

US Congressional hearing:

Former FBI agent says tech companies must “silence” sources of “rebellion”

Andre Damon
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Top legal and security officials for Facebook, Twitter and Google appeared before the Senate Judiciary Committee Tuesday, in a hearing targeting “Extremist Content and Russian Disinformation Online.”

Over the course of four hours, senators argued that “foreign infiltration” is the root of social opposition within the United States, in order to justify the censorship of oppositional viewpoints.

Russia “sought to sow discord and amplify racial and social divisions among American voters,” said Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein of California. It “exploited hot button topics...to target both conservative and progressive audiences.”

Republican Senator Chuck Grassley of Iowa said Russia helped promote protests against police violence in Ferguson, Baltimore and Cleveland. Russia, he said, “spread stories about abuse of black Americans by law enforcement. These ads are clearly intended to worsen racial tensions and possibly violence in those cities.”

Democratic Senator Mazie Hirono of Hawaii demanded, for her part, that the companies adopt a “mission statement” expressing their commitment “to prevent the fomenting of discord.”

The most substantial portion of the testimony took place in the second part of the hearing, during which most of the Senators had left and two representatives of the US intelligence agencies testified before a room of mostly empty chairs.

Clint Watts, a former U.S. Army officer, former FBI agent, and member of the Alliance for Securing Democracy, made the following apocalyptic proclamation: “Civil wars don’t start with gunshots, they start with words. America’s war with itself has already begun. We all must act now on the social media

battlefield to quell information rebellions that can quickly lead to violent confrontations and easily transform us into the Divided States of America.”

He added, “Stopping the false information artillery barrage landing on social media users comes only when those outlets distributing bogus stories are silenced—silence the guns and the barrage will end.”

As this “civil war” rages on, he said, “our country remains stalled in observation, halted by deliberation and with each day more divided by manipulative forces coming from afar.”

The implications of these statements are staggering. The United States is in the midst of a civil war, and the necessary response of the government is censorship, together with the abolition of all other fundamental democratic rights. The “rebellion” must be put down by silencing the news outlets that advocate it.

That such a statement could be made in a congressional hearing, entirely without objection, is an expression of the terminal decay of American democracy. There is no faction of the ruling class that maintains any commitment to basic democratic rights.

None of the Democrats in the committee raised any of the constitutional issues involved in asking massive technology companies to censor political speech on the Internet. Only one Republican raised concerns over censorship, but only to allege that Google had a liberal bias.

The Democrats focused their remarks on demands that the Internet companies take even more aggressive steps to censor content. In one particularly noxious exchange, Feinstein pressed Google’s legal counsel on why it took so long for YouTube (which is owned by Google) to revoke the status of Russia Today as a

“preferred” broadcaster. She demanded, “Why did Google give preferred status to Russia Today, a Russian propaganda arm, on YouTube? ... It took you until September of 2017 to do it.”

Despite the fact that Feinstein and other Democrats were clearly pressuring the company to take that step, the senators allowed Richard Salgado, Google’s Law Enforcement and Information Security Director, to present what was by all appearances a bald-faced lie before Congress. “The removal of RT from the program was actually a result of...is a result of some of the drop in viewership, not as a result of any action otherwise. So there was ... there was nothing about RT or its content that meant that it stayed in or stayed out,” Salgado stammered, in the only time he appeared to lose his composure during the hearing.

Salgado’s apparently false statement is of a piece with Google’s other actions to censor the Internet. These include changes to its search algorithm, which, behind the backs of the public, have slashed search traffic to left-wing websites by some 55 percent, with the *World Socialist Web Site* losing some 74 percent of its search traffic.

Stressing the transformation of the major US technology companies into massive censorship operations, Democratic Senator Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island asked the representatives of the firms, “I gather that all of your companies have moved beyond any notion that your job is only to provide a platform, and whatever goes across it is not your affair,” to which all answered in the affirmative.

When pressed by lawmakers to state how many people were employed by Facebook to moderate content, Colin Stretch, the company’s general counsel, said that Facebook employed “thousands” of such moderators, and was in the process of adding “thousands more.”

While the senators and technology companies largely presented a show of unity, just how far the companies were willing to go in censoring users’ content and helping the government create blacklists of dissidents was no doubt a subject of contentious debate in the background.

On Friday, Feinstein sent a letter to Twitter’s CEO demanding that the company hand over profile information—possibly including full names, email addresses, and phone numbers—related to “divisive”

“organic content” promoted by “Russia-linked” accounts.

Although the senators largely steered away from the issue of “organic content” in their questions, a remark by Sean Edgett, Twitter’s acting general counsel, made clear that the “organic content” Feinstein’s letter was referring to included the social media posts of US-based organizations and individuals. Edgett said “organic tweets,” include “those that you or I or anyone here today can tweet from their phone or computer.”

The *New York Times* reported over the weekend, however, that Facebook has already begun turning lists of such “organic content” over to congressional investigators. Given that Facebook has said that just one “Russia-linked” company had posted some 80,000 pieces of “divisive” content, including reposts from other users, it is reasonable to assume Facebook and Twitter are being pressured to turn over information on a substantial portion of political dissidents within the United States.



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