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The Twitter Blacklisting of Jay Bhattacharya

The social-media platform revealed that many had been censored and shadow-banned.

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3 pm ET



Jay Bhattacharya speaking in Washington, Nov 10.

PHOTO: TOM WILLIAMS/ZUMA PRESS

Jay Bhattacharya, a professor of medicine at Stanford University, was a latecomer to Twitter, joining in the summer of 2021. In his first tweet, he linked to a recent article he had written that discussed age-based mortality risks and natural immunity, among other topics. His main message was powerful and contrary to Covid policies enacted across the country. “Mass testing is an insidious form of lockdown by stealth,” he wrote. Many Americans, especially parents of school-age children, would agree. But it’s possible that many on Twitter didn’t see his message.

This week Twitter released a set of internal emails and documents from before Elon Musk’s takeover of the company in October. One of the revelations was that Dr. Bhattacharya, among many others, had been censored and shadow-banned (tweets hidden in various ways) by Twitter.

Screenshots from an internal Twitter content-moderation system showed that his account was tagged with a label of “Trends Blacklist,” which ensured that his tweets would never make it to the algorithmic trending topics on Twitter’s front page.

How many people endured weekslong quarantine because Dr. Bhattacharya’s message was suppressed? How many students would have been spared the education death knell of remote learning had schools heeded his advice, or even known about it?

Unlike Dr. Bhattacharya, I am not a medical expert. Normally I wouldn’t insert myself into someone else’s domain, but the nation’s health authorities had no problem inserting themselves into mine. They meddled in my business, my church, my kids’ education, my health, my grocery store, my gym, my coffee shop, my barber. In each case, some government entity was there with strangling regulations or an order to shut down entirely.

So I formed a ragtag group of activists, analysts, experts and parents, all trying to get our lives back to normal. We called our group Rational Ground and worked to amplify common-sense Covid policies. We published interactive charts, highlighted data refuting the stay-at-home orders, and pointed out the low risk of the virus for children. It was a lonely and difficult fight, but Dr. Bhattacharya was a calm and steady ally.

By the fall of 2020 we focused our efforts to support Scott Atlas, a Stanford colleague of Dr. Bhattacharya and a key adviser to the Trump administration on Covid. After President Trump lost the election, the momentum Dr. Atlas had won was seemingly lost. The Biden administration pushed for restrictions and for censorship of those who disagreed with the government’s official position.

In July 2021, White House press secretary Jen Psaki announced, “We’ve increased disinformation research and tracking within the Surgeon General’s office. We’re flagging problematic posts for Facebook that spread disinformation.” Ms. Psaki also revealed that senior staff for President Biden were a part of the White House’s efforts to suppress free speech.

This week’s revelations about Twitter add to the evidence that something bad was afoot. Dr. Bhattacharya expressed shock on learning his account had been targeted for censorship. “The thought that will keep me up tonight: censorship of scientific discussion permitted policies like school closures & a generation of children were hurt,” he tweeted. Remembering the adage that sunlight is the best disinfectant, Elon Musk, whose takeover of Twitter led to this and a series of other revelations, replied to Dr. Bhattacharya, “The Sun is coming.”

Mr. Hart is founder of Rational Ground and author of “Gone Viral: How Covid Drove the World Insane.”