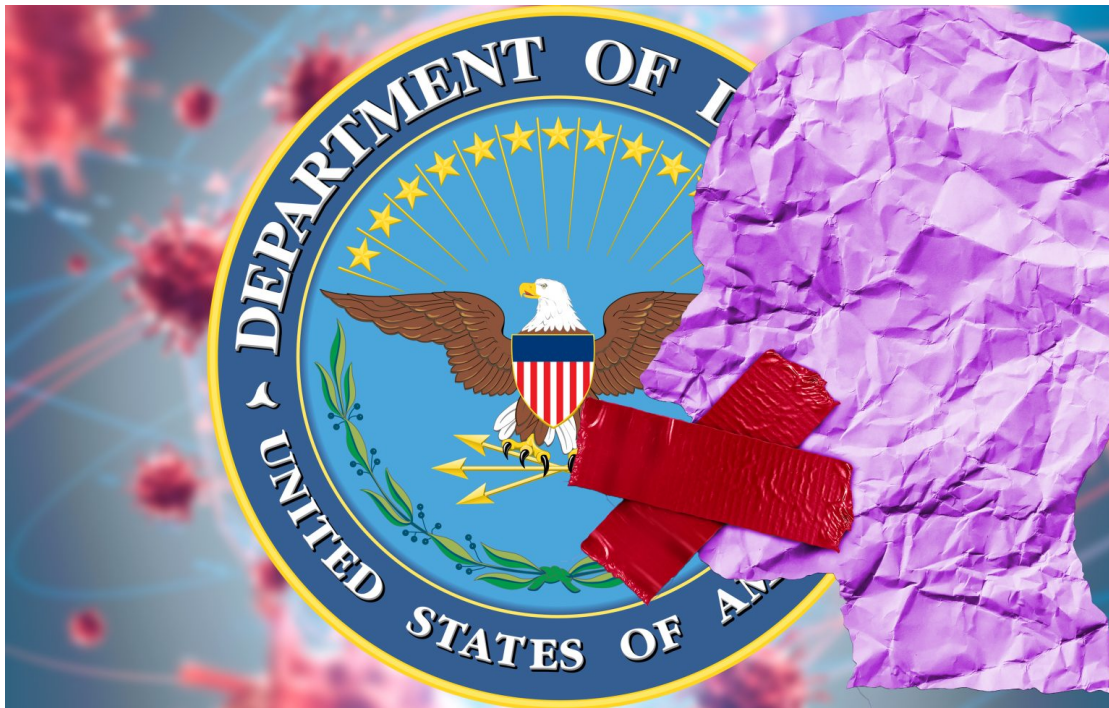




Pentagon-Funded Censorship Firm Graphika Began Monitoring Covid “Disinfo” On Dec. 16, 2019 – Two Weeks Before WHO Knew Covid Existed

April 25 2023, by Mike Benz



SUMMARY

- Graphika, a company that monitors online communities for government agencies, began collecting data on social media users sharing "disinformation" about Covid-19 two weeks before the World Health Organization even knew of an outbreak.
- The private firm, which has received millions in Pentagon grants and contracts, targeted "US right-wing" communities as the top disinfo threat, right at Covid's outset.
- Graphika is staffed by former DOD, CIA and NSA officials, and played a key role in censoring the pandemic via the Virality Project, partnered with the federal government.

Graphika, Inc., a small but influential social media monitoring and censorship firm that has received **nearly \$7 million in grants and contracts** <

<https://www.usaspending.gov/recipient/6d0f5743-7f89-a9a7-93fc-c8ea4c75f161-C/all>>

from the US Department of Defense (DOD), began tracking online "conspiracy theories"



assets.graphika.com/reports/Graphika_Report_Covid19_Infodemic.pdf released in April 2020, Graphika began “data collection” of “global conversations” containing “conspiracy theories” about Covid origins < https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/Graphika_Report_Covid19_Infodemic.pdf#page=21 > on December 16, 2019:

Chronological Mapping Series:

December 19 - March 17

Map Background

Graphika has produced a set of three network maps that capture the mainstream global conversation around coronavirus at monthly intervals. These maps were seeded on the same set of coronavirus hashtags, including #covid19 and #coronavirus, to allow a direct comparison in network structure and activity over time. Data collection began on December 16 last year - as such, these three maps can be seen as “snapshots” of the coronavirus conversation on Twitter in January, February, and March thus far. Accounts that used hashtags in the seedlist during the collection period were clustered with accounts with similar interests accounts based on their online activity. This process of mapping out the social landscape around coronavirus hashtags of interest, not the patterns of how content was shared, reveals communities of accounts that are engaging in the conversation.



