

Governments and corporations escalate Internet censorship and attacks on free speech

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The year 2018 has opened with an international campaign to censor the Internet. Throughout the world, technology giants are responding to the political demands of governments by cracking down on freedom of speech, which is inscribed in the US Bill of Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, and countless international agreements.

Bloomberg, the financial news service, published a blog post titled “Welcome to 2018, the Year of Censored Social Media,” which began with the observation, “This year, don’t count on the social networks to provide its core service: an uncensored platform for every imaginable view. The censorship has already begun, and it’ll only get heavier.”

Developments over the past week include:

- On January 1, the German government began implementation of its “Network Enforcement Law,” which threatens social media companies with fines of up to €50 million if they do not immediately remove content deemed objectionable. Both German trade groups and the United Nations have warned that the law would incentivize technology companies to ban protected speech.

- On January 3, French President Emmanuel Macron vowed to introduce a ban on what he called “fake news” during election cycles, in a further crackdown on free speech on top of the draconian measures implemented under the state of emergency. The moves by France and Germany have led to renewed calls for a censorship law applying to the entire European Union.

- On December 28, the *New York Times* reported that Facebook had deleted the account of Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the Chechen Republic, nominally because he had been added to a US sanctions list. As the American Civil Liberties Union pointed out, this creates a precedent for giving the US government essentially free rein to block the freedom of expression

all over the world, simply by putting individuals on an economic sanctions list.

- This week, Iranian authorities blocked social media networks, including Instagram, which were being used to organize demonstrations against inequality and unemployment.

- Facebook has continued its crackdown on Palestinian Facebook accounts, and has removed over 100 accounts at the request of Israeli officials.

These moves come in the wake of the decision by the Trump administration to abolish net neutrality, which gives technology companies free rein to censor and block access to websites and services.

In August, the *World Socialist Web Site* first reported that Google was censoring left-wing, anti-war, and progressive websites. When it implemented changes to its search algorithms, Google claimed that they were politically-neutral, aimed only at elevating “more authoritative content” and demoting “blatantly misleading, low quality, offensive or downright false information.”

Now, no one can claim that the major technology giants are not carrying out a widespread and systematic campaign of online censorship, in close and active coordination with powerful states and intelligence agencies.

In the five months since the WSWs released its findings, Google’s censorship of left-wing, anti-war, and progressive web sites has only intensified.

Even though the *World Socialist Web Site*’s readership from direct entries and other web sites has increased, Google’s effort to isolate the WSWs through the systematic removal of its articles from search results has continued to depress its search traffic. Search traffic to the WSWs, which fell more than any other left-wing site, has continued to trend down, with a total reduction of 75 percent, compared to

a 67 percent decline in August.

Alternet.org's search traffic is now down 71 percent, compared to 63 percent in August. Consortium News's search traffic is down 72 percent, compared to 47 percent in August. Other sites, including Global Research and Truthdig, continue to see significantly depressed levels of search traffic.

In its statement to commemorate the beginning of the new year, the *World Socialist Web Site* noted, "The year 2018—the bicentenary of Marx's birth—will be characterized, above all, by an immense intensification of... class conflict around the world." This prediction has been confirmed in the form of mass demonstrations in Iran, the wildcat strike by auto workers in Romania, and growing labour militancy throughout Europe and the Middle East.

The ruling elites all over the world are meeting this resurgence of class struggle with an attempt to stifle and suppress freedom of expression on the Internet, under the false pretence of fighting "fake news" and "foreign propaganda."

The effort to muzzle social opposition by the working class must be resisted.

On January 16, 2018, the *World Socialist Web Site* will host a live video discussion on Internet censorship, featuring journalist and Truthdig contributor Chris Hedges and WSWs International Editorial Board Chairperson David North.

The discussion will explore the political context of the efforts to censor the Internet and abolish net neutrality, examine the pretexts used to justify the suppression of free speech (i.e., "fake news"), and discuss political strategies to defend democratic rights. Hedges and North will also field questions from on-line listeners.

We urge all of our readers to register to participate in this immensely important discussion, and to help publicize it to friends and co-workers.

The webinar will be streamed live by the WSWs on YouTube and Facebook on Tuesday, January 16 at 7:00 pm (EST). For more information, time zone conversions and to register, click here.

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