

NYU's Center for Social Media & Politics: A think tank for a frightened ruling class

By Elliott Murtagh
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At the end of 2019, New York University (NYU) launched an elaborate academic research center, the Center for Social Media and Politics (CSMaP), set to “examine the production, flow, and impact of social media content in the political sphere.” This new initiative is an extension of, and now houses, NYU’s Social Media and Political Participation Lab (SMaPP), launched in 2012.

The establishment of the center at NYU, a private elite university with close ties to the state, reflects the ruling class’s increasing concerns over the political effects of social media, which enable the free exchange of ideas, including growing oppositional views not found in mainstream media, and the organization of mass protests independent from bourgeois political parties and organizations.

Voicing this concern, a 2018 report published by the Atlantic Council—a leading think tank for American imperialism—summarized a US Defense Department’s Special Operations Command conference on “Sovereignty in the Information Age,” stating that “technology has democratized the ability for sub-state groups and individuals to broadcast a narrative with limited resources and virtually unlimited scope.” By contrast, “In the past, the general public had limited sources of information, which were managed by professional gatekeepers,”—meaning bourgeois media outlets, such as the *New York Times*.

CSMaP goals and research

What is striking about the work of CSMaP is that it is above all concerned with understanding how social media is and can be used during mass protests—both by protesters, and governments. CSMaP’s website explicitly states that it is focused on researching the impact of social media on politics and how it influences political attitudes and behavior. “This includes traditional political behavior such as voting, as well as ‘unconventional’ political behavior such as engaging in protests or demonstrations,” it adds.

The center is trying to understand “not just mass behavior, but elite behavior and the intersection of elite behavior and mass behavior as facilitated by social media. Does social media make it easier for mass opinion to be observed by elites?”

Further, and most revealing, CSMaP writes that it “seek[s] to understand how authoritarian regimes respond to online opposition, and how the tools they have developed in doing so are reverberating in democratic politics.” This line of research is significant due to its implications of assessing the feasibility of using authoritarian measures in blocking social opposition within so-called democracies, such as the US.

One of 37 scholarly journal articles from CSMaP, listed on its website, is the 2019 report, “Social Networks and Protest Participation: Evidence from 130 Million Twitter Users,” published in the *American Journal of Political Science* on “the role of social ties in the decision to protest.”

By examining a large dataset of geolocated tweets surrounding the 2015 protests in Paris following the *Charlie Hebdo* terrorist attack, the report offers “the first large-scale empirical support” that “individuals are

influenced by one another in social networks when deciding whether to participate in protests” and that social media networks “play a meaningful role in individuals’ protest participation.”

The study emphasizes the importance of this research due to “the worldwide wave of twenty-first-century protests” and “their role in policy change and the overthrow of governments.” Framing protests as something that need to be controlled or suppressed, the paper, in a not-so-subtle way, gives expression to the ruling class’s growing concern over international protests.

Another study from CSMaP, “Digital Dissent: An Analysis of the Motivational Contents of Tweets From an Occupy Wall Street Demonstration,” published in *Motivation Science* in 2018, investigated “the social and psychological factors that motivate participation in political protest, by focusing on [Twitter] messages written by potential protesters.”

The study “illustrates the promise of applying machine-learning techniques to analyzing new data sources, such as social media messages, to study protest activity.” It “affirms the value and viability of using social media platforms as real-time windows into the motivations of would-be protesters” by “train[ing] models that can analyze message contents as nuanced and complex as these psychological variables.” In other words, it emphasizes the need for, and opportunity to conduct, social media-based surveillance of protesters.

Who stands behind CSMaP?

The full significance of this research into the role of social media in mass protests can only be understood if one examines the scope and funders of CSMaP.

CSMaP is, by university standards, a huge undertaking. The website lists over 50 faculty members, administrators, postdoctoral researchers and students from different disciplines, including political science, computer science and biology, who work at the center. This makes CSMaP as big as or bigger than many NYU academic departments.

