

Facebook security officer: Not all speech is “created equal”

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Alex Stamos, Facebook’s chief security officer, presented an overview of the Orwellian censorship regime implemented by the world’s largest social media company last week at an annual military conference in Tallinn, Estonia.

Speaking before an audience of generals, intelligence agents and US-aligned Eastern European politicians, Stamos warned that millions of “people who feel they have been ignored or oppressed” are using Facebook to “push for radical politics.”

The speech was an account of how the company is partnering with the US and other governments throughout the world to control public discourse online, with the primary but unstated aim of suppressing access to left-wing, anti-war and socialist viewpoints.

Stamos was speaking at CyCon, a conference sponsored by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on cyberwar and psychological operations. The very presence of a social media company at such an event, just a few hundred miles from NATO’s heavily-militarized border with Russia, makes clear the extent to which the US technology giants have been integrated into the US military-intelligence apparatus and its international operations.

Stamos began by pointing to a map of the social connections facilitated by Facebook. “As the people who have drawn those lines, and given folks the ability to make those connections,” Stamos said, Facebook has the “responsibility to understand and to mitigate” the risks that its platform might be “used for bad,” which he called an attack “against the ideals of Facebook.”

First, Stamos said Facebook is seeking to combat “fake news” through “changes in the news feed that surface this content to people.”

But instead of seeking to determine if a piece of news is “fake,” Facebook is carrying out mass profiling of

news sources by “Look[ing] to metadata around the people who have created the account, the news site that’s running it,” to evaluate whether it is “trustworthy.” Through this Orwellian censorship regime, Facebook segregates news organizations into categories and determines how many people are able to view their postings on that basis.

In other words, the company’s evaluation of whether a piece of news is “fake” is determined not by whether it is accurate, factually grounded or verifiable, but rather by who posts it. The logical implication is that if one of Facebook’s “partners” in the establishment media posts a story, no matter how inaccurate, biased, or poorly sourced, the company will still promote it as “trustworthy.”

Facebook’s policy on “fake news,” in other words, is political blacklisting.

In order to block “foreign influence operators,” Stamos said, Facebook is carrying out “manual investigations of organized groups,” and it is using machine learning to find “bad actors” at “scale” across its billions of users.

However, he added, “The biggest growth category of information operations that we’re going to see over the next couple of years is domestic influence operations”—that is, political organizations who are seeking to “influence” politics in their own countries.

Facebook is targeting groups of “people who feel they have been ignored or oppressed,” whose “goal” is to “push for radical politics,” he said. These groups, he noted, can be “quite large.” As an example, Stamos mentioned Anonymous, a “hacktivist” group that supported the Occupy Wall Street protests against social inequality and was associated with support for the online journalism group WikiLeaks.

Numerically, however, the largest target of

Facebook's censorship measures consists of "individual participants," who are often motivated by "legitimately held beliefs" to become "partners in information operations." That is, millions of people who are not part of any organized political group, but who voice their agreement with the political views promoted by groups targeted by Facebook by sharing their content or voicing their support.

A "domestic operator," he said, can have "thousands and thousands of people who believe in your cause." The effect of "these people should not be understated," he said.

To stifle the political statements of the broader public is open political censorship. For that reason, Facebook must be careful not to appear to stifle public discourse, but to block the "effectiveness" of the public in participating in "organized campaign[s]."

Stamos stated, "Our response here has to be very, very careful because part of free expression means that sometimes people are going to say stuff you don't agree with, right? Part of freedom is the freedom for people individually to be wrong, and we have to allow people to be wrong and to say things that while they don't fall afoul of our hate speech standards or standards meant to ensure safety, but that are considered inappropriate, those are the kinds of things that open societies have to accept. But we do want to implement product enhancements to make sure that we are reducing the effectiveness of these people to be part of, unwittingly part of, an organized campaign."

These "product enhancements" include redirecting users to content that Facebook approves of and providing "educational cues" informing them that their views are "disputed."

Under American law, Facebook is regulated like a communications utility, similar to a phone company or a package delivery service. It has neither the "responsibility" nor the right to impose its "ideals" onto its users.

In the company's view, however, the fact that it acts as a communications platform gives it the paternalistic obligation to police what its users say and block their speech if the company disagrees with it.

The social content of these "ideals" is made clear by the military-intelligence audience Stamos was speaking before. Over the course of the past two years, Facebook has come under relentless pressure from the US

government to serve as an agent of the state intelligence forces to censor and suppress oppositional views on its platform. Leading advocates of censorship, including Democratic Senator Mark Warner and Democratic Congressman Adam Schiff, have made clear that the company will face intense regulatory and public pressure if it does not comply with their demands to stifle political opposition online.

In so doing, Facebook is acting as an agent of the American state, doing its dirty work to subvert the public's constitutionally-protected freedoms of speech and assembly.

In perhaps his most ominous statement, Stamos concluded by calling for broader social changes in line with the measures Facebook has already taken. "Our societies overall are going to have to start to adapt to the idea that not all information is created equal," he concluded. His conclusion harkens to the motto of the pigs in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others."

With the vast majority of written communication taking place online, Facebook's actions, together with other technology companies, constitute the largest, most comprehensive regime of censorship in human history. Outside of and in contradiction to fundamental constitutional and human rights, Facebook claims the right to determine what hundreds of billions of people read and say.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is fighting to expose the effort by Facebook, Google and other technology giants to censor the internet, which is the spearhead of a drive to dismantle the freedoms of association and expression across the world. We urge all of those who want to take up this struggle to contact us.



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