

Facebook details plans to censor news feeds and manipulate public opinion

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Over the past two weeks, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has announced plans to reduce the amount of news shown to Facebook users and to ensure that the news that does appear comes from vetted sources, to introduce censorship to the world's largest social network.

Even as it incrementally rolls out new “features” to its product intended to prevent users from communicating freely, Facebook is publicly making the case for limiting the freedom of expression online.

The latest examples are two postings on Facebook's corporate blog by Samidh Chakrabarti, Facebook's Product Manager for Civic Engagement, and Cass R. Sunstein, professor at Harvard Law School and former Obama administration official. In the saccharine and Orwellian language that has become common in official apologies for censorship, the posts explain how the company plans to put into practice Zuckerberg's plans to limit free speech on the Internet.

In his post, Samidh Chakrabarti sets out to explain how Facebook is fighting the “downsides” that social media has “for democracy.”

“As recently as 2011, when social media played a critical role in the Arab Spring in places like Tunisia, it was heralded as a technology for liberation,” Chakrabarti writes. “A lot has changed since then.” Now, he and his colleagues at Facebook have come to the exact opposite conclusion: that social media “allows people to spread misinformation and corrode democracy.”

This change of heart came about as a result of the most recent presidential election, which “brought to the fore the risks of foreign meddling, ‘fake news’ and political polarization,” he writes.

The problem that emerged in the 2016 election is “polarization.” What exactly does this mean? It is not

the supposed “polarization” between Democrats and Republicans, both of whom represent the corporate and financial oligarchy (including Zuckerberg, net worth \$75 billion). Rather, he is concerned about the rise of social opposition, fueled by news stories on social media about the growth of inequality, the brutality of the state, the criminality of its wars, and the corruption of elected officials.

Among the various forms of “fake news” that led to her election loss in 2016, Hillary Clinton named first and foremost the transcripts of her speeches before Goldman Sachs. In other words, the “fake news” denounced by the Democratic Party and the social media giants is, in fact, “true news.”

It is exactly to prevent the distribution of “true news” that Facebook is, using Orwellian language, employing “fact-checkers” to flag stories and opinions that are to be suppressed. “Once they’ve identified those,” writes Chakrabarti, “we work to really limit the distribution of those stories on Facebook.”

These third-party fact-checkers will consist of CIA-vetted news outlets like the *New York Times*, working together with the US intelligence agencies and their army of think tanks.

In his post, Cass R. Sunstein declares that the worst thing that social media companies can do is allow their users to find the information that they are looking for. He writes:

“A little over a year ago, an important Facebook post stated, ‘The goal of News Feed is to show people the stories that are most relevant to them.’ It drew attention to Facebook’s ‘core values,’ which require an emphasis on ‘what content is most important to you.’

“Really? I hope not. From the standpoint of democracy, that’s a nightmare.”

Sunstein warns about the “dangerous” problem of

“group polarization—which takes hold when like-minded people talk to one another and end up thinking a more extreme version of what they thought before they started to talk.”

He warns, “Without shared experiences... People might see each other as... enemies.” To prevent this, “the common experiences made possible by social media, provide a form of social glue.”

In other words, if the 150 million or so people who have as much wealth as the richest three people in America all get together and start talking, they might conclude that they have a common social interest, and start seeing those three people as their “enemies.”

In order to prevent this perfectly natural realization, technology companies must work to shape opinion, but in secret. “When you show people views that challenge their own and you label them as being from the opposite side, this actually makes people dig in even more,” he concludes. Sunstein argues that Facebook should work to steer its users’ political opinions, but without informing them.

Facebook’s censorship regime is part of a drive by all the major technology firms, including Twitter and Google, to limit the freedom of expression.

Stripped of the buzzword of “social media,” what Chakrabarti and Sunstein are really attacking is freedom of speech. Amid the greatest levels of social inequality in over a century, as the US prepares to fight “great power” wars, potentially involving nuclear weapons, the ruling elite is seeking to use the monopoly power of the social media giants to create a totalitarian society, in which “national unity” is created by force through the suppression of free speech and overt efforts to disseminate state propaganda.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is working to fight this drive toward dictatorship. We urge readers to watch our webinar, “Organizing Resistance to Internet Censorship,” read the open letter from the WSWWS International Editorial Board, “For an international coalition to fight Internet censorship,” and contact us to take up this fight.



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