

Internet censorship goes beyond Google

Facebook, Youtube, other tech giants launch joint, state-backed censorship programs

By Zac Corrigan
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The *World Socialist Web Site* has launched a campaign against state-corporate censorship of the Internet after a change in search algorithms announced by Google in April, in the guise of combating "fake news", resulted in a major drop in readership for leading progressive, anti-war and socialist websites. The WSWS itself was hardest hit, losing more than two-thirds of its traffic coming from Google search results.

However, Internet censorship extends far beyond Google. Recent announcements by Facebook and others indicate that virtually all the world's largest tech firms, in close collaboration with governments around the world, are engaged in a coordinated effort to clamp down on Internet speech.

Following on the heels of the April 25 announcement by Google Vice President Ben Gomes (titled "Our latest quality improvements for Search"), Facebook Vice President Adam Mosseri announced an equivalent program on June 30 in the form of an update to Facebook's own News Feed algorithm.

The Orwellian language of these two statements is remarkably similar. Mosseri's memo, titled "Showing More Informative Links in News Feed", states that "a tiny group of people on Facebook" are sharing "low quality content", "sensationalism", and "misinformation". The updated algorithm will "deprioritize" these "problematic", "low quality" posts in order to "surface" better content. (By comparison, Gomes wrote that "a small set of queries" are returning "unsubstantiated conspiracy theories", and that Google's new algorithm will "demote low-quality content", "fake news" and "misleading content", in order to "surface more high-quality content".)

In other words, like Google, Facebook will no longer serve as an ostensibly unbiased platform to connect people and information, but will openly take on the role of gatekeeper, judging the "quality" of information and deciding what ideas will and will not be available to its users.

But even these measures are apparently too little. August 1 saw the first meeting of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), comprised of Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter, YouTube (which is owned by Google) and Snapchat. This time, the companies set out to vanquish not the bogeyman of "fake news", but rather "terrorists and violent extremists". UK Home Secretary Amber Rudd and US Acting Secretary of Homeland Security Elaine Duke attended the meeting.

The June 26 memo announcing the formation of the GIFCT makes no bones about the program's ties to imperialist governments, citing the participation of the European Union, the UK "and other governments," the G7, the United Nations Security Council, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (a Washington think-tank connected to intelligence agencies), the Anti-Defamation League, as well as unnamed "counter-terrorism experts," "academics and other companies."

A major project of the GIFCT is its Shared Industry Hash Database. Using this tool, content that is flagged by one firm as "terrorist" or "violent extremist," etc., is automatically censored on all the others. For its part, YouTube has deployed artificial intelligence to automatically flag "extremist" content on behalf of the group, with no need for human intervention. YouTube boasts in an August 1 blog post that "over 75 percent of

the videos we've removed for violent extremism over the past month were taken down before receiving a single human flag," and "in many cases our systems have proven more accurate than humans at flagging videos that need to be removed."

The premise of this program is that terrorism spreads not because of imperialist war, and in particular the active funding and arming of backward groups by imperialist governments, but rather because people can be dazzled by mind-altering extremist propaganda on the Internet faster than it can be taken down.

Given that Google's assault on "fake news" has resulted in the blacklisting of anti-war and socialist websites, there can be little doubt as to the real target of such "extremist" censorship. Indeed, the results so far of Youtube's AI dragnet give some indication of what is to come.

Chris Woods, the director of the organization Airwars, which documents the effects of international airstrikes, told the *New York Times* that YouTube removed around a dozen of its videos earlier this month and threatened to remove its YouTube channel entirely. Middle East Eye (MEE) reports that several of its own YouTube videos have likewise been removed. These include drone footage of fighting in Mosul, where Airwars documented the deaths of more than 5,000 civilians as a result of US-led attacks between February and June of this year.

Journalist Alexa O'Brien, who covered the 2013 court-martial of whistleblower Chelsea Manning, told MEE that videos used as evidence in that trial have also been removed. (Some of the above-listed videos have since been reinstated.)

As private entities, firms like Facebook and Google are subject to zero public oversight, and in any case they can make no claim to be a neutral arbiters of information. They are connected by a thousand threads to the oligarchy and the military-state-intelligence apparatus. According to Opensecrets.org, Facebook Inc. has spent more than \$8 million each year since 2014 lobbying the US federal government, and \$5 million so far in 2017. Among Internet firms, only Google's parent company Alphabet, and sometimes Amazon, have spent more. The \$70 billion net worth of Facebook's 33-year-old founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg places him among the very richest individuals on the planet, alongside Microsoft's Bill

Gates (\$84 billion) and Amazon's Jeff Bezos (\$81 billion).

It should also be recalled that Facebook, Google, and Microsoft, as well as Apple, Yahoo!, and others, were implicated in the massive state spying operation revealed by whistleblower Edward Snowden.

And yet, like Google, Facebook has taken on the character of a global public utility. The social media platform is the world's third most-visited Internet site (after Google and YouTube) and it is linked to by more sites than any other. As of June, it has more than 2 billion monthly active users, despite being banned in China. It is a main gateway to news and information for a large percentage of the planet.

The roll out of these worldwide corporate-state censorship programs takes place under conditions of intensifying social, geo-political and economic crisis throughout the globe. Billions of people are searching for answers to the life-and-death questions of war, inequality and dictatorship. The suppression of oppositional viewpoints is an ever more crucial prop for a moribund social order—capitalism—which offers no progressive way forward.

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