

For an international coalition to fight Internet censorship

An open letter from the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site* to socialist, anti-war, left-wing and progressive websites, organizations and activists

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The United States government, in the closest collaboration with Google, Facebook, Twitter and other powerful information technology corporations, is implementing massive restrictions on Internet access to socialist, antiwar and progressive websites. Similar repressive policies are being enacted by capitalist governments in Europe and throughout the world.

The new regime of censorship is being combined with an intensification of surveillance operations, aimed at monitoring what people read, write and think while on the Internet. The actions of this alliance of the state, military-intelligence agencies and oligopolistic technology corporations are a dangerous threat to freedom of speech and other core democratic rights.

Under the fraudulent cover of eliminating “fake news” and “Russian meddling,” the technological scaffolding of a 21st century capitalist police state is being erected.

In the summer of 2017, the *World Socialist Web Site* published information exposing Google’s manipulation of search results, beginning in April, to limit traffic to left-wing sites. The WSWS reported a nearly 70 percent decline in readers resulting from Google searches. Of the 150 top Google search terms that, until April 2017, had generated traffic to the WSWS, 145 no longer produced even a single search result for our website. The WSWS investigation also showed that other oppositional websites, like globalresearch.ca, consortiumnews.com, counterpunch.org, altnet.com, wikileaks.com and truthdig.org, had experienced substantial declines in Google search-generated readership.

In an Open Letter to Google’s principal executives, dated August 25, 2017, David North, the chairperson of the WSWS International Editorial Board, wrote:

Censorship on this scale is political blacklisting. The obvious intent of Google’s censorship algorithm is to block news that your company does not want reported and to suppress opinions with which you do not agree. Political blacklisting is not a legitimate exercise of whatever may be Google’s prerogatives as a commercial enterprise. It is a gross abuse of monopolistic power. What you are doing is an attack on freedom of speech.

We therefore call on you and Google to stop blacklisting the WSWS and renounce the censorship of all the left-wing, socialist, antiwar and progressive websites that have been affected adversely by your new discriminatory search policies.

Google did not answer this letter. But an article reporting the findings of the WSWS, which appeared in *The New York Times* on September 26, 2017, cited Google’s claim “that its search algorithm undergoes a rigorous testing process to ensure that its results do not reflect political, gender, racial or ethnic bias.”

This was an out-and-out lie. Since the initial WSWS exposure, the Government-Military-Intelligence-Corporate Technology Complex is making no secret of the fact that it is intensifying its censorship efforts on a global scale. In December 2017, the Trump administration repealed net neutrality, while governments in Germany, France and elsewhere also have begun crackdowns on Internet free speech. In January 2018, Facebook implemented changes to its newsfeed to block access to news, specifically targeting left-wing sites, with CEO Mark Zuckerberg claiming, in duplicitous corporate newspeak, that this change was to make users “feel more connected and less lonely.”

The threat to democratic rights is far-reaching and immediate. The development of the Internet in the 1990s created possibilities for a vast expansion in information sharing and world communications. But in response to exploding social inequality, growing popular discontent and heightened international tensions, the capitalist states and billionaire oligarchs who own and control information, artificial intelligence and communications technologies are transforming the Internet into a tool for state surveillance, dictatorship, private profit and war.

In a statement sent to the *World Socialist Web Site*’s January 16 Webinar *Organizing Resistance to Internet Censorship*, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange correctly warned:

While the Internet has brought about a revolution in people’s ability to educate themselves and others, the resulting democratic phenomena has shaken existing establishments to their core. Google, Facebook and their Chinese equivalents, who are socially, logistically and financially integrated with existing elites have moved to re-establish discourse control.

Activist and filmmaker John Pilger, in another message to the WSWS webinar, condemned the manipulation of search results and algorithms as “rank censorship,” adding, “With independent journalists ejected from the mainstream, the world wide web remains the vital source of serious disclosure and evidence-based analysis: true journalism.”

The ruling class has identified the Internet as a mortal threat to its

monopolization of information and its ability to promote propaganda to wage war and legitimize the obscene concentration of wealth and extreme social inequality. Democracy and the free flow of information are incompatible with contemporary capitalism. Eight billionaires possess the same amount of wealth as the poorest half of the world's population, some 3.6 billion people. The oligarchy, in total control of the world economy, fears the Internet as an arena for discussion, information sharing, and political organization of the worldwide struggle against capitalist exploitation and imperialist wars.

