

Liberal Journalist Resigns Due to Censorship

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By Glenn Greenwald

NEW YORK, N.Y.—Today I sent my intention to resign from *The Intercept*, the news outlet I cofounded in 2013 with Jeremy Scahill and Laura Poitras, as well as from its parent company, First Look Media.

Wanted to censor my article

The final, precipitating cause is that *The Intercept's* editors, in violation of my contractual right of editorial freedom, censored an article I wrote this week, refusing to publish it unless I remove all sections critical of Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden, the candidate vehemently supported by all New York-based *Intercept* editors involved in this effort at suppression.

The censored article, based on recently revealed emails and witness testimony, raised critical questions about Biden's conduct. Not content to simply prevent publication of this article at the media outlet I cofounded, these *Intercept* editors also demanded that I refrain from exercising a separate contractual right to publish this article with any other publication.

Don't mind disagreement

I had no objection to their disagreement with my views of what this Biden evidence shows: As a last-ditch attempt to avoid being censored, I encouraged them to air their disagreements with me by writing their own articles that critique my perspectives and letting readers decide who is right, the way any confident and healthy media outlet would.

But modern media outlets do not air dissent; they quash it. So censorship of my article, rather than engagement with it, was the path these Biden-supporting editors chose.

Sacrificing financial security

As of now, I will be publishing my journalism here on Substack, where numerous other journalists, including my good friend the great intrepid reporter Matt Taibbi, have come in order to practice journalism free of the increasingly repressive climate that is engulfing national mainstream media outlets across the country.

This was not an easy choice: I am voluntarily sacrificing the support of a large institution and guaranteed salary in exchange for nothing other than a belief that there are enough people who believe in the virtues of independent journalism and the need for free discourse who will be willing to support my work by subscribing.

Like anyone with young children, a family and numerous obligations, I do this with some trepidation, but also with the conviction that there is no other choice.

I could not sleep at night knowing that I allowed any institution to censor what I want to say and believe—least of all a media outlet I cofounded with the explicit goal of ensuring this never happens to other journalists, let alone to me, let alone because I have written an article critical of a powerful Democratic politician vehemently supported by the editors in the imminent national election.

Censorship is like a virus

But the pathologies, illiberalism and repressive mentality that led to the bizarre spectacle of my being censored by my own media outlet are ones that are by no means unique to *The Intercept*.

These are the viruses that have contaminated virtually every mainstream center-left political organization, academic institution, and newsroom.

Combating propaganda and repression

I began writing about politics fifteen years ago with the goal of combating media propaganda and repression, and—regardless of the risks involved—simply cannot accept any situation, no matter how secure or lucrative, that forces me to submit my journalism and right of free expression to its suffocating constraints and dogmatic dictates.

As I told former *New York Times* executive editor Bill Keller in a 2013 exchange we had in *The New York Times* about my critiques of mainstream journalism and the idea behind *The Intercept*: “Editors should be there to empower and enable strong, highly factual, aggressive adversarial journalism, not to serve as roadblocks to neuter or suppress the journalism.”

Original cofounders

When the three of us as cofounders made the decision early on that we would not attempt to manage the day-to-day operations of the new outlet, so that we could instead focus on our journalism, we negotiated the right of approval for senior editors and, especially the editor-in-chief.

The central responsibility of the person holding that title was to implement, in close consultation with us, the unique journalistic vision and journalistic values on which we founded this new media outlet.

Original vision

Chief among those values was editorial freedom, the protection of a journalist’s right to speak in an honest voice and the airing rather than suppression of dissent from mainstream orthodoxies and even collegial disagreements with one another.

- That would be accomplished, above all else, by ensuring that journalists, once they fulfilled the first duty of factual accuracy and journalistic ethics, would be not just permitted but encouraged to express political and ideological views that deviated from mainstream orthodoxy and those of their own editors.
- To express themselves in their own voice of passion and conviction rather than stuffed into the corporatized, contrived tone of artificial objectivity, above-it-all omnipotence.
- To be completely free of anyone else's dogmatic beliefs or ideological agenda—including those of the three co-founders.

Drifted from original vision

The current iteration of *The Intercept* is completely unrecognizable when compared to that original vision.

- Rather than offering a venue for airing dissent, marginalized voices and unheard perspectives, it is rapidly becoming just another media outlet with mandated ideological and partisan loyalties, a rigid and narrow range of permitted viewpoints (ranging from establishment liberalism to soft leftism, but always anchored in ultimate support for the Democratic Party), a deep fear of offending hegemonic cultural liberalism and center-left Twitter luminaries, and an overarching need to secure the approval and admiration of the very mainstream media outlets we created *The Intercept* to oppose, critique and subvert.
- As a result, it is a rare event indeed when a radical freelance voice unwelcome in mainstream precincts is published in *The Intercept*.

