


# THE SMOKING GUN: Google Manipulated YouTube Search Results for Abortion, Maxine Waters, David Hogg



 YouTube Blacklists Pro-Life videos  
*Alex Wong, Win McNamee/Getty, Screenshot/YouTube*

**In sworn testimony, Google CEO Sundar Pichai told Congress last month that his company does not [“manually intervene”](#) on any particular search result. Yet an internal discussion thread leaked to Breitbart News reveals Google regularly intervenes in search results on its YouTube video platform – including a recent intervention that pushed pro-life videos out of the top ten search results for “abortion.”**

The term “abortion” was added to a “blacklist” file for “controversial YouTube queries,” which contains a list of search terms that the company considers sensitive. According to the leak, these include some of these search terms related to: abortion, abortions, the Irish abortion referendum, Democratic Congresswoman Maxine Waters, and anti-gun activist David Hogg.

The existence of the blacklist was revealed in an internal Google discussion thread leaked to Breitbart News by a source inside the company who wishes to remain anonymous. A partial list of blacklisted terms was also leaked to Breitbart by another Google source.

In the leaked discussion thread, a Google site reliability engineer hinted at the existence of more search blacklists, according to

the source.

“We have tons of white- and blacklists that humans manually curate,” said the employee. “Hopefully this isn’t surprising or particularly controversial.”

Others were more concerned about the presence of the blacklist. According to the source, the software engineer who started the discussion called the manipulation of search results related to abortion a “smoking gun.”

The software engineer noted that the change had occurred following an [inquiry from a left-wing \*Slate\* journalist](#) about the prominence of pro-life videos on YouTube, and that pro-life videos were replaced with pro-abortion videos in the top ten results for the search terms following Google’s manual intervention.

“The *Slate* writer said she had complained last Friday and then saw different search results before YouTube responded to her on Monday,” wrote the employee. “And lo and behold, the [changelog] was submitted on Friday, December 14 at 3:17 PM.”

The manually downranked items included several videos from Dr. Antony Levatino, a former abortion doctor who is now a pro-life activist. Another video in the top ten featured a woman’s personal story of being pressured to have an abortion, while another featured pro-life conservative Ben Shapiro. The *Slate* journalist who complained to Google [reported](#) that these videos previously featured in the top ten, describing them in her story as “dangerous misinformation.”

Since the *Slate* journalist's inquiry and Google's subsequent intervention, the top search results [now](#) feature pro-abortion content from left-wing sources like BuzzFeed, Vice, CNN, and *Last Week Tonight With John Oliver*. In her [report](#), the *Slate* journalist acknowledged that the search results changed shortly after she contacted Google.

The manual adjustment of search results by a Google-owned platform contradicts a key [claim](#) made under oath by Google CEO Sundar Pichai in his congressional testimony earlier this month: that his company does not “manually intervene on any search result.”

A Google employee in the discussion thread drew attention to Pichai's claim, noting that it “seems like we are pretty eager to cater our search results to the social and political agenda of left-wing journalists.”

One of the posts in the discussion also noted that the blacklist had previously been edited to include the search term “Maxine Waters” after a single Google employee complained the top YouTube search result for Maxine Waters was “very low quality.”

Google's alleged intervention on behalf of a Democratic congresswoman would be further evidence of the tech giant using its resources to prop up the left. Breitbart News previously reported on leaked emails revealing the company targeted pro-Democrat demographics in its get-out-the-vote efforts in 2016.

According to the source, a software engineer in the thread also noted that “a bunch of terms related to the abortion referendum in Ireland” had been added to the blacklist – another change

with potentially dramatic consequences on the national policies of a western democracy.

### **youtube\_controversial\_query\_blacklist**

At least one post in the discussion thread revealed the existence of a file called “youtube\_controversial\_query\_blacklist,” which contains a list of YouTube search terms that Google manually curates. In addition to the terms “abortion,” “abortions,” “Maxine Waters,” and search terms related to the Irish abortion referendum, a Google software engineer noted that the blacklist includes search terms related to terrorist attacks. (the posts specifically mentions that the “Strasbourg terrorist attack” as being on the list).