The official [CDC.gov timeline](https://archive.fo/hhrZ0) < <https://archive.fo/hhrZ0> > shows the first cluster of patients in Wuhan, China began to experience an atypical pneumonia-like illness on December 12, 2019 — meaning Graphika’s social media “disinfo data collection” work began just four days later. WHO **was not informed** < <https://archive.fo/hhrZ0#selection-915.0-919.285> > of Wuhan’s outbreak until December 31, 2019 – a full two weeks after Graphika had already begun monitoring social media conspiracy theories about the atypical virus:

<https://www.cdc.gov/museum/timeline/covid19.html#Late-2019>

Late 2019

December 12, 2019

A cluster of patients in China’s Hubei Province, in the city of Wuhan, begin to experience the symptoms of an atypical pneumonia-like illness that does not respond well to standard treatments.

December 31, 2019

The World Health Organization (WHO) Country Office in China is informed of several cases of a pneumonia of unknown etiology (cause) with symptoms including shortness of breath and fever occurring in Wuhan, China. All initial cases seem connected to the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market.

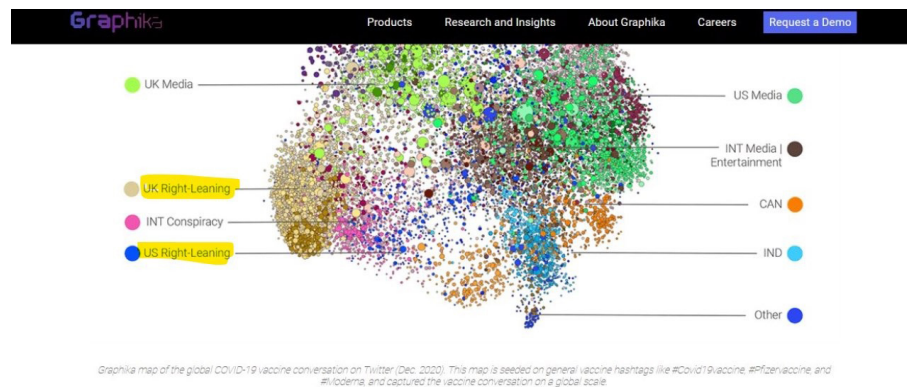


The first reported case and the initial reaction to COVID-19

The first official cases of COVID-19 were recorded on the 31st of December, 2019, when the World Health Organization (WHO) was informed of cases of pneumonia in Wuhan, China, with no known cause. On the 7th of January, the Chinese authorities identified a novel coronavirus, temporally named 2019-nCoV, as the cause of these cases.

The WHO **did not even name** < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Not_Even_My_Name> the virus “Covid-19” until February 11, 2020, and **did not officially declare** < <https://archive.fo/hhrZ0#selection-2731.0-2735.102>> a pandemic until March 11, 2020. Yet predating all these events, Graphika was closely surveilling and working to neutralize what obscure Twitter and Facebook communities were saying online about the virus’s origins – all while categorizing citizen accounts **by political affiliation**, < https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/Graphika_Report_Covid19_Infodemic.pdf#page=12> ostensibly to monitor their potential for political mobilization on the basis of shared beliefs.

The disinfo firm used the data they collected on US citizens and voices around the world to create a “network map” of “the global online conversation surrounding the coronavirus pandemic.”



The Vaccine Network: Influential Anti-Vaxx Activists Reaching Conservative Audiences

- This map shows that a core of anti-vaxx activists and conspiracists (in pink) have now gained a significant foothold in the mainstream global conversation around the COVID-19 vaccine. While these activists only represent a small portion of the overall accounts who engage in this conversation (around 5%), **their influence extends clearly to most of the conservative groups engaged in the mainstream COVID-19 vaccine conversation**, notably in the UK (in yellow), in the US (in dark blue) and in Canada (in orange). This group of activists is composed of real individuals and organizations, mostly based in the US and Canada. Influential voices in this cluster include Paul Joseph Watson, the anti-vaxx show The HighWire, and the anti-vaxx organization Children's Health Defense.

Graphika **repeatedly identifies** < https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/Graphika_Report_Covid19_Infodemic.pdf#page=5> “right-wing” accounts (54 times in total, four on the summary page alone) as primarily responsible for “propagate[ing] polarizing and at times blatantly false narratives.”



these four maps are shared below.

