



A campaign to stop private tech companies from censoring health information on their platforms that deviates from the narrow, pro-drug views of national authorities and the World Health Organization.

A campaign initiated by:
The Alliance for Natural Health

FreeSpeech4Health.org



alliance for
natural health
INTERNATIONAL USA EUROPE

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For Immediate Release
Alexandria, VA, April 17, 2024



1 Million Voices for Free Speech on Health

Petition launched to change YouTube's medical misinformation policy

ALEXANDRIA, VA. Today, the leading non-profit defending the right to natural health, the Alliance for Natural Health (ANH), has launched a campaign to gather 1 million signatures petitioning tech giant YouTube, and its owner, Alphabet Inc, to change the medical misinformation policy it implemented in August 2023.

The policy currently disallows any health information that does not align with national authorities like the US National Institutes for Health (NIH) and the inter-governmental agency, the World Health Organization (WHO).

“YouTube’s policy means any health information that isn’t approved by these national or inter-governmental authorities is treated as misinformation”, says ANH’s executive director, Rob Verkerk, Ph.D. He added, “This is madness given these authorities have limited expertise in so many areas of health, including nutritional and lifestyle-based approaches.”

The campaign has been triggered by the introduction of a medical misinformation policy by YouTube last August, 3 months after the WHO declared an end to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many free speech advocates upheld that censorship of health information would be relaxed once it was clear the risk posed by SARS-CoV-2 was minimal, but the opposite has happened.

In America, still widely regarded as the bastion of free speech, the right to express opinions without government restraint is protected under the First Amendment. While court documents have revealed significant government-influenced censorship on private tech platforms, online platforms like YouTube, as private companies, apply their own ‘community rules’ to which content owners are forced to comply or face sanctions.

The ANH has been closely monitoring content moderation practices by major online platforms and has found that, in the post-pandemic era, de-platforming has become less common, while more subtle and non-transparent techniques, such as ‘shadowbanning’, that de-prioritizes specific, ‘less-preferred’ content, are rife, and are often unrecognized by the public.

Commenting on shadowbanning, Verkerk said, “After YouTube changed its policy last year, we saw huge drops in viewer numbers on channels run by top experts in areas like intermittent fasting and keto diets. What’s more, YouTube searches on these subjects were replaced by

content from non-experts who made it their business to bash these non-drug approaches for dealing with very common metabolic issues like obesity and type 2 diabetes.”

The ANH argues that YouTube’s medical misinformation policy, which is controlled by complex and non-transparent algorithms managed by artificial intelligence, will work against public health and the public interest. Such filtering of content distorts perspectives on health and wellbeing and creates echo chambers that further polarize society.

The campaign aims to bring on board a wide range of pro-freedom and natural health interests, not only in the USA, but all over the world. ANH and its strategic partners plan to deliver the petition, supported by over a million people, to the Alphabet offices, calling on YouTube to modify how it interprets, prioritizes, and censors so-called ‘medical misinformation’.

The secondary goal will be to influence other private tech platforms that host health information to use transparent and appropriate content prioritization and moderation approaches that operate in the public interest and do not unnecessarily limit free speech.

Learn more about this critical campaign to protect free speech for health and sign the campaign petition at FreeSpeech4Health.org.

ENDS.

MEDIA CONTACTS

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EDITOR’S NOTES

Campaign webpage: FreeSpeech4Health.org

View media pack [HYPERLINK TO BE INSERTED]

View campaign video [HYPERLINK TO BE INSERTED]

ABOUT THE ALLIANCE FOR NATURAL HEALTH

www.anh-usa.org

www.anhinternational.org

www.anheurope.org

The Alliance for Natural Health is an international non-profit organization dedicated to promoting natural, sustainable healthcare through good science and good law. ANH protects the right of natural health practitioners to practice, and the right of consumers to choose the healthcare options and treatment modalities they prefer, including complementary and alternative medicine. ANH unites consumers, practitioners, and the natural health industry to speak with a common voice, having worked since 1992 to help shift the medical paradigm from its primary focus on drugs and surgery to an “integrative” approach that seeks to optimize dietary health and lifestyle, while minimizing exposure to harmful chemicals.

ANH has fought for decades for the right to talk about the many benefits of natural health options. The organization was part precedent-setting lawsuits in the USA that expanded free speech about the benefits of supplements, including permitting consumers to learn that folate supplementation during pregnancy helped prevent neural tube defects in the unborn child. In the US, Europe and beyond, ANH has continued to champion free speech about natural products so more consumers can be empowered with the wide range of information needed to make the best choices for their health.

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BACKGROUND

How Censorship and Shadowbans Undermine Our Health

Social media is one of the most important ways in which the public receives information today, yet there exists an insidious form of artificial intelligence (AI) mediated censorship that restricts access to non-consensus views about a variety of topics, including health information.

Deplatforming is the ultimate and very overt **tool for moderating content**.¹ Its existence is understandable given the potential for groups to use social media to share information that might incite extreme speech, terrorism, violence, racism, or other socially unacceptable behaviors. Other channels might be removed because they're engaged in fraudulent activities or impersonating famous people. This is a type of **'hard-action censorship'**.²

These overt forms of censorship are increasingly being supplemented by more subtle means, including "shadowbanning." This term is still so much in the shadows it has yet to make it into dictionaries, but a 2021 bill from **Wisconsin (Senate Bill 582)** offers a useful definition:

"Shadow ban" means to limit or eliminate the exposure of a user, or content or material posted by a user, to other users of the social media Internet site through any means, regardless of whether the action is determined by an individual or an algorithm, and regardless of whether the action is readily apparent to a user.

The practice is so shadowy in nature that **service providers often try to deny** this practice even exists.³ This leaves 'victims' of it wondering whether their content has been deliberately deprioritized because it doesn't align with the social

¹ Rauchfleisch, Adrian and Kaiser, Jonas and Kaiser, Jonas, Deplatforming the Far-right: An Analysis of YouTube and BitChute (June 15, 2021). Available at

SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3867818> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3867818>

² Kokil Jaidka, Subhayan Mukerjee, Yphtach Lelkes, Silenced on social media: the gatekeeping functions of shadowbans in the American Twitterverse, *Journal of Communication*, Volume 73, Issue 2, April 2023, Pages 163–178, <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqac050>

³ Savolainen, L. (2022). The shadow banning controversy: perceived governance and algorithmic folklore. *Media, Culture & Society*, 44(6), 1091–1109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221077174>

media provider's chosen values, or if other users are genuinely not interested in it.

Content becomes a target for shadowbanning when it runs afoul of community guidelines developed by social media platforms. For example, YouTube's '**medical misinformation policy**'⁴ updated on August 15, 2023, disallows content simply when it doesn't align with recommendations from local health authorities (e.g. the National Institutes of Health [NIH]) or the World Health Organization (WHO). This had led to content on dietary and lifestyle interventions as commonplace as keto diets and intermittent fasting to be targeted for shadowbanning.

The impact of shadowbans on some channels is undeniable. Recently, US chiropractor, keto diet, and intermittent fasting educator, Dr. Eric Berg, with 11.2 million subscribers on YouTube, noted a drastic decrease in new views and page traffic following the announcement of YouTube's new medical misinformation policy on August 15. It should be deeply disturbing to the public that basic information on keto diets and intermittent fasting is viewed as so controversial as to require this cloaked form of censorship.

As such, shadowbanning doesn't just prevent us from accessing a wide range of information that allows us to make our own informed decisions. It can also affect our health and quality of life if we are denied health-promoting, disease risk reducing, or life-saving information.

This censorship should be understood within a wider context of a global effort to combat mis- and disinformation, crystalized during last year's Nobel Prize Summit, the main goal of which was to figure out how to deal with the scourge of scientific misinformation relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and elections.

The problem with such efforts is that the concepts of scientific mis- and disinformation remain elusive because the arbiter of what is true and correct (i.e. not false, whether deliberate or accidental) remains the mainstream scientific

⁴ <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/13813322?hl=en&sjid=3028553399946279314-EU>

and medical establishment—an establishment that itself routinely publishes false information.^{5,6}

There is a mistaken view of science gaining steam in which science is understood as some kind of magic tool that produces unequivocal results. Yet science is about *process*. Inconclusiveness and scientific uncertainty should be dealt with by encouraging dissent and debate—in practical terms, this means replicating studies and subjecting information to peer review. The more a scientific finding is able to be replicated by others, the closer we get to something like “truth.” Yet we’re moving in the opposite direction. Dissent is punished through censorship, gaslighting, and cancel culture, all of which have gathered immense pace since the COVID pandemic.

To defend free speech, particularly as it pertains to natural and non-pharmaceutical healthcare options, ANH-USA has initiated a petition, with a goal of 1 million signatures, calling on YouTube to modify how it interprets and then de-prioritizes or censors so-called ‘medical misinformation’.

A secondary goal is to influence all private tech platforms that host health information to use transparent and appropriate content prioritization and moderation approaches that operate in the public interest and do not unnecessarily limit free speech.

⁵ Ioannidis JP. Why most published research findings are false. *PLoS Med.* 2005 Aug;2(8):e124. doi: 10.1371/journal.pmed.0020124. Epub 2005 Aug 30. Erratum in: *PLoS Med.* 2022 Aug 25;19(8):e1004085. PMID: 16060722; PMCID: PMC1182327.