In 2017, 3.8 billion people used the Internet worldwide, some 52 percent of the total population, up from 1.0 billion, or 16 percent of the population, in 2005. Over 70 percent of young people are now online, a total of 830 million people, including 320 million in China and India alone. Mobile broadband subscriptions rose from roughly 1.7 billion in 2012 to over 5 billion in 2017, with the largest increases in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. The world working class, larger, more connected and more internationally integrated than ever before, possesses tremendous potential political power.

The arguments used by the Democratic and Republican parties and corporate media to justify Internet censorship, information control and police-state surveillance are a pack of lies. Their aim is to create an atmosphere of paranoid fear to eliminate democratic rights and legal due process.

Former US Army and FBI agent Clint Watts told the US Senate on January 17, "Lesser-educated populations around the world predominately arriving in cyberspace via mobile phones will be particularly vulnerable to the social media manipulation of terrorists and authoritarians."

Facebook attorney Monika Bickert employed Orwellian language when she told the Senate, "We are increasingly finding new ways to disrupt fake news and help people connect with authentic news—we know that's what they want to do."

The invocation of "fake news" no less than "Russian meddling" is fraudulent. The Democrats, Republicans and the corporate media propagandists of *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* (which is owned by Amazon's Jeff Bezos) accuse oppositional websites of engaging in what is, in fact, the specialty of these capitalist publications, i.e., promulgating fake news.

There is no better example of this than the false claims of "weapons of mass destruction," which preceded the 2003 invasion of Iraq and led to the deaths of over 1 million people. Totally unproven claims of "Russian meddling" are now being made by a government that is engaged in permanent war, has conducted regime change operations on every continent, and has troops stationed all over the world. The ruling class is using these concocted allegations to criminalize dissent and label the publication of critical opinions the equivalent of treason.

Imperialist wars are always accompanied by political repression. Weeks after US entry into World War I, Congress passed the Espionage Act, and used it to jail socialists and deport radical immigrants. During World War II, the government blocked socialists from mailing their newspapers, prosecuted Trotskyists under the Smith Act, and interned over 100,000 Japanese in concentration camps. Facing mass opposition to the Vietnam War, the Johnson and Nixon administrations implemented the infamous COINTELPRO program to spy on innumerable civil rights and left-wing political activists. Since 2001, the Democrats and Republicans have established mass surveillance programs through the PATRIOT and FISA Acts, created a network of black site prisons, and protected CIA torturers under the guise of combating "terrorism."

The US military views the democratic potential of social media as a major threat to its operations. In a December 21, 2016 strategy document, the US Army War College wrote, "The implications of social media and the rapid spread of information (and disinformation) in a highly digital city can be profound ... Here in the United States, the release of videos

showing killings by police has led to significant protests and political movements."

In another document, published in April 2017, the War College voiced its fear that "A population equipped with smartphones and willing to communicate to others about the events taking place in their area is able to generate a picture of ongoing events in real time across the span of that population."

The scale of the danger must not be underestimated. As independent journalist Chris Hedges, who participated with David North in the WSWS webinar, has explained:

This censorship is global. The German government's Network Enforcement Act fines social media companies for allegedly objectionable content. French President Emmanuel Macron has vowed to remove "fake news" from the internet. Facebook and Instagram erased the accounts of Ramzan Kadyrov, the dictator of the Chechen Republic, because he is on a U.S. sanctions list. Kadyrov is certainly repugnant, but this ban, as the American Civil Liberties Union points out, empowers the U.S. government to effectively censor content. Facebook, working with the Israeli government, has removed over 100 accounts of Palestinian activists. This is an ominous march to an Orwellian world of Thought Police, "Newspeak" and "thought-crime" or, as Facebook likes to call it, "de-ranking" and "counterspeech." [Truthdig.com, January 21, 2018]

The mounting threat to the survival of basic democratic rights must be resisted. This requires the organization and coordination of a broad coalition against Internet censorship and surveillance. Toward this end, the *World Socialist Web Site* is sponsoring the formation of the International Coalition of Socialist, Antiwar and Progressive Websites. We welcome the participation of socialist, antiwar and progressive websites and organizations, as well as individual activists and journalists, who are willing and prepared to form a coalition for the specific purpose of opposing Internet censorship.

