

Facebook expands censorship of news organizations with restrictions on political ads

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Facebook's new measures restricting use of its advertising platform have begun to impact news and media organizations, according to a report published Friday by the *Verge*. The moves are the latest step in the company's campaign to censor its platform under the bogus pretext of combating "Russian interference" and "fake news."

Starting May 24, Facebook began requiring that anyone wishing to purchase a "political ad" must undergo an onerous authorization process, submitting images of a government-issued ID and verifying their address and Social Security number, among other requirements.

In addition to ads relating to elections, referenda, political parties or candidates for office, the social media company has designated 20 "issues of national importance" which fall under its new restrictions. The issues—abortion, budget, civil rights, crime, economy, education, energy, environment, foreign policy, government reform, guns, health, immigration, infrastructure, military, poverty, social security, taxes, terrorism, values—are so broadly defined as to include virtually all news or information of any significance.

In a May 24 blog post titled "Hard Questions: Why Doesn't Facebook Just Ban Political Ads?", Facebook Global Politics and Government Outreach Director Katie Harbath and Director of Public Policy Steve Satterfield wrote: "In the US, there aren't laws or federal agencies that list specific issues that are subject to regulation. But to have a policy that our reviewers can enforce, they need a list explaining what's OK and what's not."

CEO Mark Zuckerberg, in a post the same day, again sought to justify the anti-democratic measures with the absurd and bogus claim that they were intended to prevent "anyone to do what the Russians did during the

2016 election." In reality, Facebook, in collaboration with the US state and intelligence agencies and other major technology companies such as Google, has utilized trumped-up accusations of "Russian meddling" and "fake news" in the 2016 elections in order to initiate a vast campaign of censorship of the internet and social media.

Facebook's newest measures have already begun to negatively impact their primary target, i.e., left-wing and socialist organizations and viewpoints. As David Moore, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for US Senate in California, wrote on the *World Socialist Web Site* Friday, Facebook's requirements have effectively blocked advertisements by both his campaign and that of SEP congressional candidate Kevin Mitchell in the week running up to the June 5 midterm elections.

Facebook's anti-democratic measures throw "a lengthy and arbitrary procedure in front of the numerous smaller candidates running across the country, to the benefit of incumbents and other well-heeled candidates," Moore noted.

Along with the suppression of candidates' and political parties' ability to disseminate information and advocate their views, Facebook's new restrictions have broad and ominous implications for the press.

Facebook already announced at the beginning of 2018 that it was "deprioritizing" news and political content on users' News Feeds. Just last Friday, the company revealed that it would also be removing its Trending news section, which has frequently featured viral videos or posts revealing brutality or murder by police. These announcements followed several years of moves by the company to restrict the "organic" (i.e., unpaid) reach of pages and content on its platform, compelling many smaller publishers and organizations to pay to use its advertising tools. Now, that avenue is also being

closed off.

Facebook has stated that it plans to use a combination of both artificial intelligence and thousands of “content reviewers,” i.e., human censors, to determine whether or not an ad is political, reviewing not just the text of the ad, but also its image, who it targets and any external websites to which the ad links.

According to the *Verge*, which reviewed Facebook’s new archive of ads with political content, the new restrictions have already resulted in dozens of media organizations’ ads being blocked, including those—such as a story about a graduation speech—seemingly without political content. Other blocked posts shown in the archive reveal the more sinister character of the new policies, such as one by the History Channel television station attempting to advertise an article about the covert transportation of nuclear weapons around the US during the Cold War.

However, the archive would seem to underestimate the real number of unauthorized political posts censored so far, as it fails to list at least one ad by the WWS blocked in the last week. On Thursday May 31 the WWS posted its Perspective column “Five thousand deaths in Puerto Rico from Hurricane Maria” to its Facebook page and purchased an ad to show the post to residents in Puerto Rico. Later that day, Facebook responded that it had disapproved the ad because the WWS Facebook page was “not authorized to run ads with political content.”

The far-reaching character of Facebook’s restrictions to advertising platform has provoked limited criticisms among sections of the media. News Media Alliance, a trade group representing 2,000 news organizations, including the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, published an open letter on May 18, which, while praising Facebook for its supposed commitment to “transparency,” stated that the new measures threaten “to undermine [journalism’s] ability to play its critical role in society as the fourth estate.” At least one company, Vox Media, has subsequently stated that it will refuse to undergo the authorization process.

While *Bloomberg* has reported unease at Facebook over the criticisms of the media industry, the company has thus far publicly indicated that it will continue its present course, with Director of Product Management Rob Leathern stating, “Enforcement is never perfect at launch, but that’s why we have processes in place for

people and advertisers to help us improve.”

Meanwhile, Facebook has used News Feed communications to aggressively encourage users to report unidentified political ads, with Leathern continuing, “The community can find and report ads that don’t have the label but should, and advertisers can appeal ads that are in the archive but shouldn’t be there.”

While there may be concern among sections of the media establishment over the immediate impact of Facebook’s changes on their ability to conduct their business, publications such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and others are at the forefront of the campaign to censor the internet and limit the free exchange of information outside officially sanctioned channels. It is the *World Socialist Web Site* which is leading the fight against internet censorship, which, as with the defense of all democratic rights, requires the mobilization of a mass, socialist movement of the working class. We urge all our readers and those committed to the defense of freedom of speech and the press to join this struggle today.



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