1

The changes between Graphika's **January**, February, and March coronavirus maps (all seeded on the same set of terms) elucidate a conversation that is rapidly becoming more complex over time. The **January** and February maps have multipolar structures, with distinct and densely interconnected national communities, **but the conversation becomes flooded with informational sources in March and demonstrates a general lack of cohesion.** Groups of accounts from geographies such as Australia, Korea, Japan, and even China also become less prominent in the network structure around this time. Similarly, **the large "mega cluster" of US right-wing accounts becomes diminished by the mainstreaming of the coronavirus conversation online over time.**

2

Graphika's dedicated coronavirus disinformation map, seeded on disinformation-specific hashtags, reveals that while **conservative groups** have a larger total presence than liberal groups, the combined volume of activity from **conservative groups** is 27%, compared with 8% from left-leaning groups. When analyzed by regional clusters, the **right-wing groups** in the US, Italy, and France are more vocal but less vocal in other EU countries and Latin American countries than left-wing groups. This indicates **not only that more right-wing accounts are involved in the conversation but that these accounts are also more active in their engagement than their left-wing counterparts.** The map also encompasses two large groups of Italian accounts, spanning both sides of the political spectrum.

3

A number of groups are leveraging the conversation around coronavirus to propagate racism and anti-immigration sentiment. Some of these communities focus upon the origins of the outbreak to spread anti-Chinese content, **but the French and Italian right-wing are determined to draw attention to immigration policy in their respective countries.** This content is most often shared via articles on clickbait "news" sites and expertly blends conspiratorial narratives with anti-establishment messaging.



groups in the disinformation map, and the combined volume of activity from conservative groups is 27%, compared with 8% from left-leaning groups. This indicates not only that there are more right-wing accounts, but these accounts are also more prolifically producing content than their left-wing counterparts. When groups are broken down geographically this holds true for the US and for Italy. However, left-leaning groups in LatAm and countries in the EU appear to be more active in engaging in the coronavirus conversation.

Location	Percentage of tweets - Right-Wing Groups	Percentage of tweets - Left-Wing Groups
US	22%	3%
Italy	2%	<1%
Latin America + EU ¹⁰	2%	5%

In February, the US Right-Wing group had the largest percentage of nodes present in the map as well as the highest volume of tweets in the map (tied with Hong Kong at 18% tweet volume). This map was produced on a global scale and therefore encompasses 1.3 million tweets, but right-wing groups appear to be dominating the conversation around coronavirus in terms of volume, even by comparison with international media.

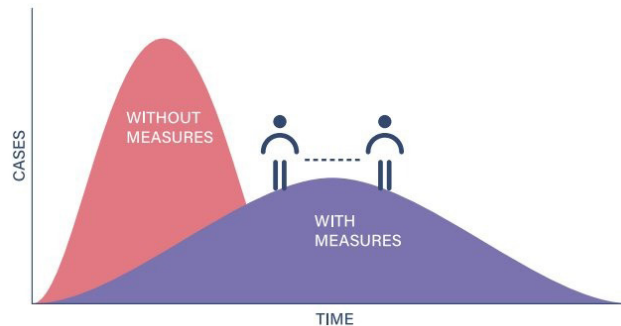
Twitter activity by each group in the February coronavirus map.

Group Name	#Nodes	Total Map Nodes	#Tweets	Percent of Total Map Tweets	Avg Tweets per Member
US Right-Wing	3,029	23%	245,512	18%	67
Hong Kong	2,364	18%	246,202	18%	94
China	1,303	10%	95,377	7%	62
INT Media Business	1,290	10%	166,034	12%	106
Korea Japan	1,281	10%	93,085	7%	56
INT Health Science Intel	989	7%	137,063	10%	114
INT Left-Wing	978	7%	115,591	9%	98
INT Coronavirus News	771	6%	116,120	9%	120
EU INT Right-Wing	704	5%	76,479	6%	93
INT Entertainment	684	5%	66,986	5%	78
Grand Total	13,393	100%	1,358,449	100%	889

Lest there be any doubt about Graphika's political bias, the report lists "U.S. Right Wing" as its own specific disinformation group, whereas the report mentions "left-wing media," "Resist" and "anti-Trump" groups as predominately involved in driving "positive online communications."