However, for the International Coalition of Socialist, Antiwar and Progressive Websites to be effective, there must be an agreement on a specific set of principles, which should include:

- Safeguarding the Internet as a platform for political organization and the free exchange of information, culture and diverse viewpoints, guided by the principle that access to the Internet is a right and must be free and equally available for all.
- Uncompromising insistence on the complete independence of the Internet from control by governments and private corporations.
- Unconditional defense of net neutrality and free, unfettered and equal access to the Internet.
- The banning and illegalization of government and corporate manipulation of search algorithms and procedures, including the use of human evaluators, that restrict and block public visibility of websites.
- Irreconcilable opposition to the use of the Internet and artificial intelligence technologies to carry out surveillance of web users.
- Demanding the end to the persecution of Julian Assange and Edward Snowden and the complete restoration of their personal freedom.
- Advocating the transformation of the corporate Internet monopolies into public utilities, under internationally coordinated democratic control, to provide the highest quality service, not private profit.
- The fight against Internet censorship and the defense of democratic rights cannot be conducted through appeals to capitalist governments and the parties and politicians who serve their interests, but only in uncompromising struggle against them. Moreover, this struggle is

international in scope and totally opposed to every form and manifestation of national chauvinism, racism and imperialist militarism. Therefore, those who are truly committed to the defense of democratic rights must direct their efforts to the mobilization of the working class of all countries.

In accordance with these principles, the international coalition should undertake the following essential tasks:

- Develop a systematic campaign of written exposés to be posted on the Internet and transmitted widely through all available forms of social media as well as through the distribution of printed leaflets, brochures and pamphlets to expose Government and corporate censorship.
- Amplify awareness of the threat to Internet free speech by aiding one another in the sharing of articles, videos, interviews, graphics, and other content.
- Organize meetings and establish discussion groups on the fight against Internet censorship in work places, neighborhoods, and schools.
- Mobilize combined resources to defend and publicize websites, groups, and individuals who are targeted by the censors and the state.

Agreement on the principles and tasks of the coalition will be an effective starting point for the development of an international counter-offensive against the conspiracy of governments and corporations to censor the Internet and destroy democratic rights.

In the International Coalition of Socialist, Antiwar and Progressive Websites, there will inevitably be a wide range of opinions and conflicting views on many political questions. Participation does not require the acceptance of a single political line. The participating websites and organizations will be free to continue their own independent work.

The *World Socialist Web Site* does not seek to dictate to other organizations what their politics should be, nor will we accept any restraints on our socialist political perspective in the interest of an unprincipled unity.

However, the *World Socialist Web Site*, as the Internet presence of the International Committee of the Fourth International, will continue to advance its Marxist and socialist program, policies and analysis. We will seek to rally support for the expropriation of the technology monopolies, and the establishment of international and democratic control of the Internet. The WSWS will fight for the understanding that the effective defense of free speech and all democratic rights requires a struggle against imperialist war, the ending of the capitalist system, and the establishment of a socialist society.

The WSWS will emphasize that Internet censorship, carried out by powerful capitalist states and immense transnational corporations, can be successfully opposed only to the extent that the great power of the international working class is brought to bear in this fight. It is critical to establish an understanding in the working class of the inseparable connection between the defense of their class interests—their living standards, working conditions, wages, etc.—and the fight for democratic rights. Without access to alternative news and social media, workers in different countries will not be able to effectively coordinate their common struggles. Unfettered access to the Internet will facilitate the international unity of the working class in the global fight for socialism, democracy and equality. The *World Socialist Web Site* is convinced that the struggle against Internet censorship, as a critical component of the defense of democratic rights, will be enthusiastically supported by the working class. This is their fight. It is not simply that the involvement of the working class is important in order to defend free speech. Rather, the fight to defend free speech is important for the working class.

During coalition work and discussions, we will seek to persuade others of this program and the revolutionary socialist approach to the fight against government-corporate control and censorship of the Internet.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges and welcomes the participation of all socialist, antiwar and progressive websites, organizations and activists to collaborate in the work of the International Coalition of Socialist,

Antiwar and Progressive Websites.

Representatives of websites or organizations interested in joining the coalition should direct inquiries to endcensorship@wsws.org. Individuals who want to participate in the work of the coalition should submit this form.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact