

# Facebook establishes new censorship centre in Germany

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11 August 2017

Facebook announced Wednesday that it would open a new control centre in Essen with 500 employees. The number of workers responsible for censoring and checking content in Germany will almost double as a result. The company has thus far only one such centre in Berlin.

Facebook has gone to great lengths to cover up the work of the control centres. While the training documents and internal guidelines for the workers have been kept strictly secret, the company organised a tour of the Berlin centre for selected media outlets a month ago.

The public broadcaster WDR, *Die Zeit* and Spiegel Online were permitted to look at locked screens and ask questions of workers specially primed for the occasion in the offices of Arvato, a subsidiary of Bertelsmann, which carries out the deletions for Facebook. All three media outlets focused their subsequent reports on the difficult working conditions of the employees and presented them as being responsible merely for deleting videos of brutal beheadings and child pornography.

In fact, millions of Internet users are being systematically censored in the hermetically sealed-off offices. Reports about the deletion of critical posts and the blocking of left-wing and progressive authors have risen rapidly in recent months.

Last December, for example, a post by the satirist Leo Fischer was deleted. Fischer placed the xenophobic headline of the right-wing *Bild* newspaper, “The great debate about refugees’ perceptions of women,” alongside the same newspaper’s regular pictures of women in bikinis and took a picture of it. It was not only attacked by numerous right-wing extremists, but also deleted by Facebook, because the post allegedly breached the community’s regulations.

With the same justification, Facebook blocked

Austrian author Stephanie Sargnagel for 30 days. Her profile had been flagged by numerous right-wing and far-right users in a concerted campaign. Sargnagel had posted satirical comments against xenophobia and racism, and therefore ended up in the crosshairs of the far right and the Internet company.

Berlin-based blogger Jörg Kantel also reported that some of his posts were deleted. After the *Bild* seized on the violence surrounding the G-20 summit in Hamburg to publish unpixelated pictures of alleged rioters from Hamburg, Kantel wrote, among other comments, “Germany, a land of denunciators and surveillance. At least since 1933!” According to the blogger, Facebook deleted the post.

The list of censored authors could be extended at will. In addition, there are those who go unnoticed because they lack the prominence of the individuals involved in the cases discussed. The *Guardian* revealed on May 21 that Facebook was carrying out this work systematically. The newspaper obtained 100 training documents for the workers at the control centres and came to the conclusion that they were alarming for advocates of free speech.

While posts advocating extreme violence and brutal murder or containing insults were deemed unproblematic, the employees were ordered to immediately delete posts like “Someone shoot Trump,” because as a head of government, Trump was part of a “protected category.” Freedom of speech therefore only applies at Facebook so long as the government, which is considered worthy of protection, is not attacked.

This is an obvious violation of freedom of speech, which above all protects the population’s right to criticise the government.

The close connections between the government and the major corporation’s censorship apparatus is

especially clear in Germany. Even though on July 1 only 1.5 percent of Facebook users came from Germany, 16 percent of Facebook's 7,500 censors will work in Germany by the end of the year when the new facility is up and running. At the end of June, the federal parliament passed the so-called Network Enforcement Law, which compels companies like Facebook to fulfill the responsibilities of a censor. Without any judicial ruling, the company must delete "obviously unlawful content" within 24 hours or face a fine of up to €50 million [\$US 59 million]. The major companies are left to determine what "obviously unlawful" is.

The censoring of the Internet by the government and corporations is by no means restricted to Facebook. Google, the search engine monopoly, has disappeared entire websites from its search results, making them inaccessible to millions of readers.

This operation was also implemented in close consultation with German government circles. On April 25, Google's chief engineer of search, Ben Gomes, announced that Google would downgrade "low-quality" information such as "conspiracy theories" and "fake news."

Just three weeks earlier, Gomes met with representatives of all German state governments to discuss the functionality of search engines.

Google's censorship measures resulted in numerous anti-war websites and left-wing publications being massively downgraded. The *World Socialist Web Site* was targeted in particular, with its search traffic from Google declining by 67 percent.

The resort to such aggressive censorship by the government and major corporations can only be explained by mounting social conflicts. Policies of militarism and social attacks are being met with opposition from the vast majority of the working population. War and capitalism are incompatible with basic democratic rights.

This is why all of the parties represented in the German parliament are calling in their election programmes for the strengthening of the state apparatus and the censoring of the Internet. Concepts such as "fake news" or "hate speech" serve in this context to justify state repression. The lies of the major media outlets and agitation by all parties against refugees, by contrast, are being spread without hindrance.

In its programme, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) describes "fake news" as "a great danger for peaceful coexistence and for a free and democratic society." Therefore, it calls for the "better training and equipping of police authorities and judicial system in this area." The SPD intends to retain the Network Enforcement Law and cut the "reaction times" even more. "Anybody failing to abide by the provisions will be punished with painful financial penalties."

The Left Party also calls for more police and for action to be taken against "verbal attacks" online. "We want to protect the security of citizens in public spaces with more personnel," their election programme states. "On social networks, as in public spaces in general, protection against verbal attacks, hate speech and character assassination must be enforced."

It is no coincidence that this choice of words recalls the campaign of leading media outlets against the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality. Because they criticised right-wing extremist statements, which were subsequently confirmed as such by a court, from Humboldt University Professor Jörg Baberowski, accusations of "bullying" and "character assassination" were directed against them.

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* complained shortly prior to Gomes' visit to Berlin about "how impactful the Trotskyist splinter group is," and demanded the WSWS be censored—a demand that Google has since fulfilled.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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