Maintain Social Distancing #FlattenTheCurve



Graphika has also analyzed several public health campaigns - one of which stands out as a success in its collective communication of best behaviors to adopt in the face of the pandemic. The spread of #FlattenTheCurve is a small case study in the efficacy of science communication that attests to the positive, and likely life-saving, impact of credible information online. The peak date of use for #FlattenTheCurve in our map data was March 16th. There were 115,000+ tweets on this day that included the #FlattenTheCurve hashtag. The mainstream media played an important role in the spread of #FlattenTheCurve. From the accounts participating in the issue that had been previously identified in other Graphika maps, the most significant overlap comes from users identified as followers of mainstream News and Politics.

The hashtag was used predominantly by liberal and progressive groups, including left-wing media, and Resist and anti-Trump groups. Use of this hashtag was associated with a larger organic spread of public health information, with top co-occurring like #SocialDistancing, #StayAtHome, #StayHomeAndSaveLives, and #StopTheSpread. Of particular note was how the hashtag was engaged with by government officials, from Prime Minister Trudeau to the Chief Medical Officer of Ireland. Four of the top ten retweets from our data collection were from verified accounts of government organizations and officials, who engaged in the viral hashtag to spread important information to their constituents in an effort to keep them safe.

Graphika also [takes special care < https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/Graphika_Report_Covid19_Infodemic.pdf#page=24 >](https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/Graphika_Report_Covid19_Infodemic.pdf#page=24) to track how Bill Gates and George Soros contextualized by so-called “U.S. Right Wing” disinformation:



was prominent in the coronavirus disinformation map.

The hashtag #BillGates appeared in the February conversation map, with steady, yet low-frequency usage from February through March. Although this usage was widespread across groups in the coronavirus disinformation map, the use of the hashtag never exceeded 20 tweets per day. This is evident in the chronotope below, which displays a dot for each tweet including the #BillGates hashtag from a group in the disinformation map across time. Conspiracy-focused content that contains the hashtag either focuses on Bill Gates predicting the coronavirus³⁶ or claims that Gates called for depopulation.³⁷ A further conspiracy emerged around the Gates Foundation engineering the virus for profit, since the Gates Foundation patented a potential vaccination for it.³⁸

What exactly lands someone in the category of spreading “Covid disinformation,” according to Graphika? For prominent Chinese human rights activist Jennifer Zeng, it was “frequently shar[ing] Epoch Times articles.” For exiled Chinese billionaire and political activist Guo Wengui, it was questioning the Chinese Communist Party’s virus death toll figures. Both Zeng and Wengui land in Graphika’s “conspiracy community” of “anti-CCP activists.”

often conspiratorial content.⁶⁷ Popular content in the anti-CCP and conservative cluster in the map includes videos featuring Guo Wengui that claim the coronavirus is a bio-weapon⁶⁸ and that the death toll has been underreported by the Chinese government.⁶⁹

This narrative appears to have spread to other conspiracy groups, including the dedicated coronavirus "news" group, where GNews is among the most shared domains. Popular accounts in this group include Himalayan International Workstation (@GlobalHimalaya) and their counterpart Himalaya Global (@HimalayaGlobal), who are directly tied to GNews.⁷⁰ Their goal, as stated in their website description, is to be the bridge between breaking Chinese news and the Western world, though their main outputs are Fox News and America's Voice clips that have been translated into Mandarin Chinese.⁷¹ Similarly, the English account translates Guo Wengui and GNews clips into English.⁷²

Mentions of @jenniferatntd in the coronavirus disinformation map



The aforementioned Jennifer Zeng has become a prominent voice on the coronavirus. Zeng frequently tweets Epoch Times articles, and her account is mentioned over 500 times per day in Graphika's dedicated coronavirus disinformation map.

Jennifer Zeng has amplified Epoch Times's coronavirus coverage to other groups in this network, and her influence extends beyond Chinese clusters, for example Zeng is also one of the most followed accounts in the internationally focused conspiracy theorists group.

Another 1MM incinerators on the way!
Do you still trust CCP's numbers?



3:58 PM · Feb 23, 2020 · Twitter Media Studio
1.1K Retweets · 1.4K Likes

A tweet from Himalaya Global with a Guo Wengui video translated into English that questions the accuracy of death toll figures reported by the Chinese government.⁷³



Jennifer Zeng, a prominent voice on the coronavirus, frequently shares Epoch Times articles.

