

Demetri Kofinas: 00:00 Today's episode of Hidden Forces is made possible by listeners like you. For more information about this week's episode or for easy access to related programming, visit our website at HiddenForces.io and subscribe to our free email list. If you listen to the show on your Apple Podcast app, remember you can give us a review. Each review helps more people find the show and join our amazing community. And with that, please enjoy this week's episode.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:48 What's up, everybody? My guest on this episode of Hidden Forces is Matt Taibbi. Matt was last on the show about two years ago, and our conversation focused mainly on the news media, how the press covers politics and power, and how propaganda works in a democratic society. It was a great episode. Check it out after today's recording if you're interested.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:10 Many of you will already know Matt by reputation. He's one of the most outspoken, no holds barred journalists that you will find anywhere, and a precious rarity during a time when many prominent journalists and political commentators seem to prioritize servile flattery and compliance above any commitment to telling the truth.

Matt Taibbi: 01:32 Matt is also a contributing editor for Rolling Stone and winner of the 2008 National Magazine Award for columns and commentary. He co-hosts the "Useful Idiots Podcast" alongside Katie Halper, publishes a regular newsletter on Substack, which I strongly recommend you all subscribe to, and is the author of 10 books, the latest of which is "Hate Inc," which we discussed during our last conversation together on episode 78.

Demetri Kofinas: 02:01 We are living through what I would describe conservatively as a very dangerous time. Everyone's on edge because unsurprisingly days after the election was supposed to be over, we still don't know who the president is and technically we may not know until inauguration day. What's most remarkable though about the shit show that this election is turning into is how predictable it was. I've watched panels and been on conference calls at think tanks dealing with how to manage voting irregularities, large numbers of mail-in ballots, and just about any other issue you could imagine, and yet somehow we still managed to screw it up.

Demetri Kofinas: 02:44 How can you not entertain conspiracies when you're faced with explanations that demand such incompetence? It's one of the many questions that Matt and I explore as we try and wrap our heads around this ongoing parody of an election that is guaranteed to piss off one half of the country and further radicalize and polarize an already outraged electorate.

Demetri Kofinas: 03:08 I've been saying this since the very beginning of the coronavirus outbreak. Coronavirus is not the existential threat that we should be concerned about. The polarization in our communities and in our country is if it means we can't effectively govern ourselves or hold a free and fair election whose outcome the vast majority of Americans can trust. We have enemies, both foreign and domestic who would love nothing more than the further divide us, and so far we have fallen directly into that trap.

Demetri Kofinas: 03:41 I have absolutely no idea what the next few months will hold. But I implore everyone listening today to think twice before acting under impulses and emotions. We need calm. The anger and unrest in this country could easily spiral out of control, and I don't think any of us are prepared for what something like that will actually look like. We are all accountable, and we all need to hold ourselves accountable. And in democracy, there is no one else.

Demetri Kofinas: 04:15 A quick note for anyone is new to Hidden Forces. We don't accept commercial sponsors. These conversations last anywhere between 90 minutes to two hours. The second half of which is made available to our premium subscribers, along with transcripts to each conversation, as well as notes in the form of rundowns that I put together ahead of each and every episode.

Demetri Kofinas: 04:38 If you value what we do, consider signing up for one of our four content tiers. If that's not an option for you, there are still things you can do to support the show by sharing your enthusiasm and love for the podcast. Tweet it out, send it to your friends, and write us a review on Apple Podcasts.

Demetri Kofinas: 04:59 Every bit of support helps, especially in a climate like this where independent voices are needed and where we face significant resistance in breaking through the noise of partisan ranker and disinformation that has only been amplified by this most recent election.

Demetri Kofinas: 05:15 And on that note, please enjoy this week's conversation with my guest Matt Taibbi.

Demetri Kofinas: 05:26 Matt Taibbi, welcome to Hidden Forces.

Matt Taibbi: 05:28 Thanks for having me on, Demetri. Long time.

Demetri Kofinas: 05:31 Yeah, it's been... How long has it been?

Matt Taibbi: 05:33 Couple years I think.

Demetri Kofinas: 05:34 Yeah, I think so. Yeah. I think both campaigns have conspired against us on this morning.

Matt Taibbi: 05:40 Shenanigans. Yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: 05:41 Yeah. We had a really tough time setting that up. For listeners, we also may have a mystery guest joining us later. We'll see. There's a lot of technical issues going on.

