million, but then tapped into millions of years of stored energy "increased by ten times in a mere two hundred years." This fast-ascending population curve, Moore and Gibbs say, is also increasing consumption by as much as ten times per person.

Now, the environmentalist movement has been telling us for over half a century that rapid human growth and its insidious effects – [sprawl](#), [deforestation](#), [habitat loss](#), [overfishing](#), etc. – are threatening species and warming the planet. It was not so long ago that deriding such concern was the exclusive preoccupation of right-wingers. Bush-era Republicans infamously thought liberal tree-huggers loved spotted owls [more than people](#), and perhaps even nurtured plans for mass forced abortions to reduce world population (I wrote a [book](#) about an evangelical church that preached this idea).

With *Planet of the Humans,* we've come full circle. Now liberal critics are deriding all this tree-hugging as not just misanthropy, but supportive of racism and even genocide, using language that blows away Bush-era conservative rhetoric.

"Protecting the trees has almost always come with a judgment about which kind and color of humans they need protection from," [wrote](#) Kate Aronoff at the *New Republic.* She added, "Gibbs

does not appear to be a white nationalist himself, but his film echoes their approach."

In *The Nation,* which lists Moore on its masthead as a contributing editor, Fox wrote a piece denouncing the film as not only "racist," but, potentially, an "incitement to [eco-fascist population controls](#)." He added:

> *We see old white male after old white male declaring there is no solution to climate change except reducing the population. (With this many white guys, we can only guess which groups of people are supposed to stop reproducing.)*

Leah Stokes on *Vox* wrote the film's takes on the dangers of overpopulation had "[more in common with anti-immigration **hate groups** than the progressive movement](#)" and expressed hope the film would be "buried." *Gizmodo* [argued](#) the film has "more than a whiff of eugenics and ecofascism... Who are we going to knock off or control for?"

Given that the primary criticism of Moore's film is that it unfairly depicts people like McKibben as sellouts, it's more than a little odd that the apparently serious return criticism is that Michael Moore and Jeff Gibbs want to massacre nonwhite people. This would be laughable were it not for the fact that the campaign succeeded.

The director of *Roger and Me* and *Bowling for Columbine* has had plenty of prior experience with efforts to suppress his work. In 2001, HarperCollins blocked the release of his book *[Stupid White Men](#)*, on the grounds that a book critical of the U.S. government was inappropriate after 9/11. In 2004, Disney tried to [block subsidiary Miramax from distributing *Fahrenheit 9/11*](#), a film that

detailed links between the families of Bush and Osama bin Laden.

Both attempts failed. *Stupid White Men* was released after a group of librarians flooded the publisher with protest letters, and *Fahrenheit 9/11* was ultimately distributed after Miramax and Disney reworked their deal.

The clear difference in this case was Moore and Gibbs are taking on Shibboleths on the left, instead of the right. Erstwhile liberal allies this time employed a tactic the right never used, describing the film as not merely wrong but "[dangerous](#)." In conjunction with the new embrace of Internet control, this was enough to achieve something that Bush and Cheney never did: suppression of major motion picture.

In the past, a copyright dispute would have been a matter for courts. So, too, would questions of defamation that might have been raised by the likes of McKibben. Now critics can just run to Mommy and Daddy tech companies to settle disputes, and there's no clear process for those removed to argue their cases.

This is a situation that carries serious ramifications, especially for people who have less reach and financial clout than Moore. "If they can do it to me, they can do it to anybody," is how Moore puts it.

This is probably why, apart from a few brave institutional voices [like PEN America](#), none of the traditional defenders of speech (*ahem,* ACLU) have spoken out. As was the case with Julian Assange and even Alex Jones, a fear factor is probably part of the equation. Who wants to be seen defending, even in the abstract, the rights of an ally of Putin? A race-baiting talk show host? An

"eco-fascist"? Couldn't such a defense itself invite reports of violating "community standards," and bring a fresh threat of removal?

Maybe Moore is wrong about the environmental movement, but these new suppression tactics are infinitely more dangerous than one movie ever could be, and progressives seem to have lost the ability to care.