But the April 2020 report wasn't nearly the end of Graphika's Covid censorship work. As Twitter Files reporting from Matt Taibbi [revealed](https://twitter.com/mtaibbi/status/1636729252950278150) <https://twitter.com/mtaibbi/status/1636729252950278150>, Graphika wrote a subsequent report sent to Twitter encouraging them to take action to throttle or ban the alleged misinformation and disinformation. There, the DOD-funded disinfo firm sought to shield Anthony Fauci from criticism in much the same way it had done earlier to shield Bill Gates and George Soros:

Fauxi: Undermining Authoritative Health Sources

Authors: Erin McAweeney (Graphika), Lily Meyersohn (Stanford Internet Observatory), Avneesh Chandra (Graphika)

The June 1 release of [thousands of Dr. Anthony Fauci's emails](#) from his National Institutes of Health account gave the public a glimpse into the challenges experienced by US government officials in the early days of the pandemic. The emails were obtained via FOIA requests submitted by the *Washington Post* and BuzzFeed News and were published by each outlet. Although they were obtained legally, anti-vaccine and conservative influencers have largely referred to the documents as “leaked emails,” and quickly began to produce stories alleging that they revealed Fauci’s deep ties to the Chinese government, dishonesty in public communications about the lab leak theory of the virus, and otherwise-nefarious intentions for prolonging the pandemic and lying to the public.

“This continual process of seeding doubt and uncertainty in authoritative voices,” Graphika wrote, “leads to a society that finds it too challenging to identify what’s true or false.”



An Instagram post insinuates that Fauci was conspiring with the CCP.

This tactic is not incidental. For years, incentivized influencers have repeatedly undermined and delegitimized authoritative health sources, public health institutions, and health experts. This continual process of seeding doubt and uncertainty in authoritative voices leads to a society that finds it too challenging to identify what’s true or false, loses confidence in the scientific process overall, or becomes more susceptible to harmful misinformation from a source that they like or trust. Sowing distrust in health authorities also provides an opportunity for incentivized influencers to further manipulate communities that might already err on the side of being anti-vaccine, vaccine-skeptical, or vaccine-hesitant. These beliefs and concerns might originate for different reasons or out of different local histories — religious affiliations; frustration with a prohibitively-expensive and opaque medical system; or a weariness of institutions that have historically exploited or mistreated minority communities — and the additional erosion of trust in reputable authorities compounds them.

In other words, much of the information cited by Graphika as misinformation and disinformation wasn’t actually false, but they believed it was “too challenging” for people to discern between true and untrue information — and so the self-appointed arbiters of truth should decide what content to allow and what to censor.

Indeed, Graphika’s Virality Project would explicitly tell Twitter to censor “true” information <https://twitter.com/mtaibbi/status/1636729265122168835>, if true information would lead people to lose faith in government Covid measures.

Here it should again be noted that Graphika has received nearly \$7 million in government grants and contracts <https://www.usaspending.gov/recipient/6d0f5743-7f89-a9a7-93fc->



Warp Speed's vaccine development effort < <https://insidedefense.com/insider/dod-takes-lead-role-trumps-operation-warp-speed-vaccine-effort> > , ended up funding firms who censored online criticism or questions about the DOD's vaccine development efforts.

Which is a disturbing coincidence, on its own.

One of Graphika's primary benefactors – according to [its own website](https://imgur.com/a/yTXHelT) < <https://imgur.com/a/yTXHelT> > – has been the Defense Department's Minerva Initiative. The Minerva Initiative is a [controversial](https://www.wired.com/2008/05/project-minerva/) < <https://www.wired.com/2008/05/project-minerva/> > Pentagon research program dedicated, [in effect](https://minerva.defense.gov/Research/Research-Priorities/) < <https://minerva.defense.gov/Research/Research-Priorities/> > , to the study of psychological warfare and the science of modifying the behavior of social and political groups overseas. Minerva Initiative cohorts provide guidance to DOD, for example, about [how to stop citizen opposition](https://twitter.com/MikeBenzCyber/status/1640162746086948865) < <https://twitter.com/MikeBenzCyber/status/1640162746086948865> > to crisis governance measures – not unlike opposition government pandemic policies – and how to secure “citizen buy-in” [so the state's “accepted authority”](https://minerva.defense.gov/Research/Funded-Projects/Article/2957115/post-conflict-security-structures-and-citizen-buy-in/) < <https://minerva.defense.gov/Research/Funded-Projects/Article/2957115/post-conflict-security-structures-and-citizen-buy-in/> > is unchallenged.

