

Facebook censors Telesur and Venezuela Analysis

By Andrea Lobo
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Monday evening, the English language page of the television network *Telesur*, which is published by the Venezuelan government, was taken down by Facebook in a direct act of censorship of content critical of US government policy. After administrators received a notice that the *Telesur* English page had violated Facebook's "Terms of Use," the page reappeared two days later, with Facebook claiming, in an unserious and unconvincing manner, "that there was instability on the platform, which caused this problem, but now everything should be in order."

The Facebook page of another media outlet aligned politically with the Venezuelan government, *Venezuela Analysis*, which is based in New York, was also temporarily taken down on August 9, only four days before, for allegedly violating "Facebook Pages Terms." The site's administrators, however, have not received any explanation about the suspension.

Since last year, Facebook has been carrying out a campaign to censor information and perspectives at odds with the official narrative of the US government by expunging, intimidating and threatening users that publish such content. Facebook has justified these actions by charging users with arbitrary terms like being "divisive," "extremist" and "inauthentic," while not presenting any evidence to substantiate these charges.

The administrator of the popular Facebook page *Revolution News*, James Wood, received a "publishing authorization" request—a threat to shut down the page unless Wood confirmed his country location by August 28—seconds after posting an article about the removal of the *Telesur* English page. Several other Facebook pages that publish content critical of US policy, including *Anti-Media*, have reported receiving the same notice.

On July 31, Facebook announced that it was deleting 32 pages, including an event page promoting an anti-fascist demonstration and the page of a group organizing a rally

against Trump's separation of undocumented families, both in Washington D.C. The Atlantic Council, a think tank tied to the US intelligence apparatus that has been working closely with Facebook in conducting its censorship campaign, charged, without presenting any evidence, that the pages removed sought to advance "Russian information operations" and "to trigger standoffs between genuine Americans, bringing the risk of real-life violence from false stories."

Such censorship measures, however, seek only to block the development of opposition to US militarism, the government's fascistic attacks against immigrants, police violence, inequality, and other forms of social reaction.

While some of the pages censored by Facebook pertained to far-right groups, such as that of Alex Jones in the United States and accounts of the Free Brazil Movement, these steps seek fundamentally to establish the precedent for attacking freedom of speech and expanding censorship against left-wing political views and movements.

On the same day *Telesur* was suspended, Trump signed into law the National Defense Authorization Act, which defines a "United States-based foreign media outlet" as one that "produces or distributes video programming ... that is transmitted, or is intended for transmission, by a multichannel video programming distributor to consumers in the United States," suggesting that the outlet doesn't need to be physically based in the US.

It adds that such an outlet would be considered a foreign agent and be required to provide the Federal Communications Commission with a description of its relationship with any foreign government.

News commentators have suggested that the Qatar-based *Al Jazeera* will be the first target. However, in the case of *Telesur*, US Attorney General Jeff Sessions received a letter from South Carolina Republican Congressman Joe Wilson in February requesting that he

investigate whether *Telesur* can be required to share its PDVSA and its subsidiaries and rights to exploit a foreign agent. Last November, the network *RT America*, which is also critical of US foreign policy and receives funding from the Russian government, was forced to register as a foreign agent.

While not an independent media outlet, *Telesur* has reported critically on the catastrophes wrought by US foreign policy around the world. Currently, the Trump administration is escalating the use of trade war measures, economic sanctions, regime-change operations and military confrontations to advance US geopolitical interests worldwide, pushing entire economies into the abyss, including in Venezuela, Turkey, and Iran, and destroying entire societies, as in Yemen, Libya, Syria and Iraq.

Created in 2005, *Telesur* is based in Caracas, Venezuela, and is financed directly by the governments of Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Nicaragua and Uruguay. The Argentine and Ecuadorian states stopped funding the network after the election of right-wing governments more closely aligned with Washington, respectively those of Mauricio Macri and Lenín Moreno.

The censorship by Facebook of the *Chavista* media outlets comes amid an intensified campaign by Washington to undermine the Venezuelan government of Nicolás Maduro. The US government has imposed economic sanctions against the financial operations of individual military and government officials and PDVSA, the state oil company, the main source of government income, deepening the social catastrophe in the already crisis-ridden economy.

In a statement last week, *Venezuela Analysis* inferred that Facebook's suspension was a response to its recent coverage of the apparent drone assassination attempt against Maduro on August 4. Two days before being temporarily censored, the site charged the Venezuelan opposition, "its northern masters and the latter's regional puppets," with responsibility for the incident.

Meanwhile, top US administration officials have held increasingly frequent meetings this year with Latin American leaders to strengthen military ties, highlighting in each session efforts to coordinate further actions against the Maduro government, with reports that Trump himself has suggested to regional presidents a direct military intervention to overthrow the Venezuelan government.

As the crisis in Venezuela deepens, the Maduro administration has become increasingly dependent on loans from Chinese and Russian firms in exchange for

the petroleum deposits in the Orinoco River Basin, the largest in the world. Not only would US-based oil conglomerates like to regain control over these vast resources, but the Pentagon has made explicit its priority of undermining the economic interests of Beijing and Moscow in region, considering them "revisionist powers" that challenge the US-led international order.

The specific provision in the recent Defense Authorization Act calling for the identification of "foreign" media outlets that distribute content to "consumers in the United States" is significant. As opposition to capitalism, and interest in socialism and militancy grow among workers and youth in the United States, the ruling corporate and financial oligarchy fears above all a massive mobilization against the domestic and foreign policy of US imperialism.

In response, it has moved ever more aggressively to censor left-wing, progressive, socialist and anti-war media outlets, targeting, in particular, the *World Socialist Web Site*.

While this process has been spearheaded by the US intelligence and political establishment, regimes across the world, including the Maduro government in Venezuela, have been implementing their own online censorship against political opposition, with the collaboration of the same technology corporations.

This underscores the urgent and essential character of the fight against internet censorship and for the defense of all democratic rights as the international working class enters into struggle against the policies of the capitalist ruling class.

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