

Facebook announces latest step in censorship campaign, prioritizing “local news”

By Will Morrow
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Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced January 29 that the social media platform will prioritize news from “local sources” in the News Feed displayed to users. The announcement is the third in a creeping roll-out of updates announced by Facebook since the start of the year aimed at censoring online information.

On January 12, Facebook reported that it would deprioritize news and political content—that is, display them less often—in favor of “personal moments.” One week later, Zuckerberg announced that of the news articles that are shown to users, the News Feed will prioritize those published by what it called “trustworthy” sources, meaning pro-establishment outlets such as the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

Zuckerberg’s post announcing the most recent change made little effort to conceal its political motivation. It would serve to “turn down the temperature on the more divisive issues and instead focus on concrete local issues,” he wrote, so that the population can “all make progress together.”

Presumably this means more information about school bake sales and sporting events, and less about the Trump administration, the global crisis of capitalism, and the growing danger of world war.

Zuckerberg apparently regrets the great technological advance that created the “World Wide Web” and made it possible for people on every continent to communicate with each other rapidly and without corporate and government censors controlling what they say. He prefers the posture of the ostrich with its head stuck firmly in the ground.

The post is filled with the Orwellian newspeak used to describe all of Facebook’s censorship measures. Walling users off from being able to read about events outside their immediate vicinity will help “build

community—both on and offline,” and ensure that Facebook “isn’t just fun but also good for your well-being and for society.”

The Facebook billionaire does not want people to have access to unfiltered information on such questions as the United States government preparation to wage nuclear war against North Korea, Russia and China, government censorship of the Internet and spying on the population, mass demonstrations against immigration raids, police violence, workers strikes, or details about growing levels of social inequality, including the fact that five multi-billionaires (Zuckerberg is one) own as much wealth as half the world’s population.

While the change will initially apply to US Facebook accounts, Zuckerberg states that the “goal is to expand to more countries this year.” Pointing to further censorship announcements still to come, Zuckerberg concludes with the note that he is “looking forward to sharing more updates soon.”

There are more than 2 billion Facebook users around the world, the majority of whom access news via the social media platform. Approximately 45 percent of the American population, or 145 million people, access the news on Facebook—the highest news readership rate of any social media platform—according to a Pew Research Center study from November 2017.

Millions of people turned to independent and alternative news publications via social media precisely because it provided a means to circumvent the establishment media, which have become popularly and correctly identified as pro-government propaganda outlets. According to a 2016 Pew Research poll, the American population’s trust in the media had fallen to 32 percent in that year, the lowest level on record.

By confining users to “local news,” the social media

giants are seeking to wind back the clock to the days when the population had access to the news mainly through local newspapers, and could find about world events only through the officially sanctioned corporate press.

Zuckerberg's announcement explains that publishers will be promoted according to how many users in a "tight geographical area" click on links to their articles. This means of surfacing content explicitly demotes web sites which by their nature are oriented to a national or international readership, such as the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS), which is directed to the world working class.

It also enforces the monopoly of giant media conglomerates, which own the vast majority of smaller, localised publications. The concentration of newspaper ownership has developed enormously over the past two decades, via an ongoing process of mergers and acquisitions. According to newspaperownership.com, a handful of top private media corporations collectively owned 1,449 newspapers in 2014, up from 1,128 just 10 years earlier. Many more local newspapers have simply closed their doors.

Earlier this month, Facebook announced that it was testing a new section of its mobile phone app called "Today in," which will include only local news, events and announcements. The test is being conducted in only six US cities so far. All news publishers who appear there must first be approved and vetted by Facebook's News Partnerships team.

Facebook's latest announcement also coincided with Google's January 26 restricted release of a new smartphone app, Bulletin, to promote what Google calls "hyperlocal" news, which it defines as news "about your community, for your community."

The application will allow users to publish stories directly to the web through Google, without the need to create their own blog, web page, or use social media. What this will mean in practise is that Google will have even more direct control over the hosting of independent news content not vetted by the state-sanctioned, corporate-controlled media outlets.

Google is already engaged in systematically blacklisting socialist and left-wing news publications, particularly the WSWS, by rigging results from its search engine to block links to specified web domains. This change was initiated by Google in April 2017

under the banner of combating "fake news" and promoting what it called "authoritative" content.

The purpose of the ongoing changes was made clear in a post by Zuckerberg on Wednesday accompanying the company's latest earnings report. The report showed that Facebook use actually declined for the first time over the past year, a fact that Zuckerberg welcomes in his post. Zuckerberg states that Facebook is taking action to demote "viral videos," because such material—which includes videos of police violence and war crimes—is not "good for people's well-being and society." This argument complements the McCarthyite campaign being waged by the Democratic Party, intelligence agencies and technology companies, labelling all political opposition in the United States as the outcome of Russian influence and "fake news" promoted by the Kremlin.

The post further notes that Facebook is using artificial intelligence to closely monitor every photo, video, message and post on the platform, to "understand all the content on Facebook," in what amounts to surveillance on billions of people. (See: "From Facebook to Policebook")

The avalanche of new measures for mass political censorship and surveillance, now being released on a weekly and even daily basis, testifies to the correctness and urgency of the *World Socialist Web Site*'s open letter to socialist, left-wing and anti-war organizations, individuals and web sites, "For an International Coalition against Internet Censorship." We urge our readers to read and widely share the letter and to take up this fight.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>