Post-conflict Security Structures and Citizen Buy-In

PI: Aila Matanock, University of California

Year selected for award: 2021

Post-conflict Security Structures and Citizen Buy-In

Principal Investigator: **Aila Matanock**, University of California

Co-principal Investigator: **David Dow**, University of Arizona; **Rebecca Hanson**, University of Florida; **Dorothy Kronick**, University of Pennsylvania; and **Miguel Garcia Sanchez**, Universidad de los Andes

Years of award: 2022-2025

Managing service agency: [Air Force Office of Scientific Research](#)

Project description:


This project seeks to understand how to stabilize those precarious moments [when the state needs to \(re\)establish itself as the accepted authority](#), particularly on the emergence of post-conflict security structures, state reforms, alternative security structures, and [citizen buy-in](#).

For more on Graphika and Minerva Initiative, [see here](https://twitter.com/MikeBenzCyber/status/1637203157812912132) < <https://twitter.com/MikeBenzCyber/status/1637203157812912132> > .

In 2018, Graphika contributed to a Senate Intelligence Committee Report alleging that Russia undermined the integrity of the 2016 election. In its Senate report, Graphika claimed [to have uncovered](https://slate.com/technology/2018/12/senate-reports-russian-to-have-uncovered) < [https://slate.com/technology/2018/12/senate-reports-russian-](https://slate.com/technology/2018/12/senate-reports-russian-to-have-uncovered)

[trolls-cartoons-midterms/index.html](#)” – a non-committal claim (“suspected”) based on frightfully thin evidence (cartoons posted in a chatroom) – just days before Americans voted in November 2022.

Graphika’s formal censorship work on Covid [came later](#) <https://report.foundationforfreedomonline.com/11-9-22.html> as part of its involvement with the Virality Project. Twitter Files author Matt Taibbi accurately described Virality Project as “an oligopoly of would-be corporate competitors organized quickly behind a secret, unified effort to control political messaging.”

Graphika is also a member of the Election Integrity Partnership (EIP), a “counter-disinformation” collective also heavily involved in pushing the debunked Russian collusion hoax. EIP worked directly with tech platforms to throttle narratives and outright ban US accounts.  Mike Benz, EIP’s accounts supposedly spreading misinformation during the 2020 election cycle, [100% of the accounts](#) <https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/druid:tr171zs0069/EIP-Final-Report.pdf#page=206> EIP targeted as “repeat misinformation spreaders” were conservative:

5. Actors and Networks: Repeat Spreaders of Election Misinformation

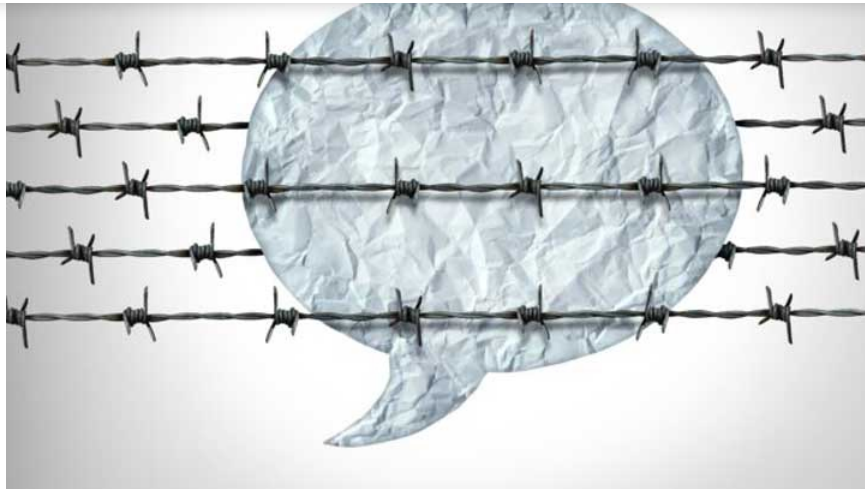
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Forbes: “Government Efforts To Censor Social Media Should Be Transparent,” by Mark MacCarthy.

Oct 5 2022, by Forbes



The Epoch Times, “America’s Censorship Regime,” by Lee Smith.

Oct 5 2022, by Epoch Times

NEWS



“Federal Gov’t Outsourced Censorship to Private Orgs that Later Received Federal Grants: Report,” by Catherine Salgado

Oct 3 2022, by MRC NewsBusters

representatives currently perceiving its probe into the engine
<https://news.yahoo.com/house-panel-conducts-probe-coronavirus-204221969.html> of



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