From Facebook to Policebook

Andre Damon
2 February 2018

On Wednesday, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg posted a notice outlining extraordinary plans by the social media company to monitor all the postings and messages of its users, censor independent journalism, and use artificial intelligence (AI) to report users to the police and intelligence agencies.

Zuckerberg began his post, released in conjunction with the company's quarterly earnings report, by declaring that 2017 was a "hard year" for Facebook. "The world feels anxious and divided—and that played out on Facebook. We've seen abuse on our platform, including interference from nation states, the spread of news that is false, sensational and polarizing, and debate about the utility of social media." Facebook, he writes, has the responsibility to "amplify the good and prevent harm. That is my personal challenge for 2018."

In Facebook's "newspeak," this means that the company will act aggressively this year to suppress the spread of information online and censor content, under the guise of combatting "fake news" and "Russian meddling."

The truly ominous implications of this project are outlined in Zuckerberg's post. Among Facebook's initiatives, he writes, is "new technology to detect suicidal posts that has helped first responders reach more than 100 people who needed help quickly, and we've built AI systems to flag suspicious behavior around elections in real time and remove terrorist content."

In other words, Facebook has introduced AI systems to collect, monitor and interpret all the information posted on its social media platform. As always, the introduction of such a sweeping system of mass surveillance is justified with seemingly praiseworthy motivations. After all, who could object to measures aimed at stopping suicides or terrorist attacks? The actual purpose of the new systems, however, is very different.

Zuckerberg points to the sweeping scope of the company's artificial intelligence plans later: "Our goal with AI is to understand the meaning of all the content on Facebook." Every single post, photo, video, message, comment, reaction and share will be fed into the company's increasingly powerful computer systems to be analyzed for "harmful" content, and reported to the police and intelligence agencies as deemed necessary.

The real—and sinister—aim of Facebook's actions is also made clear by the other initiatives that the company is taking. Most significantly, Zuckerberg stressed the company's determination to make sure that "the information you see on Facebook comes from broadly trusted and high-quality sources, in order to counter misinformation and polarization."

What are these "broadly trusted" sources? "For example, take the Wall Street Journal or New York Times," wrote the multibillionaire CEO. "Even if you don't read them or don't agree with everything they write, most people have confidence that they're high quality journalism. On the flip side, there are blogs that have intense followings but are not widely trusted beyond their core audience. We will show those publications somewhat less."

In other words, corporate media sources will be promoted, while other publications, even those that "have intense followings," will be demoted. As for being "shown somewhat less," what Zuckerberg means is that they will be blocked from reaching a broader audience. More simply, they will be censored.

In addition to censoring news from alternative sources, Zuckerberg states at the beginning of his post that Facebook is working to "show fewer viral videos" because such content is not "good for people's well-being and for society."

The viral videos Zuckerberg is referring to include footage of police violence, social exposures like reporting on last year's Grenfell Tower inferno that exposed social inequality in London, and documentation of the war crimes carried out by the US military. Any such content will be "demoted," which Zuckerberg later notes "reduces an article's traffic by 80 percent."

Zuckerberg's central pretense—that Facebook will promote sources that "people have confidence" in—is a

fraud. In fact, according to a Gallup poll published last year, Americans' trust in the mass media "to report the news fully, accurately and fairly" reached its lowest level in polling history, with only 32 percent of participants saying they have a "great deal" or "fair amount" of trust. At the same time, the use of social media to read news has been growing exponentially, reaching two-thirds of the US population according to a poll by the Pew Research Center.

The growth in the popularity of Facebook and other social media networks was in large measure due to the fact that they allowed their users access to information and viewpoints unavailable through mainstream media outlets. Now, Facebook has reversed course and declared that its intention is to promote the official narrative and block independent news sources that question it.

Facebook, Google, Twitter and other giant social media companies—working closely with intelligence agencies and governments—are seeking to leverage their role as mechanisms of communication to become instruments of censorship and repression. In the process, they are turning one of the most important and liberating technological advances of the 21st century, the growth and expansion of artificial intelligence, into a mechanism for police control and dictatorship.

The fight against Internet censorship is an urgent task facing workers all over the world. The World Socialist Web Site is leading the fight against the greatest threat to free speech since the Second World War. On January 23, it published an open letter calling for an international coalition of socialist, antiwar, left-wing and progressive websites, organizations and activists to fight Internet censorship.

The principles for this coalition are:

• 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.

We urge all of those who agree with these principles to contact the World Socialist Web Site and take up the fight against Internet censorship.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact