

# Corporate giant Unilever demands crackdown on oppositional Internet content

Will Morrow  
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The drive to censor the Internet took another step this week with a public statement by Keith Weed, the chief marketing officer for the London-based multinational Unilever, threatening to withdraw advertising from social media platforms if they fail to suppress “toxic content.”

Weed reportedly told an annual leadership meeting of the Interactive Advertising Bureau in Palm Desert, California that the company “will not invest in platforms or environments” that “create divisions in society, and promote anger or hate.” He added, “We will prioritize investing only in responsible platforms that are committed to creating a positive impact in society.”

Excerpts of Weed’s remarks—the most explicit of their kind from a major corporate executive—were leaked to several media outlets, including the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Guardian*. They were immediately featured on NBC News and other major American news outlets on Sunday. The *Journal’s* report was accompanied by an interview with Weed.

The coordinated release was designed to escalate the propaganda offensive by the Democratic Party and US intelligence agencies, together with the corporate media, for Internet censorship. The fraudulent premise for this assault on freedom of speech, both in the US and across Europe, is the claim that political opposition and social tensions are the product not of poverty, inequality and policies of austerity and militarism, but of “fake news” spread by Russia through social media.

Weed’s statements preceded yesterday’s US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence hearing, which witnessed a series of hysterical denunciations of Russia by politicians and intelligence agents. The Democratic vice-chairman of the committee, Mark Warner of Virginia, declared that Russia “utilized our social

media platforms to push and spread misinformation at an unprecedented scale.”

Facebook responded to Weed’s threats by declaring, “[W]e fully support Unilever’s commitments and are working closely with them.” The *Journal* stated that Unilever “has already held discussions” with Facebook, Google, Twitter, Snap and Amazon “to share ideas about what each can do to improve.”

Weed absurdly framed his demand for censorship, made on behalf of a multibillion-dollar global corporation, as the expression of popular anger over the supposed spread of “fake news.” He referred to research showing a decline in trust in social media and a “perceived lack of focus” in the form of “illegal, unethical and extremist behavior and material on” social media platforms. Speaking to the *Wall Street Journal*, he claimed to be articulating the concerns of consumers over “fake news” and “Russians influencing the US election.”

In reality, the intervention by Unilever—a consumer products behemoth with a market capitalization of \$157 billion and annual revenues of \$65 billion, more than the gross domestic product of many countries—only highlights the economic and political forces driving the censorship campaign: an alliance of the military/intelligence apparatus, giant technology firms and the corporate-financial oligarchy.

Unilever’s annual marketing outlays of nearly \$9 billion place it in the top five companies in that category globally. It owns dozens of brands used by some 2.5 billion people around the world, including Dove soap, Rexona deodorant and food products Cornetto, Magnum and Lipton. Weed’s statements amount to a declaration that Unilever will use this economic power to filter what the world’s population can and cannot read online.

This is in line with a long and reactionary tradition. Large advertisers played a significant role in enforcing the McCarthyite witch hunt of socialist and left-wing figures in the US during the late 1940s and 1950s. General Motors, DuPont, Reynolds Tobacco and other major companies were backers of the notorious anticommunist periodical *Counterattack*, which published names of suspected communist sympathizers and forced the removal of targeted performers and critical content from programs they sponsored.

In one of many such cases, the blacklisted Jean Muir was dropped from the television show “The Aldrich Family” after General Foods, the program’s sponsor, told NBC it would not sponsor programs featuring “controversial persons.”

In another development, Susan Wojcicki, the CEO of YouTube (owned by Google’s parent company, Alphabet), told a Code Media conference in Los Angeles that Facebook “should get back to baby pictures and sharing.” The statement is a reference to Facebook’s announcement last month that it is deprioritizing news content on its News Feed in favor of “personal moments.” The change is one of a number of recent measures to prevent Facebook users from accessing news and analysis outside of officially sanctioned corporate outlets.

UK Home Secretary Amber Rudd on Tuesday released a government-developed application that uses machine-learning algorithms to automatically detect ISIS-related content in videos so that it can be censored.

The BBC wrote that the tool was seen by the government as a way to demonstrate that its “demand for a clampdown on extremist activity was not unreasonable.” Rudd stated, “The technology is there. There are tools out there that can do exactly what we’re asking for,” i.e., identifying and censoring video content. The new application will be provided free of charge to smaller video hosting companies, and the government will consider making its use legally mandatory.

The *Washington Post*, which along with the *New York Times* has been at the forefront of the censorship campaign, linked the UK government’s announcement to the intervention of Unilever, writing that it came “amid mounting pressure on social media companies to do more to remove extremist content from their

platforms.”



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