⁶ Richtig G, Berger M, Lange-Asschenfeldt B, Aberer W, Richtig E. Problems and challenges of predatory journals. *J Eur Acad Dermatol Venereol.* 2018 Sep;32(9):1441-1449. doi: 10.1111/jdv.15039. Epub 2018 May 29. PMID: 29729106; PMCID: PMC6174996.

ANH ARTICLE

Censorship: Some Ugly Truths

By ANH-USA

On 04/11/2024



Share This Article

Why we need to tackle censorship and authoritarianism head on.

This article was adapted from an in-depth article by our executive director, Rob Verkerk PhD, published last week on the ANH International website. Read the original [here](#).

THE TOPLINE

- Societies and social groups are becoming ever more polarized and fragmented, much of this being down to the way we receive and perceive news and information.
- Our experience of the world around us means we're subject to bias and our increasing reliance on online news means that pre-selected filters determined by platform owners further restrict what we're exposed to.
- Our increasing inability to find agreement with each other, coupled with the rising tide of authoritarianism and censorship, potentially threaten the viability of our species.
- The solution is unlikely to be in the hands of those who attempt to control us. It's in our hands, which is why we're launching a major anti-censorship campaign focusing on free speech for health.

Anyone looking closely at the direction human societies have been taking these last few years has got to realize that humanity is at a juncture, one that might be so fundamental, it could determine the very survival of our species.

But not everyone sees it that way. While some perceive a return to normalcy post-COVID-19, others recognize the looming specter of disaster as global elites and health bureaucrats plot the elimination of our sovereign rights and devise new ways to eliminate or restrict what they've called mis- and dis-information.

One of the most important reasons there is so little agreement over where we are as a society, is because we all have very different perceptions of reality—these perceptions being determined by our limited five senses. Take, for example, just what we see; the band of visible light that most of us can see represents just a tiny fraction (close to 0%) of the known electromagnetic spectrum. And the things we hear and see that are likely to be most influential on the future of our species are mostly things that happen outside of our own experiences. They are very rarely experienced first-hand. We might hear information or opinions from people around us, or they're filtered through one media source or another—these media sources often carrying very substantial cognitive or editorial biases.



The rise of digital technology further complicates matters. Online news is now, in most countries, the most important way people get their news, this being especially the case among younger age groups.

Yet, these platforms are not neutral conduits of information; rather, they are heavily filtered by algorithms that create echo chambers, reinforcing existing beliefs among those with similar preferences and behaviors while stifling dissenting opinions.

Nowhere has this censorship been more apparent than in the realm of health information, something we've been following closely for years. Information about natural health has been the target of government censors for some time, but the COVID era took it to a whole new level. During the pandemic, information on ivermectin, hydroxychloroquine, and really anything that challenged vaccine uptake was censored; we reported previously that the censorship has now extended to information on keto diets and intermittent fasting since it runs afoul of YouTube's new medical misinformation policy. This is happening despite valid scientific evidence backing up the use of these alternative health-promoting strategies.

Put all of this together and we see the emergence of two phenomena that have a huge influence on how we see the world around us: echo chambers and filter bubbles. Echo chambers are environments that over-expose us to news that we like or agree with, and they reinforce specific views while reducing our exposure to other views, so distorting our perception of available information. Filter bubbles, by contrast, occur where news we dislike, disagree with, or that the platform owners think we shouldn't be exposed to, are filtered out, so narrowing our view of the outside world.

It's going to be impossible for us to unravel this tumultuous problem facing human society unless we become more aware of the processes

that are causing such extreme polarization and fragmentation within society.

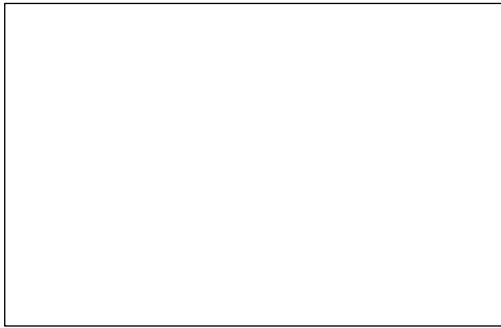
Free Speech 4 Health campaign launches next week

That's why next week, we'll be launching our FreeSpeech4Health campaign. The goal of the campaign is to shine a light on censorship of online health information, especially the censorship that's less apparent and therefore more insidious. Free thought is exponentially harder in a heavily censored world—we cannot continue to march down this path. Stay tuned next week for the campaign launch!

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UNTIL APRIL 17, 2024
9am ET | 2pm BST | 3pm CET

CAMPAIGN VIDEOS

The following videos have been created to support the Free Speech for Health campaign.



