Google announces moves to censor RT and Sputnik

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All but admitting that Google is engaged in censorship, Eric Schmidt, executive chairman of Google's parent company Alphabet, announced that Google will create algorithms designed to "de-rank" web sites such as RT and Sputnik on its news delivery services.

In a question and answer session at the Halifax International Security Forum in Canada over the weekend, Schmidt laid out Google's intentions. When asked if the internet giant had a role in preventing the "manipulation of information," Schmidt stated, "We are working on detecting and de-ranking those kinds of sites—it's basically RT and Sputnik."

In response to a question about "Russian propaganda," Schmidt replied, "We are well of aware of it, and we are trying to engineer the systems to prevent that. But we don't want to ban the sites—that's not how we operate." Instead, Schmidt said he viewed the "misuse of information" as bugs in a program. "If you're misusing information, then our programs are not doing a good enough job of properly ranking it."

During the session, Schmidt claimed that he was "very strongly not in favor of censorship," while at the same time professing faith in the "ranking" process that is used to demote content not deemed authoritative—clearly a form of censorship, since ranking is used to make certain web sites virtually invisible on "Google News" and similar news aggregators.

Schmidt added that Google's algorithm was capable of detecting "repetitive, exploitative, false, and weaponized" information, but did not elaborate how such criteria are defined.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has been engaged in a campaign to expose Google's efforts to censor left-wing and anti-war sites. Since it discovered that its search traffic originating from Google had dropped by 74 percent since April of this year, the WSWS has provided detailed data showing that Google is effectively banishing the WSWS from its lists of articles and news sources. The WSWS has published an Open Letter and launched a petition drive to demand that Google end its censorship of the WSWS and other left-wing, progressive and anti-war web sites.

Google has refused to respond to the WSWS' allegations, even after the *New York Times* published an article based on an interview with the chairman of the WSWS International Editorial Board, David North, describing the systematic and obvious purging of the WSWS from its search requests.

However, Schmidt's statements over the weekend amount to an admission that Google is actively censoring sites because of their political views.

The blacklisting of media platforms RT and Sputnik is part of a broader campaign of internet censorship, backed by the US intelligence agencies and supported politically by the Democratic Party, in particular.

Earlier this month, RT America was forced by the US Justice Department to register as a foreign agent under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). The platform has been a prime target of the efforts of tech companies, including Twitter, Facebook and Google, to combat so-called "extremist content," a term that embraces information and opinions at odds with the policies and propaganda of the government.

The report released last January by the intelligence agencies on alleged "Russian meddling" in the 2016 elections makes clear that the government defines social and political dissent as tantamount to foreign subversion. The report stated: "RT broadcast, hosted and advertised third-party candidate debates and ran reporting supportive of the political agenda of these

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candidates. The RT hosts asserted that the US two-party system does not represent the views of at least one-third of the population and is a ‘sham.’”

The popularity of RT and other news platforms critical of the US government reflects the mood of broad layers of the American public. An NBC poll in July reported that 76 percent of Americans were worried about a war breaking out with North Korea, and 59 percent preferred diplomacy to solve conflicts with that country. A report by the anti-communist Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation revealed that most young people in the US, age 21 to 29, preferred socialism to capitalism.

US politicians such as Senator Mark Warner, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, claim that RT is an arm of the Kremlin, used to “sow divisions” within the United States. This month’s congressional hearings on “extremist content” on the internet were replete with demands for social media companies to take decisive action in censoring “harmful content.”

At one of the hearings, Senator Dianne Feinstein, Democrat from California, questioned Google’s legal counsel on why it took so long for YouTube to remove RT as a “preferred” channel. She demanded to know, “Why did Google give preferred status to *Russia Today*, a Russian propaganda arm, on YouTube?”

Representative Jackie Speier from California asserted that RT “seeks to influence politics and fuel discontent in the United States.” She asked, “Why have you not shut down RT on YouTube?... The intelligence community says it’s an arm of one of our adversaries.”

The American people do not need RT to understand that the political system is corrupt and dominated by Wall Street. The results of the McCarthyite witch-hunt over supposed “Russian interference”—algorithms to promote “authoritative content,” the demoting of “extremist content,” the blacklisting of left-wing sites—have set a dangerous precedent. The hysterical campaign against Russia, including RT, has served as a cover for a frontal attack on the First Amendment rights to free speech and political expression.

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