“If you look at the other entries recently added to the youtube\_controversial\_query\_blacklist(e.g., entries related to the Strasbourg terrorist attack), the addition of abortion seems... out-of-place,” wrote the software engineer, according to the source.

After learning of the existence of the blacklist, Breitbart News obtained a partial screenshot of the full blacklist file from a source within Google. It reveals that the blacklist includes search terms related to both mass shootings and the progressive anti-second amendment activist David Hogg.

This suggests Google has followed the lead of Democrat politicians, who have [repeatedly pushed tech companies](#) to censor content related to the Parkland school shooting and the Parkland anti-gun activists. It’s part of a popular new line of thought in the political-media establishment, [which views the](#)

[public as too stupid to question conspiracy theories for themselves.](#)

Here is the partial blacklist leaked to Breitbart:

2117 plane crash Russian

2118 plane crash

2119 an-148

2120 florida shooting conspiracy

2121 florida shooting crisis actors

2122 florida conspiracy

2123 florida false flag shooting

2124 florida false flag

2125 fake florida school shooting

2126 david hogg hoax

2127 david hogg fake

2128 david hogg crisis actor

2129 david hogg forgets lines

2130 david hogg forgets his lines

2131 david hogg cant remember his lines

2132 david hogg actor

2133 david hogg cant remember

2134 david hogg conspiracy

2135 david hogg exposed

2136 david hogg lines

2137 david hogg rehearsing

2120 florida shooting conspiracy

The full internal filepath of the blacklist, according to another source, is:

```
//depot/google3/googledata/superroot/youtube/youtube_control  
versial_query_blacklist
```

## **Contradictions**

Responding to a request for comment, a YouTube spokeswoman said the company wants to promote “authoritative” sources in its search results, but maintained that YouTube is a “platform for free speech” that “allow[s]” both pro-life and pro-abortion content.

YouTube’s full comment:

*YouTube is a platform for free speech where anyone can choose to post videos, as long as they follow our [Community Guidelines](#), which prohibit things like inciting violence and pornography. We apply these policies impartially and we allow both pro-life and pro-choice opinions. Over the last year we’ve described how we are working to [better surface news sources](#) across our site for*

*news-related searches and topical information. We've improved our search and discovery algorithms, built new features that clearly label and prominently surface news sources on our homepage and search pages, and introduced information panels to help give users more authoritative sources where they can fact check information for themselves.*

In the case of the “abortion” search results, YouTube’s intervention to insert “authoritative” content resulted in the downranking of pro-life videos and the elevation of pro-abortion ones.

A Google spokesperson took a tougher line than its YouTube subsidiary, stating that “Google has never manipulated or modified the search results or content in any of its products to promote a particular political ideology.”

However, in the leaked discussion thread, a member of Google’s “trust & safety” team, Daniel Aaronson, admitted that the company maintains “huge teams” that work to adjust search results for subjects that are “prone to hyperbolic content, misleading information, and offensive content” – all subjective terms that are frequently used to suppress right-leaning sources.

He also admitted that the interventions weren’t confined to YouTube – they included search results delivered via Google Assistant, Google Home, and in rare cases Google’s organic search results.

In the thread, Aaronson attempted to explain how search blacklisting worked. He claimed that highly specific searches would generate non-blacklisted results, even controversial ones.



But the inclusion of highly specific terms in the YouTube blacklist, like “David Hogg cant remember his lines” – the name of an actual viral video – seems to contradict this.

Aaronson’s full post is copied below:

I work in Trust and Safety and while I have no particular input as to exactly what’s happening for YT I can try to explain why you’d have this kind of list and why people are finding lists like these on Code Search.

