

Accused by Trump of rigging search results, Google denies political bias

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On Tuesday, US President Donald Trump accused technology monopolist Google of manipulating search results to suppress right-wing news sources.

“Google search results for ‘Trump News’ shows only the viewing/reporting of Fake News Media,” Trump wrote in a Twitter post. “In other words, they have it RIGGED, for me & others, so that almost all stories & news is BAD. Fake CNN is prominent.” Trump added, “Google & others are suppressing voices of Conservatives and hiding information and news that is good. They are controlling what we can & cannot see.”

Later in the day, Trump told reporters that by engaging in censorship, Facebook, Google and Twitter “are really treading on very, very troubled territory and they have to be careful.”

Trump was reacting to actions by the Internet giants to promote publications aligned with his opponents in the ruling class, like CNN, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Facebook and Twitter have also taken action in recent weeks against the fascist social media personality Alex Jones.

Contrary to Trump’s claims, however, the main target of the censorship measures adopted by the Internet companies is not right-wing, but rather left-wing, socialist and anti-war publications. In August 2017, the *World Socialist Web Site* revealed that changes to Google’s search algorithm announced in April sharply reduced search traffic to left-wing sites, with search traffic to the *World Socialist Web Site* falling by 75 percent.

On August 25, 2017, the *World Socialist Web Site* published an open letter to Google demanding that the company stop its censorship of the internet. Google never replied to the letter.

In response to Trump’s criticisms, Google said in a

Tuesday statement that its search service was “not used to set a political agenda and we don’t bias our results toward any political ideology.”

The company added, “Every year, we issue hundreds of improvements to our algorithms to ensure they surface high-quality content in response to users’ queries... We continually work to improve Google Search and we never rank search results to manipulate political sentiment.”

These statements are false. In an April 25, 2017, blog post, Google engineering VP Ben Gomes reported that the company had “made algorithmic updates to surface more authoritative content.” In practice, Gomes explained, this involved a team of paid evaluators reviewing Google searches and downgrading those that showed “alternative viewpoints... unless the query indicates the user is seeking an alternative viewpoint.”

The ratings by these evaluators are then input into Google’s deep learning systems to modify search rankings. The effect of these changes was to bury left-wing political viewpoints in Google search results. As one example, the *World Socialist Web Site* does not appear in search results for “socialism,” while right-wing criticisms of socialism are disproportionately represented. Prior to the changes, the WSWS ranked high on search terms related to socialism, inequality and opposition to war.

Facebook has taken similar measures. In January, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg posted a notice stating that the company had taken action to promote “broadly trusted and high-quality sources” such as “the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*,” while reducing exposure to “blogs that have intense followings but are not widely trusted beyond their core audience.”

Rather than use Trump’s tweets to critically evaluate

claims that Google, Facebook and other companies are engaged in censorship, the entire establishment media has fallen in line behind the internet giants, defending their actions and excoriating Trump's statements as an example of "fake news."

Leading the pack was CNN, whose article, "Trump slams Google search as 'rigged'—but it's not," was the lead item on Google's widely-used news aggregator. CNN stated, "The articles that were the basis for Trump's claim of rigging ignored the fact that Google's most fundamental interest is returning search results that users find helpful, because that's how it gets them to come back. It does that, in part, by prioritizing results from trusted news outlets with large audiences."

In fact, Facebook, in announcing that it would follow Google's example in promoting "trusted" news sources, acknowledged that the changes would decrease the amount of time users spend on the social network. When Facebook announced earlier this year that engagement had in fact decreased, the company's stock price fell by 20 percent.

Trump is raising the issue of censorship as a weapon against his political opponents, exploiting the fact that the Democrats' campaign against "fake news" and "Russian meddling" in US politics has been, from the start, part of the deepening factional struggle within the ruling elite over foreign policy.

The president and his political allies in the extreme right are only able to posture as opponents of censorship because of the leading role of the Democrats in the campaign to censor the internet, and the utter silence on censorship on the part of the middle-class left, which has largely signed onto the Democrats' anti-Russian witch hunt.

The Trump administration has itself taken measures to strengthen the control of the giant corporations over the Internet. In June, the administration ended the policy of net neutrality, giving internet service providers vast powers to censor the internet, including those sections not controlled by the social media monopolies.

Over one year since the publication of the WSWS's open letter to Google, it is more urgent than ever to develop the struggle against internet censorship, and to root it in the working class, the only social force capable of defending democratic rights and the freedom

of expression.



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