

In letter to Congress, social media companies outline plans for mass censorship

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Leading US technology companies are hiring thousands more human reviewers and developing artificial intelligence algorithms to monitor and censor political speech on the internet, according to letters submitted to Congress prior to January 16 and released on January 25.

The letters from Facebook, Twitter and Google are written follow-ups to questions at the Senate Intelligence Committee hearing into “Social Media Influence in the 2016 U.S. Elections,” held on November 1, 2017.

Facebook Vice President and General Counsel Colin Stretch wrote that the company will double the size of its army of content moderators from 10,000 to 20,000 people, and add another 3,000 employees to its Community Operations department, which will “review content that our users and automated tools flag as inappropriate, dangerous, abusive, or otherwise violating our policies.”

These changes will help “to identify new kinds of abuse on our platform, and to respond quickly to reports from our community and from law enforcement.”

In addition, Facebook is adding 1,000 staff to its “teams dedicated to reviewing ads around the globe.” Their work will be used to “train our automated review systems to be more efficient and effective at finding improper ads and enforcing our policies.”

Facebook’s human reviewers work in tandem with increasingly powerful artificial intelligence algorithms, which learn to mirror the decision-making behavior of human censors, allowing for a vast increase in the scale of censorship.

As part of its promotion of greater election “transparency,” Facebook is requiring all political advertisers to register and verify their name and

location. Stretch’s letter states that for advertisers who “do not actively disclose themselves, we are building machine learning tools that will help us find them.” Such algorithms would have to be capable of determining whether specific content shared on its platform is political.

Stretch adds that the investments in “security issues will be so significant that we have informed investors that we expect that the amount that we will spend will impact our profitability.”

Responding to a question from Democratic Senator Kamala Harris, Google Senior Vice President and General Counsel Kent Walker noted that the company is continuing to update the algorithms used to determine which results are surfaced on Google Search. “In the last few months, we have altered our algorithm once again to ensure irrelevant or unverified results are replaced by more relevant results,” Walker stated.

Walker also noted that Google regularly monitors “results on our products after public safety events.” These “public safety events” undoubtedly also include studying population-wide responses to demonstrations, military operations, police shootings, worker strikes and anti-immigrant raids in the United States and internationally.

Walker also notes that the content reviews that Google uses to suppress or promote different websites on its search engine are increasingly being performed by artificial intelligence programs. “Google serves billions of users every day and our solutions need to work at scale,” he notes. “We rely not only on the thousands of human reviewers we have hired and trained, but we’ve also dedicated some of our top engineers to develop machine learning tools and algorithms to protect our platforms and promote adherence to our policies.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* has documented changes to Google's search result algorithms—first announced last April under the banner of combating “fake news” and promoting “authoritative content”—are aimed at blocking search traffic to socialist, left-wing and antiwar publications, particularly the WSWS.

The questions addressed to the social media companies by Democratic and Republican lawmakers highlight the authoritarian character of the current campaign over so-called Russian “meddling” in US politics.

Republican Senator Tom Cotton demanded that Facebook and Twitter explain why they were continuing to allow Wikileaks, a journalistic outlet that has published cables exposing US government spying and war crimes, its head Julian Assange, and whistleblower Edward Snowden, who revealed mass NSA spying on the American and world population, to maintain Twitter and Facebook accounts.

Democratic Senator Harris declared that “much broader than Russian propaganda” was the problem of “false” and “hyper-partisan” content, i.e., online views opposed to those of the US media and political establishment. Democrat Diane Feinstein demanded to know whether Facebook had maintained a database of 126 million Americans who allegedly viewed or shared posts “generated” in Russia.

Since the Senate committee hearings, the social media companies have gone even further than the actions outlined in the documents submitted to Congress. In December, Facebook announced that it was creating a portal to show users which material supposedly linked to Russian pages they had previously read. In a similarly threatening statement making clear that it was following all users' political activity, Twitter sent out a message notifying users who it claimed had shared or followed “Russian propaganda.”

On January 12, Facebook announced that it was deprioritizing news and political content on users' News Feed and promoting so-called “personal moments.” One week later, it announced that the news that it does display to users would be skewed toward “trustworthy” sources to the detriment of independent news outlets—leading to a spike in share prices for the *New York Times*. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced on Monday that the News Feed will now promote news sources in users' own towns or cities, as

that opposed to those focused on “divisive national issues.” These actions are explicitly aimed at promoting establishment news outlets and preventing users from being able to reach alternative perspectives on major world events and political issues.

The building of a regime of censorship and political surveillance, increasingly powered by artificial intelligence technology, underscores the urgency of the warning issued by the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site*—in its open letter to socialist, left-wing and progressive websites, “For an International Coalition to fight Internet Censorship”—that “the technological scaffolding of a 21st century capitalist police state is being erected.” We urge all of our readers to read and share the open letter, and contact us to get involved in the fight against Internet censorship.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact