New York Times cashes in on Facebook's news censorship

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The *New York Times'* share price jumped 9 percent on Friday, January 19, following Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg's announcement that the social media network will prioritise news from "trusted sources." The newspaper's stock has continued to rise by a further 2.1 percent in the week since.

Using Orwellian language to describe censorship, Zuckerberg, who has a net worth of $76 billion, said that Facebook will promote "trustworthy" sources to combat political "polarization" and help build a "sense of common ground." He claimed that the level of trustworthiness of individual outlets will be determined by a survey of Facebook users, asking them if they are familiar with a news source, and, if so, how much they trust it.

The response to the announcement on Wall Street underscores that Facebook's latest change will mean the promotion of establishment outlets like the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the major cable TV broadcasters, along with the censorship of alternative and politically oppositional news sources.

The *Times* and the *Post* have been at the forefront of the drive to censor the Internet. The *Times* continued its campaign in an op-ed by Nina Jankowicz, a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center's Kennan Institute, published online yesterday. The column, "Russian trolls are only part of the problem," openly admits that the effort to censor the Internet is not primarily about Russia.

Jankowicz writes that while it is "refreshing" that Facebook and Twitter "finally realized their culpability in the spread of online disinformation," their solutions have concentrated "too heavily on removing Russian content while ignoring the problematic articles and posts created and shared by American outlets and users."

She concludes: "If these tech giants want to contribute to democracy instead of help to tear it down, they need to recognize that homegrown threats to civil discourse exist among the very users to whom they are bequeathing more responsibility."

The *Times* has become increasingly fearful in recent years that the growth of the Internet and smartphone technology has allowed millions to circumvent its control over what the population reads, shares and sees. Two-thirds of the American population now access some news on social media, according to a September 2017 poll by the Pew Research Center.

The mainstream media outlets have seen their readership drop precipitously over the last two decades, as their functioning as state propaganda outlets has led growing numbers of people to turn to alternative sources of information. According to an annual Gallup poll, the proportion of Americans who trust the media to "report the news fully, accurately and fairly" fell to 32 percent in 2016, the lowest level since Gallup began asking the question annually in 1997. This compares to 76 percent who answered in the affirmative in 1976.

There is a confluence between the political efforts of the *Times*, in collaboration with the Democratic Party and the intelligence agencies, to censor the Internet and the direct financial interests of the newspaper and its corporate shareholders, including Carlos Slim, the largest public shareholder and the world's seventh richest man.

The *Times'* average weekday circulation fell from over 1.1 million in 2002 to 575,500 in 2016, reflecting a broader decline in readership of print media. The circulation of the *Post*—which is privately owned (now by Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos) and does not publicly report these figures annually—fell by 37 percent between 2009 and 2015, two years for which figures

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are available.

Despite the *Times*' turn toward digital subscriptions, total advertisement revenue has fallen from approximately $1.3 billion in 2009 to $580 million in 2016. Last year, the *Times* announced a major restructuring, including the sacking of over 100 copy editor positions.

More than ever before, the mainstream media outlets, through a continual process over several decades of buyouts and corporate takeovers, have become concentrated in the hands of giant corporate monopolies, speaking directly on behalf of a tiny number of billionaires.

According to a 2011 *Business Insider* report, the number of media corporations that together control 90 percent of print, video and radio outlets fell from 50 in 1983 to six in 2011. They include Comcast (2017 revenue of $84.5 billion), the owner of NBC; and Disney (2017 revenue of $55.14 billion), which purchased the American Broadcasting Corporation in 1995 for $19 billion. These organizations view the democratic potential of the Internet as a dangerous threat to billions of dollars in profits.

Notwithstanding the propaganda barrage over "fake news," the fact remains that the greatest purveyors of "fake news" are the world's governments and corporate media. First among these is the *Times* itself, whose columnist Judith Miller was a leading promoter of the lies about weapons of mass destruction used to drag the American population into war in Iraq.

The *Times* sees its role not as a means of informing the population, but of serving the interests of the state and the ruling class it represents. It is an outlet that declared, in the words of its then-Executive Editor Bill Keller in 2010, that "transparency is not an absolute good," and that "freedom of the press includes freedom not to publish, and that is a freedom we exercise with some regularity." For the *Times*, censorship of the Internet and its online competitors is a business opportunity and a means for overcoming its longstanding decline in readership, profitability and influence.

Keller had earlier warned that the growth of the Internet brought with it the danger of "information anarchy."

The changes to Facebook's news feed algorithms are the latest fronts in a McCarthyite campaign, spearheaded by the Democratic Party and giant technology corporations, to present the growth of social and political tensions in the US as the outcome of Russian influence.

The political and media establishment is seeking to censor alternative sources of information, including socialist and oppositional websites such as the *World Socialist Web Site*, under conditions of mounting social discontent and the return of "great power" conflict.

The WSWS, which is taking up a fight against the drive to dictatorship, urges our readers to watch our webinar, "Organizing Resistance to Internet Censorship ," read the open letter from the WSWS International Editorial Board, "For an international coalition to fight Internet censorship," and contact us to join this fight.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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