

DreamHost ordered to hand over data on anti-Trump website: The criminalization of political dissent

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In a chilling attack on free speech, a District of Columbia Superior Court judge Thursday ordered the web hosting company DreamHost to make available to the Trump administration vast amounts of data related to a website, disruptj20.org, which organized protests against Trump's inauguration in January.

The government's request first became known on August 14, when DreamHost revealed the content of a warrant issued in July demanding that the company turn over all the data on disruptj20.org, including visitor logs and IP addresses from 1.3 million people who visited the site, which can be used to identify individuals. It also demanded access to emails, photos and other data of those involved in contributing to and producing the site.

Following public exposure of the Department of Justice's warrant, the government "clarified" its request, stating that it does not want IP addresses, but still demands "all records or other information, pertaining to the Account, including all files, databases, and database records stored by DreamHost in relation to that Account."

The judge, Robert Morin, a Clinton appointee, has granted the warrant, with the empty stipulation that the court will oversee the government's methods for searching the data.

DreamHost, a private company that hosts more than 1.5 million websites, has agreed to abide by the warrant and begin turning over data, claiming that the judge's decision is a "win for privacy." Nothing could be further from the truth. As the company's own lawyer, Raymond Aghaian, stated in court Thursday, the information that the government is demanding and will now receive is "tantamount to the membership list of

an advocacy group."

The government request amounts, Aghaian noted, to a "general warrant," that is, a demand for sweeping information not related to any specific crime or individual. Such warrants were outlawed in Britain in the 18th century. They are proscribed in the Fourth Amendment of the US Constitution, which prohibits "unreasonable searches and seizures" and requires that all warrants be based on "probable cause... particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized."

The government now has a legal precedent for demanding similar information from any website organizing or supporting protests and other oppositional activity, using the pretext of alleged violent actions—often the result of police provocateurs—to effectively criminalize dissent.

The DC court ruling takes place in the context of coordinated efforts by the ruling class internationally to suppress and outlaw political opposition. On Friday, the German government took the extraordinary step of shutting down the German Indymedia site, claiming that it helped organize violent protests in Hamburg, Germany during the G20 protests in July.

In the weeks since the G20 summit, the government's claims of "violent demonstrators" have been thoroughly debunked. In fact, the protests were the occasion for a police riot, supported by all factions of the political establishment in Germany, which is using supposed "left-wing violence" to crack down on "left extremists."

In a statement befitting an authoritarian regime, German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière declared that the site had to be shut down because it was

“sowing hate against different opinions and representatives of the country”—that is, it advocated political opposition to the government.

In the US, the far-reaching implications of the DC court decision contrast sharply with the almost complete absence of coverage and comment in the corporate media and political establishment. No leading Democrats have issued statements opposing the decision.

In one of the few commentaries on the ruling, the *Washington Post* published an editorial Friday under the headline, “Don’t believe the hype: The Justice Department isn’t cracking down on anti-Trump dissent.” The *Post* accepts the government’s argument that prosecutors are “investigating serious violations of public order” justifying the search, only mildly criticizing the broad scope of the original order. The “clarification of the government’s case” has made it “substantially stronger,” the *Post* argues.

The editorial concludes with a call for the institutionalization of the type of search demanded by the government. “The courts and Congress should contemplate how to make [the procedures approved by the court] a clear rule of the road.”

While the Trump administration represents a grave threat to the democratic rights of the working class, it is itself a product of a protracted collapse of democratic forms of rule in the United States, to the point where clear and egregious violations of the Constitution do not even provoke commentary, let alone opposition.

Nowhere in the official political “debate” since Trump’s election has there been any discussion of the massive growth of the intelligence apparatus, including the illegal and unconstitutional domestic surveillance by the National Security Agency exposed by Edward Snowden four years ago. The demands of the Justice Department in the DreamHost case are an expression of the central purpose of the spying apparatus supported and expanded by the Obama administration: the crackdown on domestic dissent.

Throughout the seven months since Trump took office, the Democratic Party and the media have sought to cover up the real character and social basis of his administration—a government of the corporate and financial oligarchy, determined to vastly expand war abroad and social counter-revolution within the United States. Their criticism of Trump has centered on

differences over foreign policy, with denunciations of Trump for coming into conflict with sections of the military and intelligence agencies.

In the aftermath of the neo-Nazi violence in Charlottesville two weeks ago, the Democrats have supported the restructuring of the Trump administration to place it even more directly under the control of the military and financial aristocracy.

Trump’s actions against political protesters, moreover, are entirely in line with the campaign of Internet companies, supported by the Democratic Party and affiliated media, to implement a far-reaching program of Internet censorship under the guise of combatting “fake news.” Most prominent are the actions of Google to manipulate search results to block and blacklist left-wing websites, above all the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The overriding threat to the interests of the ruling elite, in the US and internationally, is the emergence of a politically independent and organized working class, armed with a socialist program. It is to block and preempt the creation of such a movement that the repressive actions of the state are directed.



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