

THE VERGE

Leaked Google research shows company grappling with censorship and free speech

A rare look at how the employees of the world's most powerful search engine are trying to balance two opposing forces

By Nick Statt@nickstatt Oct 10, 2018, 5:56pm EDT

A leaked research presentation put together by employees of Google shows the extent to which the search giant is grappling with decisions around freedom of speech and censorship. The presentation, leaked to *Breitbart News* this week and published in full by the organization, is titled “The Good Censor,” and it’s a mix of findings and insights based on interviews and contributions from a number of journalists, academics, and cultural critics. The aim, according to the first slide of the presentation, is to “reassure the world that [Google] protects users from harmful conduct while still supporting free speech.”

The slides are a rare and stark look at Google’s ongoing struggles, which are mirrored by many Silicon Valley tech platforms, including Facebook and Twitter, that now moderate a large swath of human conversation. Essentially, the company is asking itself whether it’s possible to protect against the negative aspects of free speech — violent threats, fake news, bots, trolling, propaganda, and election interference, to name just a few — while promoting a platform that gives everyone a voice. Google says in the presentation that the internet was founded on “utopian principles of free speech,” and that Silicon Valley was largely built under the guiding principles of those ideals.

Google’s presentation acknowledges that “censorship can give governments — and companies — the tools to limit the freedom of individuals.” But it also lays out all the reason why tech platforms like Google search and YouTube are responsible for policing what happens on their apps and websites. The

slides give a history of how parts of the internet have become dominated by bad actors, and how both tech companies and governments have failed to address the issues. With regard to censorship, Google notes in the slides how government takedown requests have tripled in the last two years, and how YouTube is now the target of a majority of these requests, with Google Search behind it.

The presentation concludes that tech companies “are performing a balancing act between two incompatible positions,” and that’s the reason why censorship is on the rise as companies like Google, Facebook, and Twitter take more heavy-handed approaches to moderation in response to heightened criticism. The slides conclude that transparency, consistency, and responsiveness are paramount in addressing this ongoing imbalance, and that there is not a “right amount of censorship” that will please everyone and solve these issues.

While the presentation is certainly a candid look at how a company as powerful as Google is analyzing these issues and attempting to solve them, hanging over the entire conversation is the prospective launch of a Google search product and news site in China, codenamed Dragonfly. The company still has barely acknowledged its work on the project, but investigative reporting on its existence has led to massive internal strife, high-profile resignations, and serious inquiry from Congress. The slides make no mention of China, its historical approach to online censorship and social authoritarianism, or any plans to operate there.

In response to the leak, Google has said the research is not indicative of any official company position, but rather research to better understand how users think about these key issues. In a statement, the company told *The Verge*, “Google is committed to free expression — supporting the free flow of ideas is core to our mission. Where we have developed our own content policies, we enforce them in a politically neutral way. Giving preference to content of one political ideology over another would fundamentally conflict with our goal of providing services that work for everyone.”