Outside reporters or writers with no claim to mainstream acceptability—exactly the people we set out to amplify—have almost no chance of being published. It is even rarer for *The Intercept* to publish content that would not fit very comfortably in at least a dozen or more center-left publications of similar size which pre-dated its founding, from *Mother Jones* to *Vox* and even MSNBC.

Courage replaced by fear

Courage is required to step out of line, to question and poke at those pieties most sacred in one's own milieu, but fear of alienating the guardians of liberal orthodoxy, especially on Twitter, is the predominant attribute of *The Intercept's* New-York based editorial leadership team.

As a result, *The Intercept* has all but abandoned its core mission of challenging and poking at, rather than appeasing and comforting, the institutions and guardians most powerful in its cultural and political circles.

Cofounders' role diminished

Making all of this worse, *The Intercept*—while gradually excluding the cofounders from any role in its editorial mission or direction, and making one choice after the next to which I vocally objected as a betrayal of our core mis-

sion—continued publicly to trade on my name in order to raise funds for journalism it knew I did not support.

It purposely allowed the perception to fester that I was the person responsible for its journalistic mistakes in order to ensure that blame for those mistakes was heaped on me rather than the editors who were consolidating control and were responsible for them.

Reality Winner debacle

The most egregious, but by no means only, example of exploiting my name to evade responsibility was the Reality Winner debacle. [Ms. Winner was a former American intelligence specialist who was charged in 2017 with removing classified materials from a government facility and mailing them to a news outlet.] As *The New York Times* recently reported, that was a story in which I had no involvement whatsoever.

While based in Brazil, I was never asked to work on the documents which Winner sent to our New York newsroom with no request that any specific journalist work on them. I did not even learn of the existence of that document until very shortly prior to its publication.

The person who oversaw, edited and controlled that story was Betsy Reed, which was how it should be given the magnitude and complexity of that reporting and her position as editor-in-chief.

It was *Intercept* editors who pressured the story's reporters to quickly send those documents for authentication to the government—because they were eager to prove to mainstream media outlets and prominent liberals that *The Intercept* was willing to get on board the Russiagate train.

They wanted to counteract the perception, created by my articles expressing skepticism about the central claims of that scandal, that *The Intercept* had stepped out of line on a story of high importance to U.S. liberalism and even the left. That craving—to secure the approval of the very mainstream media outlets we set out to counteract—was the root cause for the speed and recklessness with which that document from Winner was handled.

No clarification

But *The Intercept*, to this very day, has refused to provide any public accounting of what happened in the Reality Winner story: to explain who the editors were who made mistakes and why any of it happened.

As the *New York Times* article makes clear, that refusal persists to this very day notwithstanding vocal demands from myself, Scahill, Laura Poitras and others that *The Intercept*, as an institution that demands transparency from others, has the obligation to provide it for itself.

Silence and cover-up

The reason for this silence and this cover-up is obvious: accounting to the public about what happened with the Reality Winner story would reveal who

the actual editors are who are responsible for that deeply embarrassing newsroom failure, and that would negate their ability to continue to hide behind me and let the public continue to assume that I was the person at fault for a reporting process from which I was completely excluded from the start.

That is just one example illustrating the frustrating dilemma of having a newsroom exploit my name, work and credibility when it is convenient to do so, while increasingly denying me any opportunity to influence its journalistic mission and editorial direction, all while pursuing an editorial mission completely anathema to what I believe.

Still difficult to leave

Despite all of this, I did not want to leave *The Intercept*.

As it deteriorated and abandoned its original mission, I reasoned to myself—perhaps rationalized—that as long as *The Intercept* at least continued to provide me the resources to personally do the journalism I believe in, and never to interfere in or impede my editorial freedom, I could swallow everything else.

Upcoming election

But the brute censorship this week of my article—about the Hunter Biden materials and Joe Biden’s conduct regarding Ukraine and China, as well my critique of the media’s rank-closing attempt, in a deeply unholy union with Silicon Valley and the “intelligence community,” to suppress its revelations—eroded the last justification I could cling to for staying.

It meant that not only does this media outlet not provide the editorial freedom to other journalists, as I had so hopefully envisioned seven years ago, but now no longer even provides it to me.

