

Behind the Facebook data scandal: The drive to censor the Internet

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23 March 2018

In a week full of major social and political developments, no single topic has occupied the US media outlets more than the scandal surrounding Facebook's relationship with Cambridge Analytica, the election data company previously associated with former Trump campaign Chairman Steve Bannon.

The *New York Times* has led with the story three out of the last five days and carried at least one front-page story every day this week. The rest of the mainstream press has followed suit, promoting a campaign—without any evident popular following—for users to leave the social media company, complete with a ready-made hashtag: #DeleteFacebook. In response to the campaign, Facebook's stock price has fallen by 11 percent, wiping out some \$50 billion from the company's market capitalization.

The harvesting of the personal information of some 50 million Facebook users by Cambridge Analytica raises serious privacy concerns. But the media firestorm sparked by the synchronized release of the story by the *New York Times* and the *Guardian* has far darker and more nefarious motives. Using the election data scandal as a cover, the media, working with the intelligence agencies and leading congressional Democrats, is seeking to create the climate for a crackdown on political opposition on the world's largest social network.

From the standpoint of bourgeois election campaigns, massive data harvesting operations are par for the course. In 2012, the Obama reelection campaign did essentially the same thing as Cambridge Analytica, prompting users to install a Facebook app that harvested the information of users' entire contact list, netting up to 190 million profiles. At the time, the practice was not only widely reported, but praised by major news outlets as evidence of the innovative and

forward-thinking nature of the campaign.

Moreover, despite having access to Cambridge Analytica's massive trove of Facebook information, the Trump campaign did not choose to use the data because it already had access to an even bigger, more comprehensive, and more accurate dataset from the Republican National Committee.

Flush with hundreds of millions of dollars in cash, secured from billionaire donors who are wealthier than ever, modern bourgeois election campaigns employ hundreds, or even thousands, of staff members, many with advanced computer science and statistics degrees, to mine, quantify, and analyze private data, with the aim of influencing and shaping voters' political views.

These operations massively dwarf the scale of the alleged “meddling” by “Russians” in the 2016 presidential election, which, according to a report submitted by Facebook to the Senate Intelligence Committee, consisted of buying some \$100,000 of Facebook advertisements both before and after the election.

Given the diminutive scale of the role played by Cambridge Analytica in the election campaign, what accounts for the massive campaign in the press for users to “Delete Facebook?”

The real issues underlying the campaign can be seen in another report, published on the front page of the *New York Times* Wednesday, headlined, “Fed Up, Teachers in Oklahoma May Walk Next,” warning that the strike movement by educators, which began in West Virginia, risks spreading to Oklahoma, Arizona, and other states.

The article notes that “several Facebook groups” have been “pushing for a walkout,” and that “Rank-and-file teachers” have used the social media network to organize outside of the framework of the teachers'

unions.

The growth of working-class opposition is the real target of the media firestorm over Facebook's alleged data lapse. The aim of the press campaign is to create the climate for the introduction of even more explicit censorship measures.

In successive interviews responding to the allegations, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg and Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg, reversing their previous positions, vociferously endorsed a bill working its way through Congress to target "foreign meddling" in US politics by severely restricting the purchase of political advertisements—one of the few avenues left open to independent news outlets to attract a broader readership on Facebook.

"We're open to regulation. We work with lawmakers all over the world," Sandberg told CNBC. Zuckerberg, speaking to CNN, said he would "love to see" regulation targeting Facebook advertisements like those allegedly purchased by "Russians."

In his CNN interview, Zuckerberg pledged to redouble Facebook's efforts to combat the efforts of "folks trying to sow division." He said the company would "do a better job of tracing and using AI tools to be able to scan and observe a lot of what is going on." He said that he was open to further government regulation of the company, that is, a greater integration of Facebook with the state and its intelligence agencies.

He then went on to say that Facebook now employs "15,000 people working on security and content review," and that this number would rise to 20,000 by the end of the year.

This amazing admission means that, based on the company's employee headcount of 25,000 at the beginning of this year, most of the company's employees are engaged in reviewing and censoring user content. From a company nominally dedicated to helping users share information and learn about the world, Facebook is being transformed into an instrument of police repression and censorship.

The media is working to create the political climate for the further implementation of mass censorship on the world's largest social media platform.

Behind the scenes, the campaign has been accompanied by the announcement this week by Google of a "news initiative" aimed at censoring independent news outlets like the *World Socialist Web*

Site and promoting "trustworthy" news sources such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. The announcement marks a significant intensification of measures, beginning with changes in Google's search algorithm last April, that have led to a massive drop in search traffic to left-wing, anti-war, and socialist web sites.

Workers entering into struggle to defend their jobs, wages, and working conditions must see the drive toward censorship for what it is: not only an existential threat to their constitutionally protected freedom of expression, but an effort to smash their efforts at self-organization and struggle to break free of the grip of the trade union bureaucracy.

We urge all workers and young people who understand the importance of this fight to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* and join its campaign against Internet censorship.

To expose the growing drive toward censorship, and to organize resistance, the World Socialist Web Site, International Youth and Students for Social Equality, and the Socialist Equality Party are holding a series of meetings throughout the US, "Organizing Resistance to Internet Censorship" and a conference in Detroit on April 22, "The resurgence of class struggle and the fight against Internet censorship." We urge all of our readers to attend these meetings, publicize them as widely as possible, and contact the WSWS to organize a meeting in your area.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact