

# “True Stories ... Could Fuel Hesitancy”: Stanford Project Worked to Censor Even True Stories on Social Media

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*While lost in the explosive news about Donald Trump’s expected arrest, journalist Matt Taibbi released new details on previously undisclosed censorship efforts on social media. The latest Twitter Files revealed a breathtaking effort from [Stanford’s Virality Project](#) to censor even true stories. After all, the project insisted “true stories ... could fuel hesitancy” over taking the vaccine or other measures. The effort included suppressing stories that we now know are legitimate such as natural immunity defenses, the exaggerated value of masks, and questions over vaccine efficacy in preventing second illnesses. The work of the Virality Project to censor even true stories should result in the severance of any connection with Stanford University.*

We have learned of an ever-expanding coalition of groups working with the government and social media to target and censor Americans, including [government-funded organizations](#).

However, the new files are chilling in the details allegedly showing how the Virality Project labeled even true stories as “anti-vaccine” and, therefore, subject to censorship. These files would suggest that the Project eagerly worked to limit free speech and suppress alternative scientific viewpoints.

Taibbi [describes](#) the Virality Project as “a sweeping, cross-platform effort to monitor billions of social media posts by Stanford University, federal agencies, and a slew of (often state-funded) NGOs.”

He added:

“We’ve since learned the Virality Project in 2021 worked with government to launch a pan-industry monitoring plan for Covid-related content. At least six major Internet platforms were ‘onboarded’ to the same JIRA ticketing system, daily sending millions of

items for review.”

According to Taibbi, it targeted anyone who did not robotically fall in line with the CDC and media narratives, including targeting postings that shared “Reports of vaccinated individuals contracting Covid-19 anyway,” research on “natural immunity,” suggesting Covid-19 “leaked from a lab,” and even “worrisome jokes.”

That included evidence that it “knowingly targeted true material and legitimate political opinion, while often being factually wrong itself.”

The Virality Project warned Twitter that “true stories ... could fuel hesitancy,” including stories on “celebrity deaths after vaccine” and the closure of a central New York school due to reports of post-vaccine illness.

The Project is part of the Cyber Policy Center at Stanford and bills itself as “a joint initiative of the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies and Stanford Law School, connects academia, the legal and tech industry and civil society with policymakers around the country to address the most pressing cyber policy concerns.”

The Center [launched the Project as a “a global study](#) aimed at understanding the disinformation dynamics specific to the COVID-19 crisis.”

As with many disinformation projects, it became a source of its own disinformation in the effort to suppress alternative views.

It is being funded by Craig Newmark Philanthropies and the Hewlett Foundation.

On its [website](#), it proclaims: “At the Stanford Internet Observatory our mission is to study the misuse of the internet to cause harm, and to help create policy and technical mitigations to those harms.” It defines its mission to maintain the truth as it sees it:

“The global COVID-19 crisis has significantly shifted the landscape for mis- and disinformation as the pandemic has become the primary concern of almost every nation on the planet. This has perhaps never happened before; few topics have commanded and sustained attention at a global level simultaneously, or provided such a wealth of opportunities for governments, economically motivated actors, and domestic activists alike to spread malign narratives in service to their interests.”

What is even more disconcerting is that groups like the Virality Project worked against public health by suppressing such stories that are now considered legitimate from the efficacy of masks to the lab origin theory. It was declaring dissenting scientific views to be dangerous disinformation. Nothing could be more inimical to the academic mission. Yet, Stanford still heralds the work of the Project on its website.

There is nothing more inherently in conflict with academic values than censorship. Stanford’s association with this censorship effort is disgraceful and should be a matter for faculty action. This is a project that sought to censor true stories that undermined government or media narratives.

I am not hopeful that Stanford will sever its connection to the Project. Censorship is now the rage on campuses and the Project is the perfect embodiment of this movement. Cloaking censorship efforts in self-righteous rhetoric, the Project sought to silence those who failed to

adhere to a certain orthodoxy, including scientific and public health claims that were later found flawed or wrong. The Project itself is an example of what it called “media and social media capabilities - overt and covert - to spread particular narratives.”

Stanford should fulfill its pledge in creating the Virality Project in fighting disinformation by eliminating the Virality Project.

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