When dealing with abuse/controversial content on various mediums you have several levers to deal with problems. Two prominent levers are “Proactive” and “Reactive”:

- Proactive: Usually refers to some type of algorithm/scalable solution to a general problem
  - E.g.: We don’t allow straight up porn on YouTube so we create a classifier that detects porn and automatically remove or flag for review the videos the porn classifier is most certain of
- Reactive: Usually refers to a manual fix to something that has been brought to our attention that our proactive solutions don’t/didn’t work on and something that is clearly in the realm of bad enough to warrant a quick targeted solution (determined by pages and pages of policies worked on over many years and many teams to be fair and cover necessary scope)
  - E,g.: A website that used to be a good blog had it’s domain expire and was purchased/repurposed to spam Search results with autogenerated pages full of gibberish text, scraped images, and links to boost

traffic to other spammy sites. It is manually actioned for violating policy

[These Organic Search policies and the consequences to violating them are public](#)

Manually reacting to things is not very scalable, and is not an ideal solution to most problems, so the proactive lever is really the one we all like to lean on. Ideally, our classifiers/algorithm are good at providing useful and rich results to our users while ignoring things that are not useful or not relevant. But we all know, this isn't exactly the case all the time (especially on YouTube).

From a user perspective, there are subjects that are prone to hyperbolic content, misleading information, and offensive content. Now, these words are highly subjective and no one denies that. But we can all agree generally, lines exist in many cultures about what is clearly okay vs. what is not okay. E.g. a video of a puppy playing with a toy is probably okay in almost every culture or context, even if it's not relevant to the query. But a video of someone committing suicide and begging others to follow in his/her footsteps is probably on the other side of the line for many folks.

While my second example is technically relevant to the generic query of "suicide", that doesn't mean that this is a very useful or good video to promote on the top of results for that query. So imagine a classifier that says, for any queries on a particular text file, let's pull videos using signals that we historically understand to be strong indicators of quality (I won't go into specifics here, but those signals do exist). We're not manually curating these results, we're just

saying “hey, be extra careful with results for this query because many times really bad stuff can appear and lead to a bad experience for most users”. Ideally the proactive lever did this for us, but in extreme cases where we need to act quickly on something that is so obviously not okay, the reactive/manual approach is sometimes necessary. And also keep in mind, that this is different for every product. The bar for changing classifiers or manual actions on span in organic search is *extremely* high. However, the bar for things we let our Google Assistant say out loud might be a lot lower. If I search for “Jews run the banks” – I’ll likely find anti-semitic stuff in organic search. As a Jew, I might find some of these results offensive, but they are there for people to research and view, and I understand that this is not a reflection of Google feels about this issue. But if I ask Google assistant “Why do Jews run the banks” we wouldn’t be similarly accepting if it repeated and promoted conspiracy theories that likely pop up in organic search in her smoothing voice.

Whether we agree or not, user perception of our responses, results, and answers of different products and mediums can change. And I think many people are used to the fact that organic search is a place where content should be accessible no matter how offensive it might be, however, the expectation is very different on a Google Home, a Knowledge Panel, or even YouTube.

These lines are very difficult and can be very blurry, we are all well aware of this. So we’ve got huge teams that stay cognizant of these facts when we’re crafting policies considering classifier changes, or reacting with manual actions – these decisions are not made in a vacuum, but

admittedly are also not made in a highly public forum like TGIF or IndustryInfo (as you can imagine, decisions/agreement would be hard to get in such a wide list – imagine if all your CL’s were reviewed by every engineer across Google all the time). I hope that answers some questions and gives a better layer of transparency without going into details about our “Pepsi formula”.

Best,

Daniel

The fact that Google manually curates politically contentious search results fits in with a wider pattern of political activity on the part of the tech giant.

In 2018, Breitbart News exclusively published a leaked video from the company that showed [senior management in dismay at Trump’s election victory](#), and pledging to use the company’s power to make his populist movement a [“hiccup” in history](#).

Breitbart also leaked [“The Good Censor,”](#) an internal research document from Google that admits the tech giant is engaged in the censorship of its own products, partly in response to political events.

Another leak revealed that employees within the company, including Google’s current director of Trust and Safety, [tried to kick Breitbart News off Google’s market-dominating online ad platforms](#).

Yet another showed Google engaged in [targeted turnout operations](#) aimed to boost voter participation in pro-Democrat

demographics in “key states” ahead of the 2016 election. The effort was dubbed a “silent donation” by a top Google employee.

Evidence for Google’s partisan activities is now overwhelming. [President Trump has previously warned Google](#), as well as other Silicon Valley giants, not to engage in censorship or partisan activities. Google continues to defy him.

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