

The Democrats' McCarthyite witch hunt

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This week's congressional hearings on "extremist content" on the Internet mark a new stage in the McCarthyite witch hunt by congressional Democrats, working with the intelligence agencies and leading media outlets, to legitimize censorship and attack free speech on the Internet.

One after another, congressmen and senators goaded representatives of Google, Twitter and Facebook to admit that their platforms were used to sow "social divisions" and "extremist" political opinions. The aim of this campaign is to claim that social conflict within the United States arises not from the scale of social inequality in America, greater than in any other country in the developed world, but rather from the actions of "outside agitators" working in the service of the Kremlin.

The hearings revolved around claims that Russia sought to "weaponize" the Internet by harnessing social anger within the United States. "Russia," said Democratic Congressman Adam Schiff, promoted "discord in the US by inflaming passions on a range of divisive issues." It sought to "mobilize real Americans to sign online petitions and join rallies and protests."

The McCarthyite witch hunts of the 1950s sought to suppress left-wing thought and label all forms of dissent as illegitimate and treasonous. Those who led them worked to purge left-wing opinion from Hollywood, the trade unions and the universities.

Likewise, the new McCarthyism is aimed at creating a political climate in which left-wing organizations and figures are demonized as agents of the Kremlin who are essentially engaged in treasonous activity deserving of criminal prosecution.

To this end, the congressional witch-hunters released a series of "Russia-linked" social media posts expressing opposition to police violence and social inequality. These were meant to serve as "smoking gun" examples of how Russia worked to sow social

divisions within the US.

The argument that it takes a Vladimir Putin to divide the United States is, frankly, laughable. So far this year there have been 273 mass shootings in which four or more people were killed or injured. More than 1,000 people are killed by police every year.

The United States is bursting at the seams with social discontent. Inequality, war, the pressures caused by poverty-wage jobs—all are sources of enormous social anger.

The Democrats' absurd narrative stems from their attempt to rationalize away their disastrous defeat in the 2016 election, blaming it on a Kremlin-backed conspiracy instead of their own indifference to the social misery that pervades the country.

At Wednesday's hearings, Schiff declared that the problem is "not just foreign" and complained that the algorithms used by social media companies "tend to accentuate content that is fear-based or anger-based."

"That helps it pick up an audience and go viral and be amplified," he said, with the consequence of "widening divisions among our society."

When was the last time Schiff or any of his colleagues held a hearing on the real sources of division and social discontent in America? Are they holding hearings on the soaring wealth of the financial elite, on the criminal conduct of the wars in Afghanistan or Syria? No, Schiff's concern is to prevent the people from learning anything that would fuel their "anger."

To this end, he asked representatives of Facebook, Twitter and Google what "societal obligation" they have to change the fact that "what ends up percolating to the top of our feeds tends to be things we were looking for."

In this statement, Schiff makes clear the real content of the Democratic Party's furor about "fake news" and "Russian meddling." What concerns Schiff and his colleagues is not "fake news," but true news that goes

“viral” and gets “amplified” because it reflects popular anger.

The problem, according to Schiff and his fellow congressional witch-hunters, is that people looking for politically critical viewpoints can actually find them on the Internet, as opposed to what they find in the corporate-controlled newspapers and TV broadcasters.

Amid soaring social inequality, a spiraling political crisis and the continuous threat of nuclear war, millions of people have grown justifiably hostile to the capitalist system and the political establishment. The immense popularity of the Internet reflects the fact that it provides people with the chance to obtain information that news outlets such as the *New York Times*, working with the intelligence agencies, seek to keep from them.

The ruling elite sees the combination of social disaffection and the unlimited access to information provided by the Internet as an existential threat that must be combated through censorship. As Clint Watts, a former US Army officer and FBI agent, put it at Tuesday’s hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee: “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... 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.”

The fact that censorship is spoken of so openly means that a major intensification is coming. The American ruling elite, to use the words of Watts, believes it is already engaged in a civil war with its own population and is more than willing to use censorship to “silence” sources of “rebellion.”

Google, Facebook and Twitter are already engaged in censorship, each of them announcing that they are hiring “thousands” of people to moderate and review content. Earlier this month, Google removed from its list of “preferred” channels on YouTube the Russian-sponsored TV station and online news outlet RT, which reports stories largely censored by the mainstream press. Twitter likewise blocked RT from using its advertising service.

In April, Google implemented a change to its search algorithm that slashed traffic to left-wing, antiwar and progressive websites by more than 55 percent. Last

month, it removed almost all pages from the *World Socialist Web Site* from its news service, Google News, together with articles from leading left-wing journalists such as Pulitzer Prize winner Chris Hedges.

This drive to destroy freedom of speech must be opposed! It is the spearhead for the dismantling of democratic rights not just in the United States, but all over the world.

We call on all readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* to donate to its campaign against Google’s censorship and to join the International Committee of the Fourth International, which is leading the struggle to defend democratic rights as part of the development of an international working-class movement for socialism.



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