Demetri Kofinas: 05:50 Matt, I don't think I've actually ever seen the back of this part of your room.

Matt Taibbi: 05:54 This is new. I moved to this place.

Demetri Kofinas: 05:58 It's nice.

Matt Taibbi: 05:58 Yeah, thanks.

Demetri Kofinas: 05:59 That's the cover of which book is that on the right? That's the cover of one of your-

Matt Taibbi: 06:02 That's "The Divide." It's a painting by Molly Crabapple.

Demetri Kofinas: 06:07 Right.

Matt Taibbi: 06:08 It's the only piece of art I own. So, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: 06:11 So last time you were on the show, I don't know if you remember this, but we talked about your experience covering the Republican primary and actually Trump in particular.

Matt Taibbi: 06:22 Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Demetri Kofinas: 06:23 And how you actually thought that he had a much better chance of winning than your colleagues did, but you kind of got suckered into--

Matt Taibbi: 06:30 I did.

Demetri Kofinas: 06:30 ... going along with them. I think you said... I tried to find the transcript, but it must have been in the overtime. I think you said that you would never let that happen to you again.

Matt Taibbi: 06:39 And I did let it happen again. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Demetri Kofinas: 06:41 So what happened? What were your expectations this time around with the election?

Matt Taibbi: 06:45 Well, I thought Trump would do a lot better, and some of the things that I thought were worth pointing out, and I wrote about this actually a couple times. One thing that was really important was that Trump went into the 2016 election day with a lot of ambivalence among Republican voters about him. I mean, I think his approval rating... He had a tough time creeping over 60% approval rating throughout most of that election year. And if you remember correctly, 19% of the voters who cast votes-this is according to exit polls in 2016-disapproved of both candidates. And Trump did really well with those folks.

Matt Taibbi: 07:23 But four years since, Trump really consolidated his support among Republicans. So, he kind of entered this election cycle with the profile of a typical Republican incumbent with approval ratings that hovered somewhere between 85% and 95% among Republicans, which I think is important because incumbents usually don't lose, and he had basically the same profile as a George Bush in 2004.

Matt Taibbi: 07:53 So I wrote about that stuff a lot, and yet I fell for the same stuff over the summer because I kept seeing poll numbers that look like it was just not possible for there to be that many hidden voters. And I also heard repeatedly from pollsters who I talked to, "Oh, we've changed our techniques. And we're not going to miss that stuff anymore. We know what we're looking for. We're never going to let that mistake happen again." And it happened again. It's just

unbelievable. And I'm kind of embarrassed frankly because I participated a little bit in the mirage that this was a done deal.

- Demetri Kofinas:** 08:37 So a natural question is because you would've expected them to make changes, did they make changes? Were those changes ineffective in practice because of anomalies specific to this race? I mean, why were the polls so off because the extent of the divergence is enormous?
- Matt Taibbi:** 08:55 Yeah. I mean, look at Ohio. They were predicting a five point loss for Trump in Ohio, and what did he end up with? An eight point win? Something like that. Right?
- Demetri Kofinas:** 09:06 Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Matt Taibbi:** 09:07 So a 12 point swing is pretty massive, and yes, he lost the popular vote. If you look at the popular vote, that's almost reflective of where the polls were. But on a state-by-state basis, they were pretty significantly wrong in a lot of places, and almost universally wrong in the same direction. There were a couple of outliers there. I think maybe Arizona's a bit of an outlier. But to answer your question, I think there must be something inherently confusing or flawed in the polling process. And I always talk about it in terms of you can only get so much from yes or no answers from people. If you're actually covering a campaign and you talk to people and you can tell that with every fiber of their being, they not only love their candidate but despise the other candidate, that tends to be reflective of something. The people on that block, if you're not going to get a person who is so completely cut off from all the other people in his or her circle that they believe this thing.
- Matt Taibbi:** 10:13 So when you encounter that kind of enthusiasm, it tends to suggest that there's a lot of it out there. So, maybe that's what the problems with polls is that they frame this as would you or wouldn't you, yes or no, and that doesn't do as much to detect what's actually happening as more subjective tests might reveal.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 10:35 I would also to what extent, and then we'll get off of this because this is more wonky type of stuff, but I wonder to what degree Trump's rallies in the last few weeks, how that contributed to changing the dynamics on the ground.
- Matt Taibbi:** 10:48 It certainly could have, and the Democratic candidate being absent doesn't help either I think. Biden essentially was a no-show which lent itself to some questions. I saw some people talking about how some elderly voters might've been a little freaked out about that because Trump really alienated elderly voters significantly this year with his coronavirus policies. But some of their trust in Biden might've been undermined by things that they're recognizing maybe from people in their own circle. The guy's absent for nine days at a time and has trouble when he speaks in public. Maybe he isn't the climb. I think that did have an impact probably because Trump, he bounces back from COVID, and he looks like he's ready to go play an NBA game in a couple of weeks. It had to have an impact.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 11:40 Yeah. He's like the Energizer bunny. He just keeps going.

