

In Senate hearing, Facebook pledges to replace “bad speech” with “alternative facts”

Andre Damon in Washington
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Wednesday’s testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee by Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg and Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey was a milestone in the transformation of the social media companies into an advanced system of censorship and propaganda.

If one were to judge by Sandberg’s public statements before the Senate, the world’s largest social network has dissolved itself into the American state intelligence apparatus, and vice versa.

“When we find bad actors, we will block them,” Sandberg threatened. “When we find content that violates our policies, we will take it down... We are even more determined than our adversaries... This is an arms race, and that means we need to be ever more vigilant.”

Facebook’s goal, Sandberg implied, is to stop “bad” speech, and to promote “good” speech. But throughout two and a half hours of testimony, no one saw fit to ask one basic question: How does this drive to suppress “bad actors” relate to the First Amendment of the US Constitution, which protects not just “good” speech, but all speech?

This question was never asked, because what Sandberg, Dorsey, Democratic Party Senator Mark Warner and the assembled congressmen are doing is flagrantly unconstitutional.

Sandberg said that when content is “marked as false,” by Facebook’s fact-checkers, “we dramatically decrease the distribution on our site, we warn you if you’re about to share it, we warn you if you have shared it, and importantly, we show related articles next to that so people can see alternative facts.”

“The fundamental view is that bad speech can often be countered by good speech, and if someone says something not true and they say it incorrectly, someone else has the opportunity to say, ‘Actually, you are

wrong. This is true,’ and that’s what we’re working on through our systems.”

Sandberg’s use of the term “alternative facts,” no doubt inadvertent, is nonetheless significant. The phrase gained notoriety after a 2017 television interview with Trump administration aide Kellyanne Conway in which “Meet the Press” host Chuck Todd demanded to know why the White House would “utter a provable falsehood.” In response, Conway declared the White House was presenting “alternative facts.”

Todd memorably pushed back, “Look, alternative facts are not facts. They’re falsehoods.”

Sandberg’s “alternative facts” are also “not facts.” They are state propaganda. She is describing a machine that detects when its users make a statement that Facebook deems unacceptable and replaces “bad speech” with “good speech” and “alternative facts.”

“America,” Sandberg said, is “the country we love.” But this country is under threat from “opponents who wish to undermine our democracy.” Combating this threat requires the integration of the state and private corporations: “everyone—including industry, governments and experts from civil society” working to stop the spread of “bad” speech and ideas.

“We have more than doubled the number of people working on safety and security and now have over 20,000,” Sandberg boasted. “We review reports in over 50 languages, 24 hours a day. Better machine learning technology and artificial intelligence have also enabled us to be much more proactive in identifying” accounts to be targeted for removal.

She added, “By using technology like machine learning, artificial intelligence and computer vision, we can proactively detect more bad actors and take action more quickly.”

Sandberg also announced a new plan to make people

who operate large pages provide their government-issued identification to Facebook. “This will make it much harder for people” to “grow virally” and spread “divisive content that way.”

Central to this process is the fight against what she calls “fake news.” She continued, “Stories” that Facebook’s “independent” fact-checkers “rate as false are shown lower in the News Feed. If pages or domains repeatedly create or share misinformation, we significantly reduce their distribution and remove their advertising rights.”

Facebook has become essentially a one-stop-shop for government surveillance. “As part of official investigations, government officials sometimes request data about people who use Facebook,” she said. “We have an easily accessible online portal and processes in place to handle these government requests.”

While Sandberg’s statements were the crudest and most direct advocacy of US internet censorship to date, it was Committee Vice Chairman Mark Warner who explained most directly the motivations for the drive to censor the internet.

“Imagine the challenge and damage to the markets if forged communications from the Fed Chairman were leaked online,” he said. “Or consider the price of a Fortune 500 company’s stock if a dishonest short-seller was able to spread false information about the company’s CEO, or the effects of its products, rapidly online.”

In other words, the internet must be censored to avoid the dissemination of statements detrimental to the profit margins of major corporations. And most of all, it must be censored to keep workers from organizing any struggle to oppose these companies.

The tech executives’ visit to Capitol Hill was orchestrated from beginning to end to exclude any serious discussion of the implications of internet censorship and the targeting of left-wing, anti-war and socialist organizations. The morning Senate hearing was a display of jingoistic bipartisan unity, with Republican and Democratic lawmakers and social media executives pledging to do their utmost to combat the supposed menace presented by Russia, Iran and China.

A second hearing, held by the House Commerce Committee, was a factional free-for-all, with Republican lawmakers accusing Twitter of “shadow-

banning” their accounts, and Democrats accusing Republicans of promoting “fake news.” The fascistic media personality Laura Loomer interrupted the House hearing to protest her ban from Twitter, which one of the committee members attempted to drown out with an auctioneer’s chant, until Loomer was ejected from the hall.

The far-right conspiracy theorists Alex Jones and Charles Johnson wandered the hallways of the House and Senate office buildings in between the hearings, attempting to confront Sandberg, Dorsey and Democratic lawmakers, but mostly succeeding only in getting into arguments with passers-by. When one woman confronted Jones about his racist views outside the buildings, the Infowars founder accused her of racism against white people and began chanting, “Brown KKK, go away!”

The claims by right-wing Republicans that they are being censored by the technology giants, and the antics of Jones and his fascistic allies, are sideshows aimed at distracting attention from the fact that left-wing political opposition is the central target of the censorship by Facebook, Twitter and Google, amid the creation of the framework of a police state.

Wednesday’s hearing is a warning: The censorship of the internet is not merely possible; it is happening. Workers and young people must begin mobilizing immediately, on the basis of a socialist perspective, to defend freedom of expression as part of the struggle against the capitalist system that is the root of war and dictatorship.



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