

Facebook censors anti-fascist rally in Washington

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The social media giant Facebook carried out a major escalation in the campaign to censor the Internet Monday, deleting the official event page for an anti-fascist rally scheduled for August 12 in Washington, D.C. on the grounds that it was engaged in “coordinated inauthentic behavior.”

The event, entitled “No Unite the Right 2 – DC,” was scheduled as a counter-protest to a fascist demonstration called for August 12 by the organizers of last year’s Nazi rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, during which a right-wing extremist murdered counter-protestor Heather Heyer.

The rally’s organizers include Chelsea Manning, the whistleblower imprisoned and tortured for six years by the Obama administration for revealing American war crimes. Manning told the *New York Times* the demonstration was “real and organic,” declaring “Folks from D.C. and Charlottesville have been talking about this since at least February.”

While Facebook shuts down left-wing pages, groups and events with growing regularity, this latest action is particularly significant both because of its prominence—a major demonstration likely to draw large numbers of participants—and because Facebook has publicly boasted about it.

The closure of the event page was a centerpiece of a blog post published Tuesday by Facebook outlining its efforts to crack down on groups aiming to “sow division using social media” ahead of the 2018 election. In addition to shutting down the rally’s event page, Facebook announced that it had shut down 32 other pages, including those opposing police violence and defending immigrant rights.

The announcement was framed as a follow-up to the company’s announcement in September 2017 that “Russia-linked” Facebook pages bought some

\$100,000 in ads related to “divisive social issues.” In addition to serving as a pretext for major new censorship measures by Facebook, the 2017 announcement was connected to allegations by the Democratic Party that US President Trump “colluded” with the Russian government to win the 2016 election.

However, with the Democrats’ anti-Russia campaign increasingly bogged down by the bitter factional battle in Washington, it appears that those sections of the state apparatus leading the drive to censor the Internet are hoping to decouple their efforts from allegations about Russian “meddling.”

Facebook and its outgoing Chief Security Officer Alex Stamos explicitly declined to attribute the claims to the Russian government. “Today we’re shutting down 32 Pages and accounts engaged in coordinated inauthentic behavior without saying that a specific group or country is responsible,” Stamos wrote in a post accompanying its announcement.

While the alleged “Russian” ads described by Facebook in 2017 included statements in support of both sides of the political spectrum, the latest batch of pages shut down were all left-wing, including those opposing police violence, attacks on immigrant rights, and the Trump administration’s right-wing policies.

On Monday, the day before Facebook announced that it had shut down the page, the company turned its latest blacklist over to the Atlantic Council, a prominent military think-tank. Its analysis makes clear that Facebook is deliberately targeting left-wing groups.

The Atlantic Council’s report said the pages shut down by Facebook targeted “the left of the political spectrum,” and that the pages were an attempt to “infiltrate left-wing American communities.” These pages “sought to promote divisions and set Americans against one another.”

Events created by “inauthentic” groups “did have a very real, organic, and engaged online community; however, the intent of the inauthentic activity appeared to be designed to catalyze the most incendiary impulses of political sentiment.”

These groups promoted “activism against fascism.” One of the groups, according to the Atlantic Council, “created an event in protest of the Trump administration’s policy of separating the children of undocumented migrants from their families.”

Another promoted event included “protests against U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), U.S. President Donald Trump’s tax plan, protests against Trump’s Muslim ban, and a ‘March against rapist cops.’”

At times, the Atlantic Council report adopts wholesale conceptions advanced by the fascist right, such as that left-wing protesters are the instigators of violence in clashes with fascists. In justifying the censorship of the Washington anti-fascist protest, the think-tank claimed its organizers “suggested a desire to provoke further confrontations and violence.”

In another instance, the report characterized Internet content “focusing on the plight of Native Americans and modern immigrants” as promoting “anti-white” viewpoints.

Both Democratic and Republican lawmakers praised Facebook’s action. Democratic Senator Mark Warner, the top Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, declared that the disclosure “is further evidence that the Kremlin continues to exploit platforms like Facebook to sow division and spread disinformation.” Warner, who has led the campaign for censorship, ignored the fact that Facebook provided no evidence that Russia had anything to do with the pages.

Facebook’s latest action must be taken as an urgent warning. Two years after the start of the campaign to censor the Internet in the guise of fighting “fake news” spread by “Russian trolls,” the social media giants, working with the US intelligence agencies, are increasingly making clear that their real target is left-wing political sentiment among growing sections of workers and young people. In so doing, they are following the path blazed by Google, which last year announced plans to censor “alternative” news, leading to a drop in search traffic to left-wing sites of up to 80 percent.

With opposition growing among 260,000 UPS workers to a sellout contract being demanded by both their union and employer, a growing international strike movement among airline workers, and simmering anger among teachers and other sections of the working class in the US, the ruling class is concerned above all that workers will use the Internet not only to organize and coordinate their struggles, but to rally around a socialist perspective.



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