

Twitter censors German satirical magazine

By Johannes Stern
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Last week the message service Twitter blocked the account of the satirical magazine *Titanic* and deleted a tweet. The magazine had used the term “barbarian hordes” to parody a tweet by the deputy leader of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), Beatrix von Storch.

Earlier in the week, von Storch, an AfD parliamentary deputy, railed against “barbaric, Muslim, hordes of men seeking to gang rape,” whereupon Twitter blocked her account for 12 hours.

After 48 hours, Twitter lifted the suspension of *Titanic* magazine’s account but, according to the *Titanic* editorial staff in an official statement on January 5, “at least five tweets from the months of January and December remain blocked in Germany.” The tweets include “reports on [Austrian Prime Minister] Sebastian Kurz, the police in Saxony and Munich and some from the fake Beatrix von Storch.” The magazine intends to “continue to defend itself against blocks that affect *Titanic* and other satirists following the implementation of the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG).”

The blocking of satirical sites confirms warnings made by the *World Socialist Web Site*. Under the pretext of combating “fake news” and “hate messages,” the NetzDG drafted by Justice Minister Heiko Maas (SPD), and adopted by the grand coalition of the Social Democratic Party and the conservative Union parties, serves to massively regulate and censor the Internet.

Last Wednesday, the German Association of Journalists (DJV) called on Twitter “to immediately end any form of censorship of the *Titanic* satirical magazine.” DJV national chairman Frank Überall described the action by Twitter as “anticipatory obedience to prevent possible fines under the NetzDG.” A private enterprise based in the US is determining “the range of freedom of the press and

opinion in Germany.” This, Überall exclaimed, amounted to “selling out basic rights!”

The NetzDG law obliges operators of Internet platforms with more than 2 million users to delete or block “obviously unlawful content within 24 hours of receiving a complaint.” A period of seven days applies for “unlawful content.” If platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat violate the rules, they face fines of up to 50 million euros.

There are hardly any limits laid down for multibillion-strong corporations, which cooperate closely with the state, when it comes to censoring the Internet. According to its own data, Facebook had already deleted 15,000 posts monthly before the NetzDG came into effect on January 1.

The German censorship law is part of a far-reaching global campaign to control the Internet. In the US, the Trump government abolished net neutrality in mid-December. Earlier this year, French President Emmanuel Macron announced a ban on “fake news” during election campaigns. Meanwhile, the European Union is preparing to set up an anti-fake news agency to censor the Internet en masse.

Justice Minister Maas’ insistence that NetzDG serves the struggle against the far right is a flagrant lie. Propaganda terms such as “fake news” and “hate speech” are used primarily to suppress and banish from the Internet political news and views that contradict the official political line of governments, the military and intelligence agencies. Since the end of April, Google has been censoring leftist and progressive websites in close consultation with German government circles. The most notable victim is the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The ruling class is pursuing the same goal with NetzDG. Representatives of the German government have vehemently defended the law against mounting opposition.

The new censorship law is good and right and must be implemented, declared SPD parliamentary leader Andrea Nahles in the *Bild am Sonntag*: “We have to bring more responsibility to the Internet, it cannot be a free for all. It has nothing to do with censorship.”

Although Germany’s nominal opposition parties express criticism of the existing form of the NetzDG, they generally agree with censorship of the Internet. “The law is all messed up and should be replaced by a decent one,” said FDP Secretary General Nicola Beer. The Green Party chair Simone Peters spoke of the “need for tweaks” in the fight against hatred and agitation on the Internet. Platforms like Twitter have to be “held accountable without assuming the role of judges.”

Even sections of the Left Party openly back censorship of the Internet. A comment titled “Free hate is not free Internet” in *Neues Deutschland* on January 6, declared: “Leaving aside the quality of the law now passed—the step was correct and important.” Companies like Facebook and Twitter had already “decided before the entry into force of the NetzDG what was deleted and who was blocked, based on their own rules.”

The AfD has protested against the censorship of the tweet by von Storch and is cynically trying to portray itself as a guardian of democratic rights. In reality, the party is not opposed to censorship and the control of the Internet. The intrigues of the far right are well known. They spread their vile propaganda, claiming the right to free expression, while working closely with establishment parties and the state to suppress progressive and left-wing viewpoints.

The German ruling class is currently preparing to introduce an extreme right-wing and militaristic government and fears, above all, growing socialist sentiment in the population. In February 2016, a survey by the YouGov research institute revealed that 45 percent of respondents in Germany have a positive opinion of socialism and just 26 percent a negative one. Regarding capitalism, the result was exactly the opposite: only about one in four (26 percent) had a positive attitude and almost half (47 percent) of all respondents expressed a negative attitude.

The radicalization of workers and young people and the possibility of organising their protests and strikes via the Internet, as was the case during the Egyptian

Revolution of 2011, is being followed closely by the bourgeoisie.

Recently, the government-related Science and Politics Foundation (SWP) published a study titled “Urban Spaces. Protests, World politics.” It stated that “Policymakers” and “Experts” increasingly see the occupation and blockade of public squares, streets or buildings as a global political challenge. ...This “politicization of the street” is reinforced by the accelerated digital and frequent (audio) visual dissemination of protest activities through social media.”

Open questions and “challenges” are “not only aspects of data protection, political regulation and national jurisdiction in cases of conflict, but also the control of certain algorithms with which platforms work,” the foundation wrote.

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