

New York University: A center of militarism, mass surveillance and censorship

Part 3: NYU and the efforts to censor the Internet

The IYSSE at NYU
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This is the third in a three-part series. The first part is “NYU and the preparations of US imperialism for world war,” and the second part is “NYU’s role in ‘cybersecurity’ and mass surveillance”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has documented, the state and companies like Google, Facebook and Twitter are seeking to censor free speech on the Internet as part of the drive to world war and mass suppression of working class struggles.

Through its newly created Center for Data Science and the Social Media and Political Participation (SMAPP) Lab, NYU is involved in developing technologies and training the personnel needed to realize this program of mass censorship.

NYU’s Center for Data Science

NYU’s Center for Data Science (CDS), which is affiliated with the Courant Institute of Mathematical Sciences, was founded by Yann LeCun in 2013. LeCun is a professor at the Courant Institute and one of the best-known experts in the field of Artificial Intelligence. Just after he founded the center, in 2014, he was personally recruited by Facebook’s CEO Mark Zuckerberg to head the company’s new AI research division, a position he held until January 2018. While working at Facebook, LeCun continued to teach and do research at NYU.

The idea behind the center was, as LeCun himself put it in an interview, to create a “partnership between NYU and Facebook ... they [Facebook] would be right next door—770 Broadway, just up the street.” This cooperation, LeCun argued, would allow him “to do academic-style research here at Courant, and at the same time, lead research projects that are better done in an industry environment” at Facebook.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is currently the most important branch in IT and is rapidly transforming the economy. It designates various areas of machine learning. As such, AI has become increasingly significant for major corporations and banks, as well as the military. AI is central to the functioning of internal data systems and for the development of social media platforms like Facebook and search engines such as Google.

Now, AI is being used to implement the censorship measures to the Facebook newsfeed that were recently announced by Mark Zuckerberg: blocking and downgrading political posts, and upgrading personal posts and “local” news (see: “From Facebook to Policebook”).

AI is also instrumental to the process of downgrading or upgrading content in Google searches, a mechanism with which the company has been blacklisting socialist, antiwar and progressive websites like the

World Socialist Web Site, Truthdig, Consortiumnews and others.

In recent years, investments in AI technologies and start-ups have grown dramatically, reaching an average of over \$1 billion per quarter in 2017. New York City has become the most important hub for AI development after Silicon Valley. Both Google and Facebook have AI research labs in the city. In terms of Venture Capital funding for AI start-ups, the New York Metro area has, in fact, become number one, with over \$4.227 billion. New York City now boasts over 8,000 openings in AI per year, more than any other city in the US.

With the Center for Data Science and the more recently established AI Now Institute (formed under the umbrella of the Tandon School of Engineering), NYU has become a hub for AI development in the US.

In 2017, the CDS hosted the Future Labs AI Summit at NYU, which included representatives of various banks and Google AI Research. The CDS’s faculty counts no less than 21 professors. The “affiliated faculty” includes a stunning 69 professors. On top of that, the CDS also has three adjuncts, three postdocs, eight data science fellows and four research engineers. The Center offers an MS and a PhD program, as well as a non-degree program that is aimed at professionals. Overall, the CDS is significantly larger than many departments of the university.

Apart from doing research, the CDS is clearly intended to train people to fill the ever-growing ranks of AI personnel in the major banks and corporations. According to its website, the CDS holds “weekly lunch information sessions with representatives from companies employing data scientists in innovative ways.” These sessions have hosted representatives of Google, Facebook, JP Morgan and Graham Capital Management, to name but a few.

While no ties to the US military and intelligence agencies have been made public, there is little doubt that the “revolving door” between academia, business and the government is in place here, perhaps even more so than anywhere else.

The US military has placed a great stress on developing its AI capacities. In 2014, the former secretary of defense Chuck Hagel declared that AI will define the next generation of warfare and advanced the concept of a “Third Offset Strategy.” Military analysts see the US involved in an “AI arms race” with Russia and China, in particular. In August 2017, James Mattis toured the headquarters of Google, Amazon and Facebook to discuss how the technology they develop can be applied to the US armed forces. Mattis stated that these companies’ AI technologies “got to be better integrated by the DoD.”

According to Julian Assange, “Google is now integrating AI systems with the national security system.” Earlier this month, it became known that Google is already putting its AI at the disposal of the US military for its drone warfare as part of the so-called Project Maven (see: “Google’s alliance with the military: The ruling class responds to social unrest in

America”).

The Social Media and Political Participation (SMaPP) Lab

The SMaPP lab was created in 2014. Judging by its own website, it was founded largely in response to the massive role that social media played in the organization of the working class uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011. The SMaPP lab is “interdisciplinary” and includes professors, researchers and graduate students from political sciences and behavioral psychology, as well as biology and computer science. Some of them are also affiliated with the NYU Center for Data Science.

The faculty currently numbers four NYU professors, nine graduate research assistants (who are also PhD students at NYU), two undergraduate assistants, two postdocs, two data scientists and research engineers and eight “collaborators” from universities such as MIT and Princeton.

However, the total number of “investigators” who are listed on the website of NYU’s Center for Advanced Global Studies is much larger: 25 (including the people numbered above). Among them are academics from Northeastern University, the University of Pennsylvania, Stanford, the University of Glasgow, NYU Abu Dhabi and others, as well as Eytan Bakshy, a senior analyst at Facebook’s Core Data Science Team, and David Rothschild from Microsoft Research. At Microsoft, Rothschild’s “primary body of work is on forecasting, and understanding public interest and sentiment,” according to his personal website.

So far, the SMaPP has organized six official conferences. On its web page, it lists over 20 papers that were published in academic journals and dozens of articles that were published in mainstream media. One could, of course, argue that this research is aimed primarily or even solely at advancing the understanding of political scientists.

However, leaving aside the revolving door between American political science departments and the American government and intelligence agencies, it becomes fairly clear in whose interest this “research” is conducted if one takes a closer look at the funding sources of the SMaPP and some of the figures involved in it.

Along with the National Science Foundation (NSF), the main sponsors of the lab include the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Knight Foundation. The latter, which had an endowment of \$2.4 billion in 2014, is currently headed by Alberto Imbargüen. Formerly the publisher of the *Miami Herald* and a member of the board of the Council on Foreign Relations, Imbargüen is now a member of the boards of PepsiCo, AMR Corporation (American Airlines) and AOL, as well as a member of the US Secretary of State’s Foreign Affairs Policy Board, and the Washington-based think tank Inter-American Dialogue.

One of the co-founders of the lab and its “principal investigator” is Joshua Tucker, professor at NYU’s Political Science Department and currently the head of NYU’s Jordan Center for the Advanced Research of Russia.

In 2014, Tucker was awarded a \$757,142 grant by NYU’s Center for Advanced Global Studies for developing the SMaPP. That same year, he made a presentation to the board of directors of the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The Carnegie Corporation of New York is one of the main US think tanks that focus on advancing US imperialist interests in the former Soviet Union, especially Russia. It has published several of the findings at the SMaPP and is also the sponsor of many events at NYU’s Jordan Center. Tucker also includes on his CV a presentation he delivered to the “JP Morgan Investment Trust Post-Election Conversation” in 2016.

In its web page “about” description, the SMaPP states: “Every time individuals use social media, they leave behind a digital footprint of what

was communicated, when it was communicated, and, to whom it was communicated. Typically, such precise estimates of these variables are available only to laboratory investigators working in artificial settings. To our knowledge, no previous research team has successfully used fine-grained social influence data such as these to predict consequential behavioral outcomes, such as attendance at a given protest or rally or the casting of a vote in an election. We are also conducting panel surveys, which are essential for drawing causal inferences about the cognitive and motivational processes whereby social media use facilitates political participation.”

There are two main areas on which the SMaPP seems to focus: first, on an analysis of governmental actors and opposition parties on social media. The detection and analysis of their way of working on social media, above all Twitter, was explored in numerous recent protests, including the Ukraine crisis in 2014. Second, the SMaPP has worked to develop technological tools to monitor political behavior, especially of Twitter users (some of which it has posted online), and to develop algorithms which allow academics and governments to predict, on the basis of Twitter posts and relations, how likely an individual is to participate in political and social protests.

In a 2015 study, “The Critical Periphery in the Growth of Social Protests,” researchers of the SMaPP tried to understand the role of the “critical periphery” and of “minority” actors on social media (above all Twitter) in the dynamic of protest development and participation on Twitter. The study concluded that “peripheral users in online protest networks may be as important in expanding the reach of messages as the highly committed minority at the core.”

Another study from 2016, titled “Social Networks and Protest Participation: Evidence from 93 Million Twitter Users,” claimed to “offer the first large-scale empirical support for the claim that social network structure influences protest participation.” The study, coauthored by Jennifer Larson (NYU), Jonathan Nagler (NYU), Joshua Tucker (NYU) and Jonathan Ronen (Berlin Institute for Medical Systems Biology), found that someone with “direct ties to a person highly motivated to participate in a protest is more likely to participate herself than someone occupying a network position farther away from, or connected with weaker ties to, others intent on protesting.”

Concluded

As this exposure has shown, NYU has become a major nexus connecting Wall Street, the Democratic Party, the American national security state apparatus and academia. Through a myriad of “centers,” trustees and professors, it is closely integrated into the US war machine and the efforts to develop technologies for Internet censorship and mass surveillance.

The IYSSE at NYU is dedicated to the struggle against militarism and censorship. On March 28, the IYSSE will hold a meeting at NYU’s Kimmel Center to organize resistance against the censorship campaign by the American state, Google, and Facebook.

We urge all students at NYU and other New York City schools who are opposed to imperialist war and censorship to come to this meeting and join the IYSSE and take up the fight for socialism at what is one of the ideological and academic bastions of US imperialism.



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