

New York Times, Democrats lead push for Facebook censorship

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25 September 2017

Facebook, the technology giant that controls the world's largest social network, has announced that it will voluntarily turn over information on political advertisements allegedly tied to fake accounts operating out of Russia to the congressional committee investigating Russian "meddling" in the 2016 election.

Those user accounts, according to the *New York Times*, "promoted inflammatory messages on divisive issues" during the 2016 election. These "inflammatory" messages included, according to the *Times*, links to articles critical of US foreign policy.

The move by Facebook is a response to a narrative concocted by US intelligence agencies, *New York Times* "investigations," and officials such as Mark Warner, the top-ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, that the Russian government sought to influence the outcome of the 2016 election by buying about \$100,000 in political advertisements.

To say this argument is flimsy is an understatement. The alleged ads constitute approximately one-one thousandth of one percent of the total \$6.5 billion spent in the 2016 US election cycle. If total election spending were an average-sized man, the ads would represent the weight of a fingernail.

But neither Facebook, congressional investigators, nor the newspapers hawking the story of alleged Russian interference in the election have presented any evidence to back up their claims that the ads were in fact tied to Russian intelligence agencies.

This contrived narrative, which begins by setting out to prove the trivially obvious—that some user accounts on social media networks are controlled by spam-bots, some of which operate out of Russia, and some of which post political messages—ends with the suggestion that domestic political opposition is the product of the actions of "hostile intelligence" agencies and foreign

subversion.

The goal of this bizarre conspiracy theory is to create a false equivalency between alleged Russian intervention in the 2016 US election and growing popular opposition to the political establishment, in order to legitimize the censorship of political discussion on the Internet.

The *Times* notes that some of the accounts allegedly reposted articles from DCLeaks.com, which published leaked documents contradicting official US policy.

Among the documents posted by the site included those showing that Gen. Philip Breedlove, who served as supreme commander of NATO forces in Europe, sought to meet with former Secretary of State Colin Powell to find ways to undermine the Obama administration's policies in the Ukraine conflict in order to promote a clash with Russia.

On CBS's "Face the Nation" program Sunday, Democratic Congressman Adam Schiff praised Facebook's move to turn over information about alleged Russian "meddling," but said the question goes much further than alleged Russian interference in the election.

"There's also an issue about the use of Facebook's algorithms and the way it tends to potentially reinforce people's informational bias," he said, "and this is a problem that goes well beyond Russia."

What does Schiff mean when he says "Facebook's algorithms" serve to "reinforce people's informational bias?" Schiff, as the ranking member of the House Permanent Subcommittee on Intelligence, is channeling the concerns of the major intelligence agencies that growing numbers of people are becoming critical of the political establishment, and that Facebook is providing millions of people with news and information that would reinforce their critical views.

Both Facebook and Google have announced over the past year plans to modify their algorithms in an effort to combat “fake news,” with Google stating that it intends to promote “authoritative content” over “alternative viewpoints.”

A WSWS investigation has revealed that Google traffic to 13 leading left-wing, progressive, and anti-war websites has fallen by some 55 percent since the company announced plans to modify its algorithm to combat “fake news” in April.

The *Times*’ breathless reporting of alleged Russian “meddling” in the election has been accompanied by calls for Facebook to take “responsibility” for what its users do online and partner more closely with intelligence agencies to take down “objectionable” content more rapidly.

In a commentary published in the *New York Times* Friday, which Google News kept on its front page nearly the whole day, Kevin Roose declares, “If I were a Facebook executive, I might feel a Frankensteinian sense of unease these days ... Facebook may have created something it can’t fully control.” He complains, “Facebook was simply not built to handle [the] problems” that come with billions of users. “It’s a technology company, not an intelligence agency.”

He notes, optimistically, “there are signs that Facebook is starting to understand its responsibilities. It has hired a slew of counterterrorism experts and is expanding teams of moderators around the world to look for and remove harmful content.”

He adds, Facebook “will need to keep investing heavily in defensive tools, including artificial intelligence and teams of human moderators, to shut down bad actors.”

The goal of the latest chapter in the tall tale of Russian meddling in the 2016 election is to create the political climate for expanding such “human moderators” who would be empowered to “remove” content they deem to be “harmful:” i.e., content their employer, working in conjunction with the US intelligence agencies, does not want the public to have access to.



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