The center is co-directed by three NYU professors—politics professor Joshua Tucker, who is the director of NYU’s Jordan Center for the Advanced Study of Russia, a writer for the *Washington Post*’s Monkey Cage blog, and author of *Communism’s Shadow: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Political Attitudes*; politics professor Jonathan Nagler, who is the director of NYU’s Politics Data Center; and Richard Bonneau, who is a professor of biology and computer science and the director of the Center for Genomics and Systems Biology. Members of CSMaP frequently publish articles on their research in the *Washington Post*, which is owned by Jeff Bezos, the head of Amazon and the richest person in the world.

CSMaP was established with an impressive \$12 million in funding: \$5 million from the Knight Foundation, \$5 million from the Charles Koch Foundation, and additional funding from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, Craig Newmark Philanthropies, Gates Foundation, Gordon and Betty

Moore Foundation, Hewlett Foundation, Intel Corp, the US National Science Foundation and the Siegel Family Endowment.

The Charles Koch Foundation is a prominent funder of libertarian causes and the Republican Party. It was founded by and is named after Charles Koch of Koch Industries, who is one of the richest people in the world with a net worth of \$45 billion. His foundation has long been a major funder of over 300 US universities. The underlying motives of this funding were outlined clearly by Charles Koch himself in 1974. In a speech given at a private conference on “The Anti-Capitalist Mentality,” Koch stressed the “obligation to fight for the restoration of the free market and the survival of private enterprise.” He offered chillingly direct statements on the role academia should play in this:

The educational route is both the most vital and the most neglected. ... We desperately need to develop additional talent capable of doing the research and writing that undergird the popularizing of capitalist ideas. ... The educational method enables the businessman to work effectively without exposing himself to the same public criticism that the other methods, particularly politics, seem to evoke.

The Knight Foundation has a \$2.2 billion endowment and is currently headed by Alberto Imbargüen, who has been a member of the US Secretary of State’s Foreign Affairs Policy Board, the Council on Foreign Relations Board, and has sat on the boards of American Airlines, PepsiCo and AOL. The establishment of NYU’s CSMaP was part of a \$50 million investment by the Knight Foundation for researching “technology’s impact on democracy,” giving \$5 million each to five leading US universities to establish similar research centers and more than \$10 million to already established research initiatives at five other universities. These include centers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Indiana University, Stanford University, the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Wisconsin at Madison and Yale University.

The origins of CSMaP and the campaign for internet censorship

The majority of these social media research center initiatives are based on the conception that the campaign over the alleged Russian interference in the 2016 US elections must be used to escalate censorship of the internet, especially social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter.

While the work of CSMaP itself focuses on analyzing the dynamics of social media use in protests and politics, the formation of the Center emerged out of this broader push by the ruling class—under the guise of combating disinformation and protecting democracy—for internet censorship.

The formation of the Center followed the publication of five reports over the past three years by NYU Stern’s Center for Business and Human Rights on combating “fake news” and advocating ramped-up internet censorship by social media companies.

One of these reports from March of last year was entitled “Tackling Domestic Disinformation: What Social Media Companies Need to Do.” It bluntly states that “the time has come for the platforms to block content.” NYU Stern’s report from September 2019, “Disinformation and the 2020 Election: How the Social Media Industry Should Prepare”—both reports were funded by the Knight Foundation, Craig Newmark Philanthropies and George Soros’ Open Society Foundations—states that though the 2018 midterm election “did not feature much Russian interference,” foreign, and now domestic, “malign content” and disinformation are “likely to play a role” in the 2020 presidential election. Echoing the case for censorship, it states that social media companies “ought to ... not merely reduce its visibility,” but “remove the material altogether.”

In addition to warning that “unwitting Americans could be manipulated

into participating in real-world rallies and protests” through the spread of ideas on social media, the September report also warns that Iran and China may join Russia as disruptive sources of disinformation in the 2020 election, but states that “most purposely false content in the US is generated by domestic sources.” It goes on to say—in apparent disappointment—that misleading domestic content is difficult to separate from “ordinary political expression,” which is protected under the First Amendment.

