Amid censorship drive, Facebook CEO to testify before Congress

Andre Damon
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Amid a relentless drive to censor the Internet, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has reportedly agreed to demands by leading Democrats to testify before Congress.

Zuckerberg's upcoming testimony is the result of an ongoing campaign, led by the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*, together with leading Congressional Democrats, to bring the company closer into alignment with the demands of the US intelligence agencies to carry out sweeping Internet censorship measures.

On March 18, the two newspapers simultaneously published revelations that the Trump campaign purchased data on some 50 million Facebook users, harvested by Cambridge Analytica.

The revelations raise serious questions about the vast amounts of data at the disposal of technology giants such as Google, Facebook and Twitter. But the media firestorm generated in the wake of the revelation is entirely out of proportion with what has been revealed. In 2012, the Obama reelection campaign did essentially the same thing as Cambridge Analytica but on an even larger scale, and was praised by the press for its savvy use of social media.

The media, at the direction of figures such as Democrat Mark Warner, a leading spokesman of the intelligence agencies in the US Congress, has used the scandal to whip up a pressure campaign aimed at bringing Zuckerberg into line, or even threatening a boardroom coup against him.

To gain traction with a broader public, the media campaign against the company's leadership is structured as an amalgam. It combines a fact—that the Trump campaign received Facebook data collected without users' consent—with an untruth: that the Russian government used Facebook to "sow division" in American society and was responsible for the election of Donald Trump.

The campaign thus seeks to exploit genuine opposition within the American population to the vast and unchecked power of the major technology giants—which treat users' most private data as their own personal property, to be analyzed, monetized and shared with the intelligence agencies—and tie it to a right-wing campaign to censor the Internet.

Since the release of the Cambridge Analytica story, Facebook's stock price has fallen by more than 15 percent, wiping $80 billion out of its market value.

Zuckerberg, the fourth-richest man in America and the owner of 35 percent of Facebook's stock, has been in the crosshairs of Warner and his fellow propagandists for censorship since his statement, in November 2016, that "the idea that fake news on Facebook, of which there is a very small amount of the content, influences the election is a pretty crazy idea."

Zuckerberg quickly changed his tune, and Facebook has since rushed to the forefront of the drive to censor the Internet. It has hired over 15,000 staff to censor users' content and plans to boost this number to 20,000 by the end of the year. Earlier this year, the company announced plans to promote "trustworthy" news sources, such as the *New York Times*, to the detriment of independent news sites and citizen journalists.

But this has not been enough. Speaking on NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday, Warner declared, "I don't think Facebook has been fully forthcoming." He said he "called out Facebook back in December of '16," but the company "blew that off."

He added, "What we saw in 2016 was the broad weaponization of information by Russians… I think the whole industry has been reluctant to accept the fact that we're seeing the dark underbelly of social media."

Threatening the company, Warner declared, "I think

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there will be appropriate penalties. But I think it raises the bigger question. All of these social media platform companies have said they have no responsibility for any of the content. I think we have to relook at that."

Taking up Warner's remark, "Meet the Press" host Chuck Todd added, "I think if you're a social media company, you can drop the word social. You're a media company."

That same day, Warner told CBS's "Face the Nation": "Facebook, unfortunately, and all the social media companies, were really slow to respond." He continued, "I think Mr. Zuckerberg needs to come and testify before Congress, not just put an advertisement in his paper. He said he would if he was the right guy. He is the right guy. He can't send a staff."

The aim of this campaign is to fundamentally alter the basic legal framework within which technology companies operate. Under the present law they are treated, roughly, like libraries instead of newspapers, and therefore not legally responsible for the content of their users' communications.

By making technology companies legally liable for content posted by their users, Warner and his political allies hope to force the technology giants to implement even more heavy-handed censorship measures, with the aim of blocking all forms of political opposition.

The moves to censor the Internet have been spurred on by the growing emergence of social opposition within the United States. Last month, teachers in West Virginia defied their union in a strike movement to defend their health care, and educators throughout the country are planning to follow suit. And last weekend, millions of young people marched in opposition to the violence that pervades American society.

Under conditions of soaring social inequality and rising war threats, the drive to censor the Internet is aimed at criminalizing these and all other forms of social opposition.

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