



Google Leaks

A Whistleblower's Exposé of Big Tech Censorship

by Zach Vorhies

12-minute read

Synopsis

Google Leaks (2021) is the no-holds-barred story of one former Google employee, who claims that the search giant has been corrupted by political bias and is pursuing a course of deliberate online censorship. It details the author's journey after Donald Trump's election from satisfied employee to unflinching corporate whistleblower.

Who is it for?

- Tech lovers concerned by the the growth of online megacorporations
- Political aficionados interested in the years of Trump's presidency
- Free-speech advocates concerned by the erosion of civil liberties

About the author

Zach Vorhies, who grew up in Portland, Oregon, is a former senior engineer with Google turned corporate whistleblower. He has worked with *Infowars* in covering the COVID-19 pandemic. He currently lives in San Francisco, where he's working on a new video-aggregating platform.

What's in it for me? Hear the tale of a Google whistleblower.

For many of us, using the internet *means* using Google. Searching for something is just another way of saying googling it. Watching a video means using YouTube – a Google subsidiary. And emails are often sent either to or from a Gmail account – or both.

But how much do we really know about this company? In reality, very little. According to Zach Vorhies, that's a problem. A former Google employee, he alleges that the company has been trying to influence politics covertly since the election of Donald Trump.

These blinks trace Vorhies's story from his days as Google employee to his time as a whistleblower making scathing claims against his former employers.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- how Google responded to the election of Donald Trump;
- why the word “covfefe” sent Google employees into a frenzy; and
- why the author was visited by a squad of heavily armed police officers.

Donald Trump's election marked a political turning point for Google.

One morning in November 2016, when Zach Vorhies turned up for work at the Google offices in San Bruno, California, he couldn't believe his eyes. The night before, Donald Trump had been elected US president – and it seemed like everyone at Google was losing their minds.

Some were crying and talking as if a close relative had died. Others had decided to take the entire day off.

To Vorhies, it seemed that these people lacked a fundamental grasp of civics. As a democracy, the United States has regular elections. You do your best to win them, but if you lose, you take it on the chin, and focus on doing a better job next time.

But that didn't seem to be what was happening at Google.

The key message here is: Donald Trump's election marked a political turning point for Google.

Everywhere he went, Vorhies heard employees talking about how unfair the election had been, and insisting that a resistance was needed to tackle Trump. It seemed like idle chatter at first – until employees were told to tune in to a weekly meeting, broadcast live from the Google headquarters in Mountain View, California.

From the start, the atmosphere was eerie. Many Google employees wear a quirky company hat, a bright striped beanie with a little propeller on top. Normally it seems

harmless – playful, even. But, surveying row upon row of employees – many wearing the same hat and all seemingly united in their political goals – the uniformity suddenly struck Vorhies as sinister.

In the broadcast meeting, Sergey Brin, cofounder of Google and CEO of its parent company Alphabet, described Trump's election as “deeply offensive.” Kent Walker, the company's Vice President for Global Affairs, blamed Trump's victory on xenophobia and hatred. And Ruth Porat, the Chief Financial Officer, encouraged employees to console each other with hugs.

Later on, a Google employee asked what the company could do to tackle the misinformation and fake news that had supposedly led to Trump's election. Sundar Pichai, the CEO of Google, responded.

Vorhies found what Pichai said simultaneously vague and alarming. Pichai claimed this was an opportunity to make progress in machine learning and artificial intelligence. So far, those systems had been used to tackle things like bullying and hurtful comments. But once they were scaled up, machine learning and AI would be used to do much more.

And for the first time, Vorhies had an inkling of just what Google intended to do.

Vorhies saw a disguised form of censorship in Google's campaign against fake news.

Vorhies had grown up believing in free speech, which he believed was a vital part of any democracy worthy of the name. His whole life, he'd formed opinions by seeking information from various sources, spanning the political spectrum.

In fact, his own mind was often swayed by coming across new arguments and information he hadn't considered before. That was the beauty of free speech.

But in Vorhies's view, Google had taken aim at that way of doing things. They weren't on board with free and open discussion. To Google, Vorhies felt, the correct opinions were predetermined – and it was their job to guide you gently toward them – search by search.

Here's the key message: Vorhies saw a disguised form of censorship in Google's campaign against fake news.

For Vorhies, Google was launching a crusade against so-called “fake news” in an effort to limit the news and arguments that the public could access. In other words, their plans sounded a lot like censorship.

At this point, though, Vorhies only had a very vague idea of what the company intended to do. So he began digging.

Conveniently, Google was what they called an “open” company, which made most of its internal documents available to all employees. Vorhies simply searched for

“fake news” – and the first document he turned up gave him a pretty good idea of what they were planning to do.

The report began by citing five examples of fake news – four were critical of Hillary Clinton, and the remaining one was in favour of Trump.

What’s more, some of the stories labeled “fake news” were, in the author’s view, not necessarily so. One headline began: “Wikileaks CONFIRMS Hillary Sold Weapons to ISIS.” Vorhies claims that the truth of that assertion isn’t clear. But, he argues, some news reports do seem to implicate Clinton’s foreign policy decisions in arming hostile insurgents.

The examples of fake news Google had chosen seemed to Vorhies to show a clear pattern. These stories were consistently pro-Trump and anti-Hillary. The choices didn’t seem to be objective and apolitical.

Because Vorhies was an engineer, he knew that distinguishing between fake news and real news would have to be an automated process – it wouldn’t be carried out manually. So the next question Vorhies asked himself was how this new system would work.

Google planned to reshape the internet in a bid to make it “fair.”

In the early months of Trump’s presidency, Vorhies came across a document about the system Google planned to use to filter its results. Cleverly, they’d given it a name that would sound reasonable to any decent person.

They called it “machine learning fairness.” But what did that actually mean?

Machine learning is when algorithms are fed real-world information – like decisions that humans make – and learn to make decisions themselves based on the patterns they find. But what about *fairness*? By *fair* machine learning, Google meant a system that could learn from humans – but without picking up on human prejudices and biases.

Which might sound pretty uncontroversial – but it’s not.

The key message is this: Google planned to reshape the internet in a bid to make it “fair.”

Reading on in the document, Vorhies learned more. Hand in hand with machine learning fairness went a related concept, called *algorithmic unfairness* – and this was what machine learning fairness was meant to counteract.

Here’s an example from the document Vorhies was reading: If searching the term “CEOs” turned up more pictures of men than women, that would count as algorithmic unfairness – because such results would be prejudicial to women.

Vorhies began to feel uncomfortable. What if there are simply more male than female CEOs? Surely reflecting the facts isn’t “algorithmically unfair”?

The document suggested that Google didn’t necessarily think so. Sometimes real fairness might mean representing things as they *should* be, rather than as they *are*. In other words, even results that provide an accurate picture of the world can still be algorithmically unfair. Showing mostly male CEOs, for instance, would reinforce harmful stereotypes about leadership and gender roles.

Google seemed to believe that helping society become fairer and more equitable can sometimes be more important than reflecting the real state of affairs.

But what about websites that didn’t agree with this view of the world? Well, perhaps they could simply be pushed down the rankings, or end up stripped of their ability to earn advertising revenue.

In fact, according to the documents Vorhies leaked, Google planned to set up a team of evaluators, working alongside AI, to rate the trustworthiness of various sites. But would this be a neutral and balanced process? Vorhies didn’t believe it for a second – he suspected that websites Google agreed with would be boosted, whereas those they disagreed with would be demoted.

To Vorhies, this seemed like a powerful program, with the ability to alter American politics profoundly. And he found it deeply worrying.

Google’s response to the “covfefe” affair made Trump look particularly bad.

Just past midnight on May 31, 2017, Donald Trump tweeted a six-word phrase that wound up becoming more famous than anyone could have anticipated: “Despite the constant negative press covfefe.”

“Covfefe”? The world was baffled – what on earth could it mean? Trump’s press secretary Sean Spicer only added to the mystery when reporters quizzed him. He said that the president and “a small group of people” knew exactly what he meant. But did they? Did they really?

Thanks to Google, Trump’s tweet could actually be deciphered pretty easily. Vorhies and others noted that the company’s translation service recognized “covfefe” as an Arabic word, meaning “we will stand up.” So: “Despite the constant negative press we will stand up.” To Vorhies, it made a lot of sense – so Google must have been happy, right? Wrong.

The key message here is: Google’s response to the “covfefe” affair made Trump look particularly bad.

The first attempt to undermine Google’s translation of “covfefe” came from the *New York Times*. The day after

Trump's tweet, a *Times* journalist named Liam Slack rubbished the idea that the president had deliberately used an Arabic word.

For one, Slack's article noted, Trump had once pledged to ban Muslims from the United States. What's more, he'd never publicly claimed to speak Arabic. And thirdly, a professor of Arabic went on record to protest that the word "covfefe" was completely meaningless.

That was the signal Google needed. Once again, Vorhies was able to piece together what happened by looking at the company's internal documents.

Google employees decided to change the system's original translation – and to play a prank on the president while doing it. In the future, the term "covfefe" would not be translated as "we will stand up." Instead, entering that word would prompt Google Translate to show an emoji of a man shrugging, as though in bafflement.

