

US Justice Department demands Facebook turn over information on anti-administration activists

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The US Department of Justice has issued warrants demanding that Facebook turn over private account information on three individuals described by their attorneys as “anti-administration activists” who “are generally very critical of [the Trump] administration’s policies.” The private account information on thousands of Facebook users could be funneled to the government as a result of the warrants.

Facebook received the warrants in February, but was until recently under a gag order barring it from making the warrants known to the targeted individuals or the public. The social media giant has not said whether it has, or plans to, comply with the search warrants.

One of the targeted Facebook users, Emmelia Talarico, operated the disruptj20 web page where protests against Trump’s inauguration were organized and discussed. Approximately 6,000 individuals visited the site, and the Department of Justice would have access to their identities should Facebook hand over the information sought in the warrants.

Talarico says that if the authorities are able to obtain her account information, they will have access to her “personal passwords, security questions and answers, and credit card information,” as well as “the private lists of invitees and attendees to multiple political events sponsored by the page.”

This follows a similar warrant issued to the web provider DreamHost, in which the government demanded that the company turn over all data on disruptj20.org, including visitor logs and IP addresses for 1.3 million people who visited the site. The warrant also demanded access to emails, photos and other data of those involved in contributing to and producing the site.

These warrants are part of a massive attack by the Trump administration on freedom of speech and political expression, focused on the Internet and social media. It is aided and abetted by a McCarthyite campaign led by the Democratic Party and the intelligence agencies, with bipartisan support from congressional Republicans, casting all political opposition to the policies of the government and to the growth of social inequality and poverty as the result of Russian “fake news” and media manipulation. The aim is to criminalize social opposition and political dissent and brand them as anti-American and treasonous activity.

Such sweeping demands for private information are in direct violation of the Fourth Amendment of the US Constitution, which prohibits “unreasonable searches and seizures” and states that warrants must be based upon “probable cause...particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.”

They also violate the First Amendment’s guarantees of freedom of speech and the press, and the right to peacefully protest.

Washington DC Superior Court Judge Robert Morin largely granted the Justice Department’s request to collect vast sets of records, including the emails of Facebook users and membership lists.

Yet this flagrant attack on democratic rights and assertion of police-state powers has evoked no significant protest from either the political or media establishment. Not a single leading Democratic politician has issued a statement opposing the warrants.

The other two Facebook users named in the warrants are Lacy MacAuley and Legba Carrefour. In court filings against the search warrant for his account,

Carrefour said it “contains a significant amount of private material concerning my personal life.” He added in a statement that the warrants are “part of a pattern of prosecutorial overreach in the repression of Inauguration Day protesters.”

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), representing the three Facebook users, filed a motion to invalidate the three warrants. ACLU lawyers said the warrants were too broad and would reveal private information about those not involved in alleged violence during the inauguration protests.

“We are deeply concerned about the government engaging in a fishing expedition,” said Scott Michelman, a senior staff attorney with the ACLU of the District of Columbia.

Of particular concern, Michelman said, is that the government search would disclose “anti- administration dissident activities that would then be investigated by the very administration that they are protesting.”

The Trump administration claims the warrants are part of a criminal investigation into the January 20 demonstrations in the capital in which more than 200 protesters were arrested.

The disclosure of the Justice Department warrants coincided with an announcement by tech giant Apple that in the first half of 2017, it received its highest ever number of US government national security letters requesting data. According to Apple’s transparency report, it received between 13,250 and 13,499 requests affecting between 9,000 and 9,249 accounts.

On Thursday, Google also released its transparency report. It received up to 499 requests for data, affecting between 1,000 and 1,499 accounts.

These developments in the US are part of an international attack on political dissent. Just last month, the German government raided the homes of the alleged administrators of the left-wing website “linksunten.indymedia.org” and shut the site down. The German government has also passed a law requiring social media companies to remove “violent extremist” material.

The issue of illegal and unconstitutional domestic spying in the US, including the pervasive National Security Agency surveillance exposed four years ago by Edward Snowden, has been completely dropped by the media and the political establishment. The Obama administration defended the NSA and blocked any

rollback of government spying on electronic communications or legal action against those who organized it. It set the table for the Trump administration by prosecuting more whistleblowers for exposing classified information than any previous administration.

Technology and information monopolies such as Facebook and Google are complicit in the ruling class attack on freedom of speech and access to information. The *World Socialist Web Site* has exposed the political blacklisting of left-wing and antiwar websites by Google, which has implemented algorithms that, in the name of demoting “low-quality content,” slash search referrals to left-wing sites. The WSWS has been most heavily impacted by this censorship.

In response to political pressure, Facebook has turned over to Congress a list of 3,000 accounts, supposedly connected to Russia, which the company claims made \$100,000 in ad purchases to “sow divisions” during the 2016 US election. Twitter is facing similar demands that it crack down on ads from Russian users such as the Russian English-language news outlet RT.



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