Main campaign video:
'The Shadowbanning of Keto'
(11 minutes)



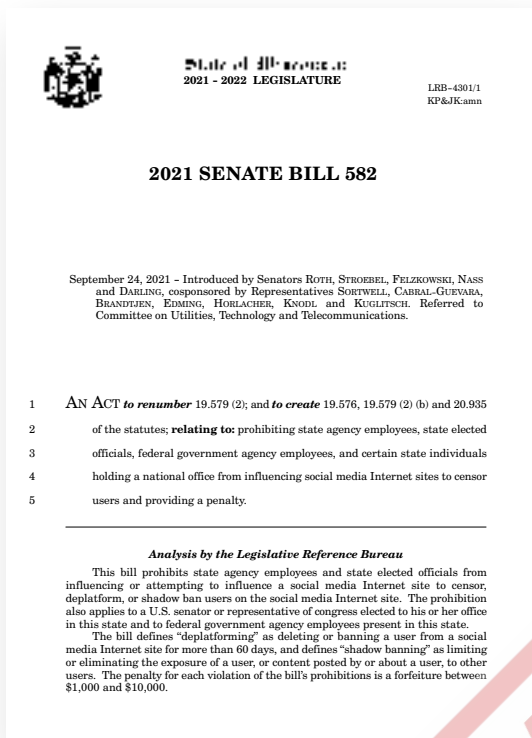
Social media campaign video 1



Social media campaign video 2

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STATE OF WISCONSIN, 2021 SENATE BILL 852



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Status of bill [<https://legiscan.com/WI/bill/SB582/2023>] **FAILED**
Shadowbanning definition was reintroduced to the Assembly as
part of Bill AB 895 on January, 4 2024
Current Status: Read first time and referred to Committee on Judiciary

Key excerpts:

This bill prohibits state agency employees and state elected officials from influencing or attempting to influence a social media Internet site to censor, deplatform, or shadow ban users on the social media Internet site. The prohibition also applies to a U.S. senator or representative of congress elected to his or her office in this state and to federal government agency employees present in this state. The bill defines "deplatforming" as deleting or banning a user from a social media Internet site for more than 60 days, and defines "shadow banning" as limiting or eliminating the exposure of a user, or content posted by or about a user, to other users.

CDT REPORT SHEDDING LIGHT ON SHADOWBANNING April 2022



[DOWNLOAD PDF](#)

New CDT Report on Shadowbanning: Everything You Need to Know

Sex workers, conservative bloggers, Black Lives Matter activists, Indian farmers, trans artists, Palestinian protesters, plus-sized influencers — these are just some of the many social media users who believe their online posts are covertly being hidden or taken down, otherwise known as “shadowbanned,” by social media companies. Are they paranoid? Or is shadowbanning a common practice? Unfortunately, social media platforms are designed in a way that makes it practically impossible for users to know for sure. CDT’s new report, *Shedding Light on Shadowbanning*, examines how shadowbanning works on social media, which groups believe they have been shadowbanned, and what effects the popular perception of shadowbanning has on online speech.

Cotter K. “Shadowbanning is not a thing”: black box gaslighting and the power to independently know and credibly critique algorithms. *Inf Commun Soc.* 2023 26:6, 1226-1243.



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ABSTRACT

Efforts to govern algorithms have centered the ‘black box problem,’ or the opacity of algorithms resulting from corporate secrecy and technical complexity. In this article, I conceptualize a related and equally fundamental challenge for governance efforts: black box gaslighting. Black box gaslighting captures how platforms may leverage perceptions of their epistemic authority on their algorithms to undermine users’ confidence in what they know about algorithms and destabilize credible criticism. I explicate the concept of black box gaslighting through a case study of the ‘shadowbanning’ dispute within the Instagram influencer community, drawing on interviews with influencers (n = 17) and online discourse materials (e.g., social media posts, blog posts, videos, etc.). I argue that black box gaslighting presents a formidable deterrent for those seeking accountability: an epistemic contest over the legitimacy of critiques in which platforms hold the upper hand. At the same time, I suggest we must be mindful of the partial nature of platforms’ claim to ‘the truth,’ as well as the value of user understandings of algorithms.

WEBSITES AND CONTACT DETAILS

WEBSITES

Alliance for Natural Health USA (<https://anh-usa.org/>)

Alliance for Natural Health International (<https://www.anhinternational.org/>)

Alliance for Natural Health Europe (<https://anheurope.org/>)

CONTACT DETAILS

USA: Jo Twombly, deputy director, Alliance for Natural Health USA, tel 1-800-230-2762, email office@anh-usa.org

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