In the days heading into a presidential election, I am somehow silenced from expressing any views that random editors in New York find disagreeable, and now somehow have to conform my writing and reporting to cater to their partisan desires and eagerness to elect specific candidates.

Silenced about Joe Biden

To say that such censorship is a red line for me, a situation I would never accept no matter the cost, is an understatement. It is astonishing to me, but also a reflection of our current discourse and illiberal media environment, that I have been silenced about Joe Biden by my own media outlet.

Numerous other episodes were also contributing causes to my decision to leave.

- The Reality Winner cover-up.
- The decision to hang Lee Fang out to dry and even force him to apologize when a colleague tried to destroy his reputation by publicly, baselessly and repeatedly branding him a racist.

- The refusal to report on the daily proceedings of the Assange extradition hearing because the freelance reporter doing an outstanding job was politically distasteful.
- The utter lack of editorial standards when it comes to viewpoints or reporting that flatter the beliefs of its liberal base.

(*The Intercept* published some of the most credulous and false affirmations of maximalist Russiagate madness, and, horrifyingly, took the lead in falsely branding the Hunter Biden archive as “Russian disinformation” by mindlessly and uncritically citing—of all things—a letter by former CIA officials that contained this baseless insinuation).

Genuine sadness

I know it sounds banal to say, but—even with all of these frustrations and failures—I am leaving, and writing this, with genuine sadness, not fury.

That news outlet is something I and numerous close friends and colleagues poured an enormous amount of our time, energy, passion and love into building.

Some great work

The Intercept has done great work. Its editorial leaders and First Look’s managers steadfastly supported the difficult and dangerous reporting I did last year with my brave young colleagues at *The Intercept Brasil* to expose corruption at the highest levels of the Bolsonaro government, and stood behind us as we endured threats of death and imprisonment.

Closest friends

It continues to employ some of my closest friends, outstanding journalists whose work—when it overcomes editorial resistance—produces nothing but the highest admiration from me.

Common problems

And none of the critiques I have voiced about *The Intercept* are unique to it.

To the contrary: These are the raging battles over free expression and the right of dissent raging within every major cultural, political and journalistic institution.

That’s the crisis that journalism, and more broadly values of liberalism, faces.

Not allowing dissenting views

Our discourse is becoming increasingly intolerant of dissenting views, and our culture is demanding more and more submission to prevailing orthodoxies imposed by self-anointed monopolists of Truth and Righteousness, backed up by armies of online enforcement mobs.

And nothing is crippled by that trend more severely than journalism, which, above all else, requires the ability of journalists to offend and anger power centers, question or reject sacred pieties, unearth facts that reflect negatively even on (espe-

cially on) the most beloved and powerful figures, and highlight corruption no matter where it is found and regardless of who is benefited or injured by its exposure.

New media outlet

Prior to the extraordinary experience of being censored this week by my own news outlet, I had already been exploring the possibility of creating a new media outlet. I have spent a couple of months in active discussions with some of the most interesting, independent and vibrant journalists, writers and commentators across the political spectrum about the feasibility of securing financing for a new outlet that would be designed to combat these trends.

The first two paragraphs of our working document reads as follows:

- American media is gripped in a polarized culture war that is forcing journalism to conform to tribal, groupthink narratives that are often divorced from the truth and cater to perspectives that are not reflective of the broader public but instead a minority of hyper-partisan elites. The need to conform to highly restrictive, artificial cultural narratives and partisan identities has created a repressive and illiberal environment in which vast swaths of news and reporting either do not happen or are presented through the most skewed and reality-detached lens.

- With nearly all major media institutions captured to some degree by this dynamic, a deep need exists for media that is untethered and free to transgress the boundaries of this polarized culture war and address a demand from a public that is starved for media that doesn't play for a side but instead pursues lines of reporting, thought, and inquiry wherever they lead, without fear of violating cultural pieties or elite orthodoxies.

Leaving a stable income

I theoretically could have stayed at *The Intercept* until then, guaranteeing a stable and secure income for my family by swallowing the dictates of my new censors.

But I would be deeply ashamed if I did that, and believe I would be betraying my own principles and convictions that I urge others to follow.

So in the meantime, I have decided to follow in the footsteps of numerous other writers and journalists who have been expelled from increasingly repressive journalistic precincts for various forms of heresy and dissent and who have sought refuge here.

I began my journalism career by depending on my readers' willingness to support independent journalism which they believe is necessary to sustain.

It is somewhat daunting at this point in my life, but also very exciting, to return to that model where one answers only to the public a journalist should be serving.