That was all it took. A few clicks of the mouse on the part of some Google employees, and voilà: the word "covfefe" was no longer identified as Arabic – and Trump's tweet no longer made any sense.

It wasn't the gravest or most alarming thing Google did – but to Vorhies's mind, it was telling. The speed and the eagerness with which the company acted were both impressive and concerning in equal measure.

Discovering "blacklists" prompted Vorhies to blow the whistle.

The covfefe affair was one thing. But for Vorhies, the turning point came when he discovered that Google was maintaining a number of "blacklists" – a catalog of terms and websites he believed the search engine was deliberately trying to suppress.

At the time, the company was telling the world that it didn't allow political considerations to affect its search results. But a quick search on Google's internal servers turned up a number of documents with the word "blacklist" in the title – and in these files, it seemed that conservative media was being targeted in particular.

Popular rightwing websites like True Pundit, Louder with Crowder, and GlennBeck.com were named on a list that Vorhies believed was designed to exclude material from Google Now newsfeeds. For him, this was a turning point: now he had to go public.

Here's the key message: Discovering "blacklists" prompted Vorhies to blow the whistle.

After making a few enquiries, Vorhies got in touch with the investigative news group Project Veritas, a right-wing organization that specializes in dramatic political exposés.

Vorhies began meeting with a Project Veritas employee, explaining in painstaking detail how he believed Google was systematically suppressing conservative content. Speaking to the reporter was a huge relief – but to his dismay, nothing came of his claims: no investigations, no news reports, not even a single tweet. For months, the group just sat on the information.

In the meantime, Vorhies decided he couldn't keep working for Google. He felt that the company had violated its own original motto: "Don't be evil." Dispirited by his work, and by the inaction of Project Veritas, Vorhies left Google for good.

And then, all of a sudden, the situation changed. Project Veritas made a secret recording of a Google executive, who observed that smaller digital organizations lacked the resources to "prevent another Trump situation." Was that really how Google saw its mission? To Vorhies, the recording seemed to confirm all his suspicions – and Project Veritas thought so, too.

The group put together a report on alleged political bias at Google, featuring an anonymized interview with Vorhies. At long last, his disclosures were bearing fruit.

When Google took action against Vorhies, the situation escalated – but finally, the word was out.

Vorhies had done it. After years of misgivings, he'd finally managed to share his discoveries with the world. It was a weight off his shoulders – but in a strange way, his confession only brought him fresh anxieties.

Although he'd remained anonymous in his Project Veritas interview, Vorhies knew that Google could discover his identity pretty easily. The company would have digital logs recording the identity of anyone accessing and storing the internal documents he had discovered: connecting the dots wouldn't take them very long.

So when Vorhies received a cease-and-desist letter from Google, shortly after the exposé appeared, he was far from surprised.

The key message is this: When Google took action against Vorhies, the situation escalated – but finally, the word was out.

Google's letter didn't just demand that Vorhies stop sharing confidential information. It also demanded he return his company laptop, which contained all of the documents on which he'd based his controversial claims.

But Vorhies felt that the world needed to see the documents he'd discovered. So instead of returning his laptop as Google's letter requested, he sent it – along with 950 pages of internal documents – to the US Department of Justice. And he also got in touch with a contact at Project Veritas, instructing him to share the

documents publicly in the event of Vorhies's own "untimely death" – an agreement that he shared with the world via Twitter.

Paranoid? Maybe – but soon afterward, Vorhies did go through a pretty harrowing experience. In what he claims was an intimidation tactic, in August of 2019, Google called the San Francisco police and asked them to perform a "wellness check" on their former employee.

When Vorhies refused to meet with the police, the situation escalated. His apartment was surrounded by police officers with their weapons drawn, and monitored by a helicopter overhead. There was even a bomb-disposal robot at his front gate. Vorhies eventually complied, and emerged from the incident unscathed.

With Google already aware of his identity, he decided to completely abandon the pretense of anonymity. So he recorded a new interview with Project Veritas, this time under his own name. What's more, the organization published the documents he'd obtained – all 950 pages of them.

A week or so after the police incident, Project Veritas published the second interview. Not with an anonymous whistleblower this time, but with Zach Vorhies – the former Google employee.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is:

As a Google employee, Zach Vorhies was alarmed by what he saw as the company's gradual drift toward political partisanship and deliberate censorship. In the wake of Donald Trump's election, he became increasingly disillusioned by the political course the tech giant seemed to be pursuing – in a campaign he alleged involved "blacklists," AI, and the dismissal of dissent as "fake news." Eventually, it all became too much for him, and Vorhies went public with his claims, revealing Google's internal documents.