Demetri Kofinas: 11:44 So let's actually move our conversation to election night, Matt. First of all, you guys did your typical drinking game. I watched some of that. Some what is that? Do you do that there's any kind of election, or is it just for presidential politics, or you just do it generally?

Matt Taibbi: 11:57 We do it sometimes for like debates and stuff like that because what we're usually trying to do, and we didn't really do the game that much that night because we got wrapped up in the results. But normally you're watching something like a debate, and the whole joke is that you're trying to predict what people say. So, for a Democratic party drinking game, if one of the rules is drink every time they say existential threat, you're going to take like five shots that night.

Demetri Kofinas: 12:23 Yeah, you're going to get pretty wasted.

Matt Taibbi: 12:25 Yeah. Exactly. So, that's the whole joke is it's predicting the stuff that you hear in political coverage. So, we do that every now and then.

Demetri Kofinas: 12:34 So what's the lesson that we can draw so far? What have we learned early on in this election that we didn't know going into it?

Matt Taibbi: 12:42 So I think the big thing is if you look at the down ballot results and you look at the shift in the demographics of Trump support, which I thought were amazing. Trump did worse with white male voters and he did better with basically every other demographic. And if-

Demetri Kofinas: 13:00 Yeah.

Matt Taibbi: 13:01 If the Republican party is smart and there isn't necessarily evidence to suggest that they are, but if they are, they will see that the opening is there for them to market themselves as the working class party of the country. And alternatively, to present the Democrats as the party of the rich elites, which there's some validity to that. The Republicans under Trump expanded their support with Hispanic voters. They did pretty well with new immigrants, and the reasons for that are complicated I think. I think it really highlights some bad decisions that the Democrats made last year to kind of devalue certain lines of argument that were being made by people like Sanders and Warren about class issues. They ran screaming from that, and as a result, they couldn't run on it with Biden and that left an opening. And for a politician who is more clever, that could become a problem. And it's reflected in the down ballot stuff.

Demetri Kofinas: 14:06 Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, the numbers that I have here in front of me is that he gained pretty much one fifth of Black male voters, up from 13% in 2016. He doubled his support amongst Black female voters. He doubled his support amongst LGBT people, and he gained in terms of Latinos and Asians. When I saw that, I thought, "Well, this is like one of those Thomas Kuhn paradigm shift moments." It's like you've got this theory, and it's clearly not working. All the empirical data is telling you that you need to change your entire theoretical framework for how you see the world. And yet I wonder if the Democrats are actually going to do that. There was this incredibly tone off op-ed that I read a couple days ago or yesterday maybe by Charles Blow at the New York Times,

and he basically what he did was he looked at the data and he said, "This is further evidence for just how entrenched the patriarchy is that minorities and marginalized groups would actually vote in greater numbers for their oppressor."

