

# PayPal's censorship marks a vicious new phase in the war on free speech

By Gareth Davies Dominic Penna Fraser Nelson Jack Maidment Helen Chandler-Wilde Joe Barnes John Waller ·  
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The Labour Party conference opens in Liverpool this weekend and the main attraction will, as always, be the stalls run by volunteers. The passionate, committed and usually humorous activists are always there, selling “never kissed a Tory” T-shirts and Corbyn memorabilia.

There will be communist sympathisers, Venezuela apologists and backers of all kinds of lost causes. You can see it as wrongheaded, perhaps extreme, but minority voices are the lifeblood of a democracy. No one would question their right to be there.

Until recently, this was a basic part of British public life – eccentricity is cherished and free speech is offered to even the nuttiest causes. Campaign groups of any persuasion can open bank accounts, print leaflets and pay their bills. But in the digital world, life outside the mainstream is becoming harder. All it takes is to tweak a censorship algorithm then: presto! As the Socialist Workers Party once found out, the Facebook page can vanish. We were never told what the SWP did wrong, which is part of the problem: Silicon Valley's social media giants answer to no one.

It all moved up a gear this week when PayPal closed the accounts of the Free Speech Union and the anti-lockdown *Daily Sceptic* with no explanation given. The latest victim is the UsForThem campaign, which sought to highlight the impact of school closures during lockdown. They use PayPal to fundraise, but the account has been suspended. Given PayPal's dominance of the market, it's quite a problem.

This matters because party conferences are now museum-piece events. Activists of all persuasions use digital means to reach each other, to recruit, to fundraise. PayPal, being bigger than its next eight rivals put together, has huge power – and if it blocks users from its

services, it can cause serious damage. A third of the Free Speech Union's membership fees, for example, are paid using PayPal. The company's dominance in the online payments world gives it huge clout, which it has now shown itself willing to abuse.

If this were a supermarket using local monopoly powers to raise prices, the Government would break it up in a heartbeat. But with tech giants, it's different. They are offering to put their huge power at the service of governments: in Facebook's case, literally running adverts offering to work in "partnership" with the authorities. It's as if they're saying: if you don't regulate us too much, we'll make sure accidents keep happening to your enemies. We'll clean up the mess, don't worry. PayPal targeting lockdown sceptics can certainly be seen as a continuation of that trend of politicisation.

When David Davis's speech questioning vaccine passports was taken down by YouTube, it was the most egregious example of digital censorship. PayPal's entry into political enforcement adds a chilling financial aspect to this. In America, it has been targeting Left-wing websites – relatively nutty ones, to be fair, which oppose Joe Biden's Ukraine policy. But do we want financial services behaving this way in Britain?

As we move towards a cashless economy, such companies will form part of the essential infrastructure of everyday life – a point that was made in Parliament yesterday. Penny Mordaunt, the new Leader of the House, replied by suggesting a debate and pointing out that tech

giants tend never to explain themselves. But she should also pause to consider the extra power that her Government is about to give them.

The Online Safety Bill is still making its way through the Commons, threatening to create the concept of “legal but harmful” – ie speech that can be censored. Michelle Donelan, the new Culture Secretary has implied that this concept will be reviewed, but it needs to go altogether. It would import into Britain the censorship-by-proxy model used to stifle dissent in China, where the black pen is wielded not by government but social media firms using algorithms to hunt down offending words (and, ergo, opinions) in real time. If in doubt, they strike it out.

Kemi Badenoch and Rishi Sunak both pledged to abolish this, but Liz Truss pointedly did not. So this self-styled defender of free speech may very well be about to usher in a censorship law. It might start with denial of the right to publish, but could quickly turn into denial of access to digital financial services. All this ought to be anathema to a freedom-loving prime minister but it's quite possible that her attention lies elsewhere. Digital censorship has moved so quickly that, even now, ministers have not really worked out that it is happening – or that they have the power to stop it.

This isn't an easy question. Like any bank or private company, PayPal is legally entitled to deny accounts to anyone it likes. So should the state interfere with the freedom of business owners? But landlords are no longer allowed to block tenants based on skin colour. Bed and

Breakfast owners can't refuse gay guests. There is a general understanding that a public service should be a public service for all. The challenge is to make another fairly basic point: that protecting diversity should also mean diversity of opinion.

Until now, financial services have rarely policed the political opinions of their clients: such behaviour was thought to have been left behind after the collapse of communism. But to an extent that politicians have not properly realised, British traditions of free speech are being steadily replaced by de facto Silicon Valley censorship. And Truss could be months away from empowering these new censors, in the mistaken belief that she is calling them to heel.

The obvious remedy is to replace the Online Safety Bill with a law making it illegal to deny digital services to anyone on grounds of race, creed or colour – and creed includes belief. Unless the speech is illegal, such as promoting violence or terrorism, no one should be censored or shadow-banned for political beliefs. Nor should anyone lose a bank account for saying the wrong things.

Penny Mordaunt is right to call for a debate: leaving this to fester will mean more voices silenced and more financial lifelines cut. The Prime Minister has said that she stands for liberty, at home and abroad. Protecting freedom of speech for the digital era would be an excellent place to start.

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