Moreover, despite previously distancing itself from the call for open government censorship, the latest NYU Stern report from June 2020, “Who Moderates the Social Media Giants?” advocates for social media companies to “explore narrowly tailored government regulation,” in addition to its call for Facebook to “double the number of [content] moderators” from 15,000 to 30,000, and calling for YouTube and Twitter to follow suit.

The purpose of such “content moderators” is to censor independent journalism, while promoting “authoritative” media, such as the *New York Times*. Google, under the same pretext, modified its search algorithms to demote left-wing, antiwar, and socialist websites, foremost among them the *World Socialist Web Site*.

These discussions clearly underlay the formation of CSMaP. In a CSMaP press release, NYU President Andrew Hamilton, who takes home an estimated \$2 million every year, emphasized the need for “taming this multi-headed, regenerative digital hydra” [the internet] in order to “steady us in these dizzying and divisive times.”

A main point that needs to be emphasized in regards to this disinformation and censorship campaign, pointed out by the *World Socialist Web Site* in the November 2019 article, “The Democrats’ campaign for internet censorship: Who is to determine what are ‘lies’” is the following:

All the dishonesty of the campaign for internet censorship is contained in the failure to answer, much less consider, one central question: Who is to determine what is true and what is false? What constitutes “lies,” “deliberate and malicious lies,” “known lies,” “deliberately misleading content,” “untruthful statements” and “disinformation”?

The “authoritative” media and politicians, both Democrats and Republicans, lie constantly. They lie about the underlying motivations for their actions, dressing up imperialist crimes in the language of “human rights” or claims about “weapons of mass destruction.” All of bourgeois politics is, in fact, “deliberately misleading content,” in one form or another.

Conclusion

The push by the ruling class for internet censorship and a close examination of the role of social media in mass protests is insolubly bound up with the breakdown of capitalism and the advanced preparations for the suppression of growing unrest through dictatorial measures.

In response to the mass protest movement that swept the US and the world after the police murder of George Floyd, Trump staged an attempted military coup. The US president has also openly incited fascist violence against protesters and immigrants, and has declared that he might not leave the White House—even if he loses the elections to the Democrats’ pro-war candidate Joe Biden. The Democratic Party has offered no opposition to these crackdowns on democratic rights, instead appealing to the military and facilitating the violent repression of protests in major American cities.

Now, the US ruling class has stepped up its unsafe back-to-work and school reopening campaigns amidst the still-raging pandemic after

pouring trillions into the bailout of Wall Street and big business and after cutting off federal unemployment compensation to the working class.

What both parties fear above all is the growing reemergence of the working class internationally which poses a direct threat to the entire capitalist system. It is for this reason that millions of dollars are flowing from “philanthropic” organizations into academic think tank-like centers for studying the role of social media in protest movements and advocating for internet censorship, whose real target is not “foreign bots,” but the working class.

These developments are not unique to the US. Along with the growth of authoritarian rule and far-right tendencies, government-imposed internet shutdowns have been on the rise internationally. According to a new report by digital rights organization Access Now, there were 213 documented internet shutdowns in 2019 in 33 countries—compared to 25 in 2018—with India responsible for more than half. The report states that “fake news/hate speech” was the most common official justification for ordering shutdowns in 2019, with protests being the most common observed cause. Elaborating on these findings, the study points out:

In examining the data from 2019, it is evident that when a government says it is cutting access to restore “public safety,” in reality it could mean the government anticipates protests and may be attempting to disrupt people’s ability to organize and speak out, online or off. Similarly, a government claim that a shutdown is necessary to fight “fake news,” hate speech, or incendiary content could be an attempt to hide its efforts to control the flow of information during periods of political instability or elections.

The international rightward shift toward authoritarianism and subordination of academia to the political objectives of the ruling class must be exposed and fought on the basis of a socialist and revolutionary program. We urge all students and youth who are ready to take up this fight to join and build the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, the youth section of the Socialist Equality Party, at NYU and other colleges and universities.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>