

# The Davos “Debate” on “Disinformation”: The “Most Existential Problem” Facing the Planet Today

By [Jonathan Turley](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

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*There has been [much coverage](#) over the resurfacing of former CNN host Brian Stelter as the host for a panel at the [World Economic Forum](#) on alleged disinformation and “hate speech.” Stelter previously called for censorship under a “[harm reduction model](#)” and [led a panel](#) at a conference where Democrats discussed how to shape the news. He was confronted over his own dissemination for false stories targeting Republicans on CNN. Yet, I was most struck by a statement from New York Times publisher A.G. Sulzberger who described “disinformation” as the “most existential” problem the world is facing today. Sulzberger insisted that disinformation is the reason why there is a loss of “trust” today. He ignores his own history in eroding that trust in the media through flagrantly biased decisions at the New York Times.*

Former NYT editor Jill Abramson also [slammed the participation of Sulzberger](#) and the New York Times at Davos, denouncing it as a “corrupt circle-jerk” between media and business. She said that “the coverage was a sweetener to flatter the CEOs by seeing their names in the NYT.”

The panel was titled, “Clear & Present Danger of Disinformation” included panelists: New York Times publisher A.G. Sulzberger, Vice-President of the European Commission Vera Jourová, CEO of Internews Jeanne Bourgault, and Rep. Seth Moulton, D-Mass. The entire conference was notable in its omission of free speech advocates while inviting long advocates for censorship like Stelter.

Stelter asked his panel, “How does this discussion of disinformation relate to everything else happening today in Davos?”

Sulzberger responded:

“Well, first, thanks for having me is as part of this conversation. As you can imagine,

this is something I really care deeply about. So, I think if you look at this question of disinformation, I think it maps basically to every other major challenge that we are grappling with as a society, and particularly the most existential among them. So, disinformation and in the broader set of misinformation, conspiracy, propaganda, clickbait, you know, the broader mix of bad information that's corrupting information ecosystem, what it attacks is trust. And once you see, trust decline, what you then see is a society start to fracture, and so you see people fracture along tribal lines and, you know, that immediately undermines pluralism. And the undermining of pluralism is probably the most dangerous thing that can happen to a democracy. So I really — I think if you're spending this week thinking about the health of democracies and democratic erosion, I think it's really import to work your way back up to where this starts."

It was a telling statement. Sulzberger suggested that allowing some opposing views undermines "trust." Indeed, allowing opposing views on Covid or election or global warming does erode trust in the media and the government. Society would be so less "fractured" if information is controlled and consistent.

There is a perfectly Orwellian element to Sulzberger's words. Democracy is being threatened because there is too much "disinformation," "misinformation," "bad information," and other harmful views being expressed. After all, without such views, there was be less "fracture" and more "trust."

That was precisely the point of the [earlier conference](#).

What is most notable about the comment, however, was the date. This is after many of those censored and blacklisted in the media and social media have been [seemingly vindicated](#) in raising questions over masks or vaccines.

Among the suspended were the doctors who co-authored the [Great Barrington Declaration](#), which advocated for a more focused Covid response that targeted the most vulnerable population rather than widespread lockdowns and mandates. Many are now questioning the efficacy and cost of the massive lockdowns as well as the real value of masks or the rejection of natural immunities as an alternative to vaccination. Yet, these experts and others were attacked for such views just a year ago. Some found themselves censored on social media for challenging claims of Dr. Fauci and others.

Likewise, the [New York Times was one of those newspapers suppressing stories](#) like the Hunter Biden laptop. It only admitted that the laptop was authentic roughly two years after the election.

Some of us have been raising concerns over the emergence of a "[shadow state](#)" where corporations carry out censorship the Constitution bars the government from doing. Leading Democrats have been open about precisely this type of corporate manipulation of political speech on social media. Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) called upon these companies to use [enlightened algorithms to protect users](#) from their own bad reading choices.

Even President Joe Biden called for such regulation of speech and discussions by wise editors. Without such censorship and manipulation, Biden asked, "[How do people know the truth?](#)"

The last year has shown how media censorship resisted scientific debate and buried legitimate stories. Yet, Sulzberger is still unrepentant and views disinformation rather than  *censorship to be the problem...Indeed the world's most existential problem.*

Sulzberger's position is nothing if not consistent. He was involved in one of the lowest moments in modern media when the newspaper turned not only on a U.S. senator but its own editor to yield to the mob.

Former New York Times editorial page editor James Bennet [recently said](#) Sulzberger "set me on fire and threw me in the garbage" in the Cotton column controversy.

The treatment of the Cotton column shocked many of us. It was one of the [lowest points in the history of modern American journalism](#). During the week of June 6, 2020, the Times forced out Bennet and apologized for publishing Cotton's column calling for the use of the troops to restore order in Washington after days of rioting around the White House.

While Congress would "call in the troops" six months later to quell the rioting at the Capitol on January 6th, New York Times reporters and columnists denounced the column as historically inaccurate and politically inciteful. The column was in fact historically accurate, even if you disagreed with the underlying proposal ([as I did](#)).

Reporters insisted that Cotton was endangering them by suggesting the use of troops and insisted that the newspaper should not feature people who advocate political violence. Writers Taylor Lorenz, Caity Weaver, Sheera Frankel, Jacey Fortin, and others also said that such columns put black reporters in danger and condemned publishing Cotton's viewpoint.

Critics never explained what was historically false (or outside the range of permissible interpretation) in the column.

In a breathtaking surrender, the newspaper apologized and not only promised an investigation into how such an opposing view could find itself on its pages but promised to reduce the number of editorials in the future:

"We've examined the piece and the process leading up to its publication. This review made clear that a rushed editorial process led to the publication of an Op-Ed that did not meet our standards. As a result, we're planning to examine both short term and long term changes, to include expanding our fact-checking operation and reduction the number of op-eds we publish."

[Bennet reportedly made an apology to the staff. That however was not enough.](#) He was later compelled to resign for publishing a column that advocates an option used previously in history with rioting.

Bennet recently told the new [media outlet Semafor](#) that Sulzberger

"blew the opportunity to make clear that the New York Times doesn't exist just to tell progressives how progressives should view reality. That was a huge mistake and a missed opportunity for him to show real strength. He still could have fired me...I actually knew what it meant to have a target on your back when you're reporting for the New York Times.

None of that mattered, and none of it mattered to AG. When push came to shove at the

end, he set me on fire and threw me in the garbage and used my reverence for the institution against me,. This is why I was so bewildered for so long after I had what felt like all my colleagues treating me like an incompetent fascist.”

These controversies are the reason why trust in [the media is at an all-time low](#). However, figures like Sulzberger still blame too much free speech as opposed to his own role in biased coverage that has undermined that trust.

That is why, in 2023, it is so glaring to see Sulzberger is being interviewed by Stelter on how disinformation is the greatest existential threat to the planet. Not nuclear proliferation, over-population, war, famine. It is the danger of allowing too much free speech that undermines “trust.”

The key however is that there was no “fracturing” at the World Economic Forum. It was the same figures voicing the same criticism of free speech as the scourge of our time. The problem is the vast global unwashed who fail to put their trust in the right people and sources. Fortunately, all the right people are gathered at Davos to show the way.

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