- Matt Taibbi:** 15:14 Right. Yeah. And the problem I think to anybody who doesn't live in that bubble is that language itself. I don't give Trump credit for anything affirmatively that he did to win those votes. I think that a lot of that voting behavior comes from probably apprehension about trends in academic thought that portray minorities as terminal victims, as people whose success or failure is 100% dependent upon the indulgence of a patriarchal, white supremacist class. I think a lot of people in those groups don't see themselves in that light, and they resent it. For me, frankly, I think it's a racist caricature a little bit, and it's kind of like an inverted version of the old Republican argument. Actually, it's not even that old, like Donald Trump Jr. was just making it. That you have to want success as much as we do in order to get it. Basically what they're saying is that we're successful because we've earned it, and you aren't successful because you haven't earned it.
- Matt Taibbi:** 16:36 But the Democratic rhetoric is kind of like a flip of that. It's like you only succeed because we allow it, and you don't succeed because we don't allow it. That's not an attractive theory I don't think. But you're right, they're going to double down on it rather than see that--
- Demetri Kofinas:** 16:51 So you think they're going to double down on it because I was actually wondering if one of the positive outcomes that will come from this is that there will be a reexamination and a reckoning within the Democratic party. You don't think so. You're shaking your head.
- Matt Taibbi:** 17:04 There should've been one four years ago about a lot of stuff, like starting with the Democratic platform and maybe continuing onto how the media looks at politics. But remember, one of the early conclusions of both the political class and the attendant big corporate media was that the only reason that Donald Trump won was because of racism. Basically they took the Hillary Clinton's deplorable's comment and they expanded it to no longer cover just a third of voters but all of them, and now this became the defacto go-to explanation for Trump's entire base. And these results should tell them that that was a flawed construction because clearly minorities themselves did not see it that way, and yet they're not going... I really doubt they're going to do that because that would mean reexamining past errors, which they don't like to do. I mean, it's one of the things that we found out in the last four years is that they just tend not to want to go back and say, "We screwed this up." And there's no way to address it without doing that.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 18:16 So let's game out a few scenarios here. First of all, what is going on right now with the vote counting because I've been confused by this as well. I'm confused about what Trump is alleging, what he wants because on the one hand he wanted vote counting to continue. He wanted them to finish voting. But now he wants voting to stop. Where are we with this?

Matt Taibbi: 18:39 I have to admit, I've never really covered a vote counting story, and I'm not really good on the mechanics of how it all works. But I think what Trump is alleging, what their people are saying is that we want to have access to watching the process of counting votes, and they want also to stop any new voting that would take place. But there are also clearly people who are gathering outside of some voting places screaming for people to stop counting. So, I'm a little confused about what exactly is going on.

Demetri Kofinas: 19:15 This is a disaster. It's really a disaster.

Matt Taibbi: 19:17 Well, sure. I mean, it raises all kinds of questions about the legitimacy of the processes because... And you couple this with the sort of rampant dishonesty of the press in the last four years. It's just going to make people suspicious of the results. I personally don't necessarily think that way, but people are going to come away with this with questions about what happened on election night.

Demetri Kofinas: 19:40 Well, I don't think of myself as a conspiracy theorist. In fact, I go out of my way not to do that. And a good example is even the Jeffrey Epstein situation. I didn't jump out and start saying what I thought happened or didn't happen. I wasn't in the cell with him. But I've been amazed, even with myself what I've been willing to entertain in this situation.

Demetri Kofinas: 19:57 I want to take a quote from a friend of yours, Glenn Greenwald who wrote, "No matter what the final result, there will be substantial doubts about its legitimacy by one side or the other, perhaps both. And no deranged conspiracy thinking is required for that. An electoral system suffused with this much chaos, error, protracted outcomes, and seemingly inexplicable reversals will sow doubt and distrust even among the most rational citizens."

Demetri Kofinas: 20:24 I feel like that's a pretty good description of where we are today. It's such a disaster, and I wonder if it's just that our expectations are too high or in the words of Krystal Ball who was on your show recently, "Why can't we have nice things anymore?"

Matt Taibbi: 20:42 Well, for so long we didn't really have an issue with this because the possibility of... Well, that's not true. I mean, we clearly has significant vote fraud in some pretty famous elections in Kennedy's election in 1960 being a famous one. But we don't have a uniform national vote counting system. So, inevitably what ends up having is that collecting all the results comes down to a confederacy of different state systems that all have their own idiosyncrasies. We saw this very clearly with the disaster in Iowa, and I was there for that when they didn't have a clear result. They were sort of just making up the rules as they went along, and there were people who would come up and they would be spokespersons for the state who would say one thing. And then you would hear a completely different explanation from some other person in the government a few minutes later. You would find that certain counties behaved one way and other counties behaved other ways. That's just not sustainable. If that's the case for across an entire country of 350 million people, then clearly you're going to get problems and that's before you even get to the question of whether there's corruption, which is of course totally possible. So, yeah, people are going to doubt the results.

Matt Taibbi: 22:08 Just to take Wisconsin for an example. What's a Republican supposed to think when they go to bed looking at the map and seeing that it looks like they've got it in the bag. They wake up the next morning and they see within a minute the whole picture's been reversed. It's almost certainly legit because if you're just taking all the votes from Milwaukee, that makes some sense. But I don't know. The people are going to wonder about it. They just will.

