University of Michigan Center for Social Media Responsibility provides cover for Internet censorship campaign

Sam Wayne, Genevieve Leigh
13 June 2018

The University of Michigan in Ann Arbor introduced a curious new research program last year called the Center for Social Media Responsibility (CSMR).

Initiated as part of the university's School of Information, the center's stated purpose is to "enable media platforms to meet their public responsibilities," according to its webpage. The program is the first of its kind in the country and signifies the further integration of academia into the emerging military-technology-intelligence nexus.

The CSMR mission page explains that the center aims to "ameliorate negative effects of broad access to the means of public communication, while amplifying positive effects." The page outlines the center's practical activity as working to "articulate principles and create metrics and tools that empower technologists to fulfill that responsibility."

The language used by the founders of CSMR is identical to that of the major political figures and CEOs leading the current Internet censorship campaign. Explaining recent changes at Facebook, the company's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, declared that he has the responsibility to "amplify the good and prevent harm" on the social media platform by combating "fake news" and promoting "authoritative content."

In practice, this has meant hiring teams of "content monitors" to review all the postings and messages of its users, censoring independent journalism, and using artificial intelligence (AI) to report users to the police and intelligence agencies. Using the same cover, major search engines such as Google have made modifications to their search algorithms to demote left wing, antiwar, and socialist websites, foremost among these being the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Google has also removed leading left-wing websites and journalists from its popular news aggregation platform, Google News.

CSMR has partnered with some of the leaders in the tech industry, including Adobe, Google, and Intel. It is clear from the center's stated mission and those involved in its implementation that the program has been erected to provide theoretical backing and the material resources and tools needed to facilitate the ongoing efforts to censor the Internet.

Dozens of research projects are listed on its webpage with a wide range of topics from, "Adoption and use of information technology to improve hospital performance," to "Building games students want to play." However, nestled throughout the list are much more sinister initiatives: "Assessing information credibility without authoritative sources," and "Auditing Algorithms: Adding Accountability to Automated Authority".

The center makes no attempt to posture as an entity which seeks to maintain scholarly independence from the giant tech corporations. Rather, it boasts of its complete subordination to their interests: "CSMR will offer a credible, independent forum where *platform companies can participate in articulating what they should and shouldn't be responsible for*, and be a credible source for monitoring and certifying progress." [Emphasis added.]

Plans for the center conveniently coincided with the beginning of the "fake news" hysteria ushered in with the 2016 election. After becoming Dean of the School of Information in 2016, Thomas Finholt explained in a statement to *The University Record* why he felt forming CSMR was necessary:

"From the earliest days of the internet, technologists envisioned the benefits of broader access to the means of public communication: social mobility, resistance to despotism, universal authorship and open source software. Much of this has come to pass. However, we now also see the challenges arising from such unedited and unhampered access: harassment and bullying, a credibility vacuum, a race to the bottom in competing for attention and a triumph of mobilization over persuasion that threatens to fracture our society. We at the School of Information are committed to meeting the intellectual and social challenges of this new era of unregulated public communication via social media. Our new Center for Social Media Responsibility will help to produce the designs, systems and metrics that will steer social media use toward more civil and beneficial discourse."

The professed epidemic of what Finholt refers to as "unregulated public communication" follows an onslaught of the strategically manufactured hysteria by the media and leading politicians—and now researchers and academics—over so-

called "fake news." In fact, it was largely the Hillary Clinton campaign which spearheaded the "fake news" narrative which she later used to explain her loss in the 2016 election. She writes in her book how "fake news" gripped voters and made them susceptible to Trump's claims that something was wrong with American society and the political establishment.

She specifically named WikiLeaks as the main culprit who she says, "helped accelerate the phenomenon that eventually came to be known as fake news." Of course, it was Wikileaks whic revealed the text of closed door speeches Clinton gave to Goldman Sachs and other Wall Street firms in return for hundreds of thousands of dollars in fees from the very oligarchs and parasites her husband's policies had helped enrich. This *true news* went largely unreported in the mainstream media but found a wide audience through social media.

The chief technologist for CSMR, Aviv Ovadya, made a name for himself among the fake news hysterics after becoming one of the first major writers to furiously ringing alarm bells to warn of a coming "Infocalypse" which will erupt out of the spreading of false information on the Internet.

Writing earlier this year in the *Washington Post*, Ovadya worriedly stated, "technology is disrupting that edifice of knowledge, and if we don't act quickly enough, it may soon bring us past the point of no return." Ovadya went on to call for "massive investment across industry, civil society and government, to understand and mitigate threats to our information ecosystems."

Speaking on behalf of the ruling elite, Ovadya is expressing anxiety and fear that the currently open and accessible nature of the Internet, both as a concept and as practical infrastructure, presents a threat to the domination over the mass flow of information the ruling class once held.

Ovadya's calls for "monitoring the information ecosystem" and "implementing authenticity infrastructure" glosses over the question of *who* would be in charge of these operations. The "we" Ovadya refers to are those who already own and control the infrastructure, i.e., the capitalist governments and technology monopolies waging a mass censorship campaign to suppress social dissent.

In addition to Ovadya, the University of Michigan brought on Garlin Gilchrist at the end of the 2017 semester to serve as the program's executive director. Gilchrest is heavily integrated in Democratic Party politics. He worked as a national campaign director for MoveOn and provided social media strategy and management for the Obama 2008 presidential campaign.

Gilchrist told *MLive* last month that he is interested in engineering social media platforms to influence individuals' "lens of truth." He also made alarming remarks about what he sees as the CSMR's purview, which includes determining how to measure "silencing" and "conversation quality." Gilchrist placed these remarks in the context of counteracting "aggression" and "personal attacks" online, but inadvertently hinted at the darker implications of the center's work:

"With [social media] becoming one of the sole sources, if not the sole source of how [people] get information about the world, we need to think about how our information flows through that network … How can the information that flows through here be trusted and how do we define trust? Something that is trustworthy to one person may not be trustworthy to someone else."

There is immense anxiety and fear within the ruling class that they can no longer control the flow of information and that the leading propaganda machines, such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, are becoming more and more discredited.

According to a Gallup poll published last year, Americans' trust in the mass media "to report the news fully, accurately and fairly" reached its lowest level in polling history, with only 32 percent of participants saying they have a "great deal" or "fair amount" of trust. At the same time, the use of social media to read news has been growing exponentially, reaching two-thirds of the US population according to a recent poll by the Pew Research Center.

The CSMR will be used as an institution to aid and abet the campaign to carry out Internet censorship, proclaim establishment sources as the only determinants of truth, and wage a discreditation campaign against any voices that diverge from the perspectives of the establishment media.

Students, youth, and workers should organize the strongest opposition to the University of Michigan's role in supporting these anti-democratic operations. Moreover, students should demand the transformation of the university into a center of intellectual and cultural life *with the broadest access to information*—all efforts to militarize the campus or collude with the state censorship and surveillance apparatuses must be exposed and soundly rejected.

The authors also recommend:

Socialism and the struggle against Internet censorship
[9 May 2018]

New York University: A center of militarism, mass surveillance and censorship: Part 1
[19 March 2018]

CIA expands its Signature School program to University of Illinois Chicago
[4 May 2018]

Capitalism and the artificial intelligence revolution
[6 April 2018]

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact