UK: Social media giants face sanctions if they fail to provide “proof” of Russian interference

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A parliamentary committee has set a deadline of January 18 for Facebook and Twitter to provide information on supposed “Russian misinformation” or face sanctions.

Damian Collins, Conservative chair of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee, declared the deadline before the New Year, insisting that Facebook and Twitter supply details of social media accounts and pages allegedly operated by Russian “misinformation actors.”

The select committee is investigating so-called “fake news,” centring on accusations of foreign interference in the June, 2016 referendum on UK membership of the European Union and the June, 2017 general election.

Both polls resulted in shock setbacks for the ruling elite, with the “Leave” vote narrowly winning the Brexit referendum and Prime Minister Theresa May losing her parliamentary majority in the general election.

The inquiry is bogus. If the committee were remotely concerned with false information, its first port of call would be parliament itself.

It was the British government under Labour’s Tony Blair—along with its various intelligence and security agencies and parliamentary committees—that was responsible for the gravest item of fake news: the “dodgy dossier” of false intelligence information alleging Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. More than a million people have been killed, Iraqi society devastated and the Middle East turned into a war zone due to this barbarous act of “foreign interference” on the part of British and US imperialism.

Instead of investigating real crimes, however, the select committee’s aim is to manufacture a pretext for new imperialist intrigues on the part of Britain’s ruling elite, this time against Russia, while systematically censoring and closing down alternative media sources that would expose its plans.

The select committee was first launched in January 2017. Timed to coincide with the Democratic campaign against the victory of Donald Trump in the US presidential election, it expressed the divisions over foreign policy objectives—especially the targeting of Russia—that exercise sections of the ruling elite on both sides of the Atlantic.

Even so, a report published by MPs in April that year, “Lessons Learned from the EU Referendum,” concluded that it did not believe foreign interference “had any material effect” on the outcome. None of the written evidence submitted to the MPs’ investigation by more than 100 individuals and organisations made any reference to Russia, and any reference at all to foreign interference was inserted only at the last moment.

The select committee’s probe was suspended in May 2017 for the June general election. The result, which saw the Tories reduced to a minority administration, further exposed the huge gulf separating the powers-that-be from the broad mass of the population. Once again, the standpoint of official commentators was proven to be at odds with much of public opinion. At the same time, the crisis within ruling circles, especially over foreign policy orientation, deepened.

Since then, the Electoral Commission has launched an investigation into several of the “Leave” campaign groups in the Brexit referendum. The official remit is to ascertain whether they overspent on electoral materials, but its real objective is to tie them to “foreign actors,” primarily Russia.

Collins’ threat to sanction Facebook and Twitter was made under conditions where the committee he heads has found no proof of Russian meddling. The findings

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given to the select committee by Facebook are a copy of those it had already submitted to the Electoral Commission. These show that the worth of paid advertising from Russian sources during the Brexit referendum and aimed at British users amounted to just 72 pence.

Similarly, a submission by Twitter, also given to the select committee and the Electoral Commission, listed just six Russian tweets promoted as paid advertisements during the referendum period. All were sent by *Russia Today* to promote its news coverage of the ballot to British users, at the cost of just £750.

Collins is now demanding that Facebook and Twitter produce the results required or face the consequences. While stating that companies were "best placed" to monitor Internet content while "safeguarding the privacy of users," Collins threatened these multi-billion-dollar corporations that if "you fail to do that, if you ignore requests to act, if you fail to police the site effectively and deal with highly problematic content, then there has to be some sort of sanction against you."

He made clear exactly what is required, claiming that Facebook had identified "tens of thousands of fake pages and accounts that were active during the French presidential election." In the US, Facebook claims to have identified 470 accounts and pages run by a St. Petersburg-based Internet research agency.

Representatives of the social media giants have been called to appear before the inquiry next month. The committee does not have the power to sanction directly, but the *Guardian* reported that "ministers are understood to be concerned by the companies' attitude and could be sympathetic to any request for action."

One area of sanctions under consideration is social media revenue, to be attacked by targeting advertising deemed to be unethical. But Collins threatened to go further. Noting that "other countries" had taken "different positions" on sanctions on social media, he said pointedly that "Germany has obviously gone furthest down this road."

On January 1, the German government began implementing its Network Enforcement Law, which threatens social media companies with fines of up to €50 million if they do not immediately remove content deemed objectionable. Two days later, France's President Emmanuel Macron said he intended to introduce a ban on "fake news" during election cycles.

As noted, this is the part of a WSWS in campaign to censor the Internet. One of the options under consideration in the UK is to class Google and Facebook as publishers, making them subject to regulation.

The response of the social media corporations to the select committee's demands make clear that they are working with governments to violate free speech. A spokesperson for Facebook said the company would respond to the select committee once it had taken "the opportunity to review the request." The spokesperson added, "We strongly support the Commission's efforts to regulate and enforce political campaign finance rules in the United Kingdom, and we take the Commission's request very seriously."

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