Demetri Kofinas: 22:35 Yeah, and we knew this. This is the other thing that's really difficult to wrap your head around because we understood that there was going to be a huge number of mail-in ballots, and that those mail-in ballots were going to be counted in the days afterwards. Why exactly that's the case, I'm not sure. I mean, Mark Barton Gellman wrote this really great analysis and projection for The Atlantic where he talked about... He basically gamed this exact scenario, that Trump would come out and say that he won the election, which is exactly what he did. And now lots of people, regardless of what's going to happen, are going to doubt the outcome.

Matt Taibbi: 23:10 Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. And the frustrating thing is clearly some states that were more experienced with election night shenanigans took the time to make sure that they had a lot of this locked down before election night. So, Florida didn't have problems, and they were able to report their results in a timely fashion, despite having historic numbers of mail-in ballots. Other states just decided not to go that route, and they were releasing results piecemeal and kind of making up when they're going to release results on the fly. What is that? Why do it that way? I just do not understand saying, "Let's take a break and reconvene at five o'clock tomorrow evening to start counting again." That makes zero sense to me in a situation like this.

Demetri Kofinas: 24:01 Yeah, it does. It makes you wonder whether they do it on purpose.

Matt Taibbi: 24:04 Sure, and you combine that with the press decisions that seem completely subjective about when they call certain states and when they don't. I'm not sure I grasp that either because they called New York with 0% of the vote in basically, and I understand that because there's no way New York is going to go for Trump. But that's based on prior voting patterns, and as we saw during this election, prior voting patterns didn't hold in a lot of places. And in some cases, they were pretty significant. So, why are we waiting to call Alaska when X amount of the vote is already in and it's clear it's not going to be close, but we are calling in other places. I don't get that either. I don't know. Some of it doesn't make sense, even to me and I work in the media.

Demetri Kofinas: 24:51 Yeah. I mean, this is conjecture, and like I said, I'm not a conspiracy theorist but this election has made me more of a conspiracy theorist, just like the 2008 financial crisis. It really has. Not as much because with the financial crisis, you could actually see people doing it out in public. It was more flagrant. But is Biden going to win this thing? Is that what it's looking like right now? I should say we're recording this on Thursday, noon Thursday, November 5th.

Matt Taibbi: 25:23 So the most likely scenario is Biden retains one or both of Arizona and Nevada, that coupled with him winning Wisconsin and Michigan gives him the election. If he wins Nevada and it's just Wisconsin, I think it comes out to be exactly 270.

The only scenario for Trump that seems like it has a chance of working is if he flips Arizona and then doesn't lose Pennsylvania. So, then at that point, Biden doesn't get the 270 I think, and then we're talking about Trump winning. But that doesn't sound likely to me. Who knows, but if the traditional people who are usually authoritative about these things. They sound extremely confident.

- Demetri Kofinas:** 26:17 That have always been wrong.
- New Speaker: 26:18 Yeah, but no, they sound extremely confident that they're at least going to get a result that is favorable to them in Pennsylvania.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 26:26 I wonder if we'll ever stop taking official numbers for granted because it just gives us a false sense of security and certainty, and we need that in order to operate our brains.
- Matt Taibbi:** 26:35 I firmly believe that by the way. That's important. But anyway, go ahead.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 26:39 Yeah, well you covered Wall Street. So, you would know that for sure. So, let's actually for the purpose of speculation, let's assume that Biden wins.
- Matt Taibbi:** 26:46 Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Demetri Kofinas:** 26:46 It also doesn't seem clear yet whether the Republicans are going to retain the Senate. Everyone says that they are, but I know that David Perdue's race against John Ossoff in Georgia potentially could flip. That's kind of the pathway the Democrats have. But let's assume that the Republicans get the Senate, which means we're going to enter into a period of divided government. That's for sure. I wonder how that's going to impact Biden's agenda. I also wonder to what degree they may welcome it because it'll be a lot easier for them not to be held accountable for their promises and to sort of keep the base of the Democratic party, the real base, which I think diverges from their template, at bay. I wonder what implication this is going to have for Nancy Pelosi. So, I'm curious, what are your thoughts? Let's say we have Biden in the executive. The Democrats control the Congress, albeit having lost I think seven seats or something like that net, and the Republicans retaining the Senate.
- Matt Taibbi:** 27:46 I mean, I think it's a perfect scenario for the Democrats because it absolves them of the responsibility to do any of the difficult kinds of governing that their ostensible base wants of them while they'll be able to seamlessly continue doing the things they've always really wanted to do, like enhance the military budget, go to war in places, make sure that corporate tax loopholes aren't closed, deliver bailouts. They'll have plenty of juice to get all of those things done, but it's things like canceling student debt or taking anti-trust action against tech monopolies. That's the kind of stuff they will not even have to answer questions about thinking of doing as long as they don't have the Senate.
- Matt Taibbi:** 28:37 So for me personally, I always thought people like Nancy Pelosi were much better or more comfortable in the position that she's been in, which is being an opposition that doesn't really have to oppose anything or do anything. I mean, it's performative, and they're good at that.

