

US congressional hearings on “extremist content” prepare assault on free speech

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Three months ago, the *World Socialist Web Site* published its first article documenting Google’s blacklisting of the WSWS and other left-wing websites. It warned that Google’s actions were part of a sweeping campaign, coordinated with the US government, media and intelligence agencies, to censor the Internet.

The period since this initial exposure has seen this campaign develop with extraordinary speed, as the Democratic Party, working with major media outlets, uses unsubstantiated allegations of Russian “hacking” of the 2016 election to mount a drive to criminalize political opposition within the United States. What is involved is nothing less than the greatest attack on the First Amendment since the Second World War.

This campaign will reach a new milestone with the testimony by officials from Facebook, Twitter and Google before the Senate Judiciary Committee today and the House and Senate intelligence committees tomorrow on their plans to counter “extremist content and Russian disinformation online.”

Over the past three months, the top Democrats on the Senate and House intelligence committees, Mark Warner and Adam Schiff, in conjunction with the US intelligence agencies and the media, have concocted an absurd narrative that some \$100,000 in Russian social media advertisements, mostly placed after November, helped swing the election in favor of Donald Trump.

Having forced the technology companies to compile lists of “Russia-linked” accounts, the lawmakers will now turn their focus on their real target: What they call “organic content,” or, to put it more plainly, political speech on the Internet.

According to the *Hill*, Warner and Schiff will press the social media companies to admit “that Russia created ‘organic content’ ...to divide and influence Americans.”

“Probably more important is, what was the content they were pushing out that was nonadvertising,” Schiff told the *Hill* this week. “I think that will probably dwarf what we’ve seen in the paid advertising,”

In prepared testimony obtained by news outlets Monday evening, Facebook expanded its list of “Russia-linked” online activity to include such “organic content,” declaring that tens of thousands of “inflammatory” posts by “fake” accounts connected to Russia reached 126 million US Facebook users.

This “divisive content” no doubt included reposts of articles by left-wing and oppositional news outlets, putting them firmly in the crosshairs of congressional investigators. As a *New York Times* report put it earlier this month, content “recorded, posted or written by Americans...ended up becoming grist for a network of Facebook pages linked to a shadowy Russian company that has carried out propaganda campaigns for the Kremlin.”

In another extraordinary development, on Friday, Dianne Feinstein, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee, sent a letter to Twitter’s CEO demanding that the company hand over personally identifying information related to “organic content” posted by Twitter users. The letter specifically requests all “organic content posted by Russia-connected users and targeted to any part of the United States, regardless of whether the individual or entity violated any Twitter policy.” Its definition of “Russia-connected users” is extremely broad, including any “person or entity that may be connected in some way to Russia.”

The letter demands that for all “organic content described above, Twitter provide all subscriber information,” and “IP address information.” This means that the company is being asked to hand over full names, phone numbers, email addresses and IP addresses, which can be used to determine physical location.

Given congressional investigators’ newfound focus on “content recorded, posted or written by Americans” and reposted by “Russia-linked” accounts, it is reasonable to infer that the “organic content” Feinstein is referring to includes content posted by left-wing websites and their associated social media accounts. In that case, what Feinstein is demanding is a list of the names, phone numbers, and physical locations of prominent opponents of

US government policy.

Equally troubling is the fact that the letter requests “All content of each [private] Direct Message” between an undisclosed list of attached Twitter accounts and accounts belonging to WikiLeaks, Julian Assange and the civil rights attorney Margaret Ratner Kunstler.

Kunstler, according to her official biography, has represented “WikiLeaks and Bradley [Chelsea] Manning supporters in connection with grand jury subpoenas, encounters with the FBI...and governmental suppression.”

The extraordinary request by the Senate Judiciary Committee for a company to turn over a lawyer’s private correspondence constitutes a gross violation of attorney-client privilege, to say nothing of its chilling effect on First Amendment rights.

Feinstein’s targeting of Assange and Wikileaks alongside her focus on “organic content” makes clear that the real target of the witch hunt is not foreign agents, but domestic political opposition.

As further confirmation, on Monday the *Wall Street Journal* carried a report, again without any factual substantiation, that “Russia-linked” accounts helped organize meetings and demonstrations, including protests against police violence. The *Journal* wrote, “At least 60 rallies, protests and marches were publicized or financed by” Russian accounts.” These allegations expand the target of the anti-Russian witch hunt from freedom of speech to freedom of assembly, which is also guaranteed in the First Amendment.

This is in line with a report published earlier this week by McClatchy (under the headline, “Protesters are increasingly being labeled domestic terrorist threats, experts worry”) that the FBI has created a category of “domestic terrorist” groups called “black identity extremists,” which could include people who participate in demonstrations against police violence.

The relationship of Google, the largest and most powerful technology company, to the congressional witch hunt has been smoother and quieter than that of Facebook and Twitter. As the *Financial Times* wrote, the company has “kept a lower profile, quietly meeting the intelligence committee in private” and silently “rolling out” changes to its algorithms.

In the background, however, the company has taken the most sweeping action of any of its peers. In April, Google announced measures to promote “authoritative content” over “alternative viewpoints.” This has caused search traffic to left-wing web sites to fall by more than 55 percent. The *World Socialist Web Site* is particularly targeted, with search traffic from Google plunging by 74 percent.

While the Trump administration seeks to cultivate an

extreme right-wing, authoritarian political movement, the nominal opposition within the state, led by the Democratic Party, is focused on a hysterical, warmongering campaign based on unsubstantiated charges of Russian interference in the 2016 US election. The aim, recalling the McCarthyite witch hunts, is to associate all political opposition within the United States to the nefarious efforts of “outside agitators,” in this case, “foreign agents.”

This sweeping attack on free speech, the bedrock of democracy, reflects the fear of the ruling elite of the emergence of an independent movement of the working class against capitalism. Whatever their differences with Trump, the greatest concern of the Democrats is that social anger over inequality and war be prevented from erupting and taking the form of a socialist movement against capitalism.

Far more than Russia, they, and the entire ruling class, fear the international working class. That is why the central target of Google has been the WSWS.

The alarm must be sounded! The WSWS has begun an aggressive counteroffensive. Our petition against Google censorship has been signed by thousands of workers from over 100 countries around the world. The struggle has only begun, however.

Workers and young people throughout the world must be alerted to what is taking place. The fight against censorship and blacklisting and in defense of free speech and political expression must be taken into every section of the working class and linked to the fight against social inequality and the drive to world war.

At the center of building such a movement is the development of the *World Socialist Web Site*. We need the support of our readers now more than ever. Donate today to help the WSWS oppose this onslaught by the US government and the technology companies. Become involved! Take up the fight for socialism!



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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