

Facebook intensifies censorship ahead of congressional testimony by Zuckerberg

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Ahead of scheduled congressional testimony by CEO Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook has announced a series of censorship measures that strike a blow against online anonymity and tighten the company's grip on what users can say on its platform.

Zuckerberg announced Friday that the company will "require people who manage large pages to be verified," meaning they will have to provide the company, and by extension the US government, with their real names and locations.

Zuckerberg declared that the measure "will make it much harder for people to run pages using fake accounts, or to grow virally and spread misinformation or divisive content." In addition, the company will prohibit ad purchases by individuals whose identities have not been "verified."

The move is a major step toward the fulfillment of the demand by the US intelligence agencies that social media companies end online anonymity, making it easier not only to track, but to arrest people for expressing oppositional political opinions.

Zuckerberg added that the move would involve the hiring of thousands of additional censors and "security" personnel. "In order to require verification for all of these pages and advertisers, we will hire thousands of more people," he wrote.

Within hours of the announcement by Facebook on Friday, the company blocked an advertisement for a public meeting held by the Socialist Equality Party, which is affiliated with the *World Socialist Web Site*, entitled "No to war, inequality, and censorship," on the grounds that it does not allow ads that contain "shocking, disrespectful, or sensational content." Other ads related to the Oklahoma teachers strike were blocked yesterday.

Zuckerberg's announcement came amidst a media-

driven campaign to demonize the company for downplaying the danger of "fake news" and "propaganda" on its platform. This campaign, presented as a defense of users' "privacy," has led the company's stock price to fall by more than 15 percent over the past three weeks. It has also fueled speculation that Zuckerberg, who owns 28 percent of Facebook stock, could be ousted in a boardroom coup.

In the course of a few weeks, Zuckerberg has gone from a media darling to a virtual pariah, complete with a lampooning on *Saturday Night Live*. Every news story about the company now includes a picture of the "beleaguered" executive sporting a frown—the type of treatment usually reserved for politicians embroiled in sex scandals.

The nominal reason for the shift is the media-driven scandal surrounding the election data firm Cambridge Analytica, tied to former Trump chief strategist Steve Bannon. Last month, *The New York Times* and *Guardian* simultaneously revealed that the company had used an app to harvest data on tens of millions of Facebook users, which was then turned over to the Trump campaign. Unmentioned in any of the media accounts is the fact that the Obama campaign did effectively the same thing in 2012, to media acclaim.

CBS's "Face the Nation" talk show, for example, devoting approximately a third of the program's airtime yesterday to discussion of Facebook—amidst a developing trade war with China, a war campaign against Syria, and the deployment of the military on the US-Mexico border.

The media's campaign against Facebook has nothing to do with protecting users' privacy, but rather is aimed at creating the best possible conditions for the imposition of massive new restrictions on the freedom of expression on the world's largest social media

network.

This was made clear by the comments of Democratic Senator Mark Warner (Virginia), who, when asked by a DC-area radio reporter Friday about the Cambridge Analytica scandal and Congress's role in protecting "people's data," replied by denouncing Facebook's resistance to his claims that it was being used to spread "fake news."

Warner told the reporter, "I first called out Facebook and some of the social media platforms in December of 2016. For the first six months, the companies just kind of blew off these allegations, but these proved to be true; that Russia used their social media platforms with fake accounts to spread false information, they paid for political advertising on their platforms." He added that the company has "got a lot of explaining to do."

Commenting on the tone of the expected hearings on "Face the Nation," Nick Thompson, the editor of *Wired* who has been a leading advocate of censorship, said that "Congress is going to be out for blood" when Zuckerberg testifies. He declared that the company would pay for the "sins" of having "stuck their heads in the sand" in response to demands that it implement censorship measures.

Thompson added that Facebook's latest measures were intended to "soften the blow" ahead of Zuckerberg's testimony. It is clear, however, that the measures that have already been announced are just a down payment on the crackdown on freedom of expression that is being prepared.

Zuckerberg's testimony comes amidst a mounting strike waves by workers throughout the United States, including strikes by educators in Oklahoma and Arizona. Numerous media accounts have noted the vital role played by Facebook in organizing resistance by workers independent of the unions.

Under conditions of mounting class struggle, increasingly bitter divisions within the ruling elite, and the growing danger of war, the ruling elite is radically accelerating its drive to censor the Internet. The aim is to prevent the organization of social opposition and the dissemination of information that questions the official narrative of events.

Zuckerberg's testimony will take place just one day after a meeting of the United Nations Security Council, at which the United States will press for an even greater intervention against Syria and Russia, nominally in

response to an alleged chemical weapons attack attributed by the US media, without any substantiation, to the Syrian government.

The war fever is aimed not only at securing American imperialism's predatory war aims in the Middle East, but, perhaps even more importantly, to create the conditions for domestic repression and political censorship at home.



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