Demetri Kofinas: 28:59 Well, about the tech platforms, I should say our mystery guest was supposed to be Matt Stoller. But because of some technical issues we've had here, that may not happen. I had written out some questions for Matt that I wanted us to discuss, the three of us, and one of them had to do with the tech platforms. Well, first of all, that raised an important point, which is that Facebook and Twitter in particular featured prominently in this election with suppression of news. When Trump came out and said he won the election, Twitter censored that tweet, and I also saw a bunch of other... I have some screenshots of censoring both Democrat and Republican-

Matt Taibbi: 29:35 Neera Tanden got censored.

Demetri Kofinas: 29:36 Yeah, I saw that. Yeah. I forget. She said something like, "Biden is winning Michigan," or something like that and she got censored.

Matt Taibbi: 29:42 Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Demetri Kofinas: 29:44 That's so freaky to me, man, that we have private corporations running public squares, the primary spaces where we come to political consensus, and they are making decisions about what to allow and what not to allow. And their defenders say that they have every right to do that because they're a private company. Rather than looking at the context which is that their private company facilitating a public space.

Matt Taibbi: 30:07 Well, it's even worse than that I would argue because they are private companies that got called into The Hill after Trump got elected, and overtly threatened with increased regulation by people like Senator Mark Warner, Macy Hirono, Hawaii, and basically these companies were told... Most of these companies had long histories of not wanting to be in the fact checking or political content moderation game. Mark Zuckerberg right before the 2016 election was saying, "We're not a news organization. We're a tech company." And then they get hauled in by the Senate. They get ordered, "Where is your plan for preventing the fomenting of discord?" That's the phrase that they use. Told if they don't do that, there's going to be tax penalties and all kinds of other things. They suddenly have to enter into partnerships with the FBI and groups like The Atlantic Council. The FBI calls them private sector partnerships now.

Matt Taibbi: 31:16 So they're being advised on what is and what is not fake news by groups full of former intelligence officials and big corporate donors and overseas donors-

Demetri Kofinas: 31:27 Partisan officials.

Matt Taibbi: 31:28 Yeah. Partisan officials. And suddenly they're like mad interfering in the publication of private news media. I think that's a clear First Amendment issue. It's not just private companies acting on their own accord. This is a partnership that has to be understood that way.

Demetri Kofinas: 31:48 So where does this lead us? I do want to bring us back to some of the issues around governance, but let's stay with this a bit. Where do you think this takes us? Is this going to become a more permanent feature of our social landscape, like surveillance did after 9/11?

Matt Taibbi: 32:01 Yeah. I think so. And this was the reason that I struggled with even the possibility of voting for the Democrats is because I think that this is going to lead to essentially an ongoing kind of quasi censorship regime. Because remember, they could've gone a couple of ways with these tech companies. They could've insisted on breaking up their monopolistic control of news distribution, which would've limited pretty significantly the possibility of spreading both foreign misinformation and fake news and all that stuff. But they didn't do that. They specifically kept this kind of oligopoly of tech firms in place, and they're all imposing rules that are completely subjective and clearly kind of go in the direction of we're going to use the standard of what would the Washington Post consider real news as what we're going to censor and not censor. And the problem is those companies, those traditional arbiters of the fact and authorities have their own politic views.

Matt Taibbi: 33:10 I mean, the other day I wrote an article where I was going to talk about why I didn't want to vote for either party in this election, and I thought about the headline. And the headline was going to be Vote for Neither. But I knew that that would actually trigger Twitter's policy against discouraging people from voting. So, I had to change the headline.

Demetri Kofinas: 33:31 Do you think that really would've triggered that?

Matt Taibbi: 33:33 Yeah. No. I know exactly. I've spoken to the people at the company about what their rules are in terms of why they step in. One of the things they are big into is any news that suggests that people not take real precautions during the pandemic. Another one was anything that encouraged people not to vote or gave them false reasons not to vote. Like a classic example would be a news item that told them that a certain polling place was closed. Now I didn't think that my stance fell into that category, but I could see it being misinterpreted that way. So, I backed off.

Demetri Kofinas: 34:10 Clearly now because it's your opinion.

Matt Taibbi: 34:11 It's my opinion, but that's the problem is that we're living in this environment where people are going to have to start weighing stuff like that and what people are going to back off from the line because they don't want to be taken off these platforms.

Demetri Kofinas: 34:25 So what does that mean for people like you and me, and especially you because you're one of the most opinionated journalists that I follow? So how does this impact our work?

Matt Taibbi: 34:36 I think it's significant because when Alex Jones first got kicked off, the first thing I had thought of was all of these kind of hashtag resistance "liberals" who were cheering because ding dong, the witch is dead. We finally got rid of this horrible person. But what they're not thinking of is we just replaced one system of speech regulation that had been built up over hundreds of years. I mean, it took forever to get us to this place where the courts decided issues like libel and slander and that sort of stuff. It was a flawed system, but it was a pretty good system. It worked. And we just changed it in a heartbeat for a new one where corporate tech overlords who are not accountable, not elected, not transparent

make decisions basically behind closed doors about who gets to be distributed and who doesn't. And everybody loves that.

- Matt Taibbi:** 35:33 Right away you could see what the end game of that is. It's going to start with Alex Jones. Then they're going to slowly move in the borders to start including other people, and then they're going to take on not just people but themes, like QAnon, right?
- Demetri Kofinas:** 35:47 Yeah.
- Matt Taibbi:** 35:48 Even within QAnon, they expanded the definition of what was impermissible there. They started off with encouraging violence, and then they expanded it into anything that was tied to real world harm, which is like an impossibly vague standard. So, for people like me, let's say that I have an opinion that the New York Post story that they ran about Hunter Biden, that I don't think it should be censored and that I think it's a legitimate news story in some way, I could see myself being bounced from these platforms even if I'm not saying that I believe the story or think it's that important. Other journalists, and I've talked about this with other journalists, we all worry about it now.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 36:36 Yeah. Well, ironically those of us who thought that it was a bad idea for Alex Jones to be taken off of YouTube, I was one of those people, I think many people, a fraction of people, but a vocal minority of people saw that as kind of closet fascism.
- Matt Taibbi:** 36:52 Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Demetri Kofinas:** 36:52 Ironically. Not that YouTube's actions were somehow fascist, but that those of us who were opposed to that... And the same would be true with the Hunter Biden story. I stayed away from that story. I didn't have the nerve to even get involved in it because of all the pretenses associated with it. But it was another example of something where it was clearly newsworthy, and yet no one wanted to touch it.
- Matt Taibbi:** 37:13 Yeah. I did the same thing. So, I did a whole big thing on it, like on the media response to it, and then I went back through all the publicly available things that were known about it. And then I also did some additional reporting talking to people in Ukraine. But I didn't touch any of the stuff that was actually in the emails because I wanted to say, "Here's what we know for sure before we get into the issue of what they're reporting." Right?
- Demetri Kofinas:** 37:39 Yeah.
- Matt Taibbi:** 37:39 But just to do that, people will say, "Okay. You're a closet Trumper. You're doing this because you love Trump." And it's not that. What worries me is the idea of suppressing a legitimate news story because once they did that once, they're going to just keep narrowing the perimeters until finally they're going to make the argument that anything that isn't within the lane of kind of mainstream milk toast CNN reportability is like somehow illegitimate. Every time they make the argument that this is something as foreign disinformation, they also narrow the perimeters because they can always subjectively argue that X, Y, or Z content

aids Putin or some other foreign actor in helping so discord or whatever it is. So, I'm afraid of these standards because they can easily be applied to people like you or me.

- Demetri Kofinas:** 38:40 Yeah. So, to that effect, do you see because Stoller, like I said, he was supposed to come on. I read some of his more recent stuff, and he's more optimistic on a Biden administration than I would've expected. And I think the reason for that, one of them I think has to do with what he thinks Biden's ideology is versus his voting record, which expressing his pragmatism as a representative of Delaware. But do you think that because this is such a unifying bipartisan issue, just like China, for example, do you think that this is something Republicans and Democrats can come together on in the next four years where we might actually see some hearings to address some of the stuff that came out of the Cicilline Report?
- Matt Taibbi:** 39:21 What report?
- Demetri Kofinas:** 39:23 The House Anti-Trust Subcommittee chaired by Congressman Cicilline which recently came out with its report on large technology platforms.
- Matt Taibbi:** 39:31 Oh. Right, yes. The one that concluded that Facebook and all those companies, they fit the definition of monopolies, right?
- Demetri Kofinas:** 39:38 Yeah, exactly.
- Matt Taibbi:** 39:39 So I doubt it. This is my primary worry, and I think Matt Stoller is probably right in his assessment of what Biden's actual political leanings are. But he played along. I didn't hear him complaining about any of these big changes that were taking place in the last year. He piled on with all the rest of them when there was all this talk of foreign subversion involving other people on the ticket. So, yeah, that's what worries me. I mean, I think the Republicans are going to focus on something that is harder to prove, which is that the new changes in the information landscape are designed specifically to suppress Conservative thought, which I don't think is exactly right. I think it's much more that they're looking to try to eliminate speech kind of across the spectrum, including Jacobin got locked out of its account for a couple of things before the election. Satire, like the Babylon B, obviously that's Conservative. They've had some issues, but sites like the World Socialist website, in some of those hearings, Google essentially admitted that it had been criticized for de-ranking the World Socialist's website.
- Matt Taibbi:** 41:06 So I don't think that there's going to be any bipartisan energy that's going to get together to help prevent the next phasing out of QAnon or the World Socialist website. I see that as being opposite to what the bipartisan consensus would do.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 41:25 I bet they are going to come together to make sure no one like Trump ever gets elected again.
- Matt Taibbi:** 41:28 Well, that's very possible. Right. Or maybe not because what's interesting is that this new version of the Democratic party that so enthusiastically welcomed in

the kind of Lincoln Project type Republican and David Frum and Bill Kristol, all those neocons. But where's the room that's left for the Republican party? If they're smart, again, they will lean into the whole populace angle that Trump turned out to be kind of a phony at, but they will lean into the class aspect of it and find somebody who can play that role a little bit better. So, I don't know. I worry that the Democrats are essentially going to become the representative of the old two party state, and the Republicans are going to have to reinvent themselves as something else.

- Demetri Kofinas:** 42:22 That's interesting because I was actually... So, these are a few of the questions that I want to ask you, but we're going to move it into the overtime for it, Matt. But one of them is what does a post-Trump Republican party look like? First of all, what's going to happen to Trump? That's a really open question. Is he going to be indicted? Is he going to be prosecuted for anything? Is he going to be pardoned by a Biden administration? Is he going to go and start a media company? Is he going to be basically like a political leader in exile because we're kind of like a Banana Republic? So he's going to be out in a third country agitating.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 42:52 I also feel like the real future of the Democratic party is a far more populace, as you pointed out, socialist type party, and people that are aligned with that vision are people like AOC and Bernie and others. And AOC really knows how to use social media. I mean, she is like made for this time. So, I want to ask you about that.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 43:12 I also wonder what's going to happen to Nancy Pelosi? Is she going to survive the next four years? But I'm going to save those and other questions for the overtime, Matt.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 43:20 For anyone how is new to the program, Hidden Forces is listener supported. We don't accept advertisers or commercial sponsors. The entire show is funded from top to bottom by listeners like you. If you want access to the second part of my conversation with Matt, as well as the transcripts and rundowns to this episode and every other episode we've ever done, head over to Patreon.com/HiddenForces. There's also a link in the summary page to this episode with instructions on how to connect the overtime feed to your phone so that you can listen to these extra discussions just like you listen to the regular podcast.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 43:56 Matt, stick around. We're going to move the second part of our conversation into the subscriber overtime.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 44:02 Today's episode of Hidden Forces was recorded in New York City. For more information about this week's episode or if you want easy access to related programming, visit our website at HiddenForces.io and subscribe to our free email list. If you want access to overtime segments, episode transcripts, and show rundowns full of links and detailed information related to each and every episode, check out our premium subscription available through the Hidden Forces website or through our Patreon page at Patreon.com/HiddenForces.

Demetri Kofinas:

44:40

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