European Union announces draconian internet censorship measures

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The European Union (EU) has advanced plans for the continent-wide censorship of the internet. Giving his final State of the Union speech last Wednesday, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker outlined plans to compel online platforms to take down "terrorist content" within one hour of it being flagged by national authorities.

Failure to comply will result in fines of up to four percent of the offending company's annual global turnover.

These proposals have vast, grave implications for the democratic right of hundreds of millions of people to access and use the internet freely. The law will mean EU member-state governments and national security services will determine what is acceptable for publication on the internet—with no reference to the courts or any kind of democratic oversight. The one-hour time limit for removing content will force platforms to prevent certain postings lest they run the risk of sanctions.

The measure will make little difference to the major tech companies, who are already censoring their platforms and employing tens of thousands of people to enforce it. But the legislation will be used to strictly police more independent outlets. That this will be primarily at the expense of postings seen as "damaging" to the corporate and financial elite is obvious.

The plans envisage a "mitigation procedure" that allows platforms the right to challenge a removal order, but the content must still be removed. Only if an appeal is successful will content be restored to the site.

A critical element in the moves to police and fine the tech giants—who are all US based—is to assert the dominance of Europe's governments over US corporations. Under conditions of a fracturing of relations between the US and EU, with the launching of reciprocal trade war measures, the European elite wants to ensure that the internet is compatible with their interests.

Once accepted by member states and the European Parliament, the law will formalise across Europe even closer relationships between state security services and tech companies pioneered by Germany and increasingly adopted by other European nations.

The Network Enforcement Act, which came into operation in Germany on January 1, requires operators of internet platforms with over two million users to "remove or block obviously unlawful content within 24 hours of receipt of a complaint." Failure to comply incurs a fine of €50 million.

Platforms must report to government authorities regularly on their handling of complaints and inform them on who wrote controversial statements. Germany is home to a 10,000 square-meter office building, currently occupied by 1,000 staff, for Facebook's "fact checkers" in Europe.

In July, the French National Assembly passed an anti-"fake news" bill allowing judges to censor not simply "fake" information, but material containing "any allegation or implying of a fact without providing verifiable information that makes it plausible."

In August, the UK parliament's Department of Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee released an interim report on "fake news" which suggested the government assign verification ratings to web sites and establish "a new category of tech company" with a "clear legal liability" to "act against harmful and illegal content."

The scale of the censorship planned by the EU is immense.

For the last six months, online platforms have been acting under the guidance of a European Commission official recommendation demanding "proactive measures" against "any information which is not in compliance with Union law or the law of the member state concerned."

The recommendation was introduced on March 1, with the acknowledgement that online platforms were already censoring their users to an unprecedented degree but insisted that more had to be done.

The EU's Digital Commissioner Andrus Ansip said at the time, "While several platforms have been removing more illegal content than ever before... we still need to react faster against terrorist propaganda and other illegal content which is a serious threat to our citizens' security, safety and fundamental rights."

Prior to this announcement, YouTube had removed nearly

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two million videos between June and December 2017. Twitter suspended 1.2 million accounts between August 2015 and December 2017, removing 300,000 accounts between January and June 2017. Facebook "took down more than 30,000 fake accounts" during the 2017 French general election. Both Google and Facebook laid out plans to hire more than 10,000 staff to police their content and both put in place algorithms to suppress "untrusted" or "divisive" material on their platforms.

Even this is not enough. More content is to be taken down or be prevented from even being published in the first place. In Juncker's words, "Whilst significant progress has been made under the EU Internet Forum established in 2015, it is clear that more needs to be done to ensure the engagement of all internet platforms and national authorities to protect Europeans online..."

In response to Juncker's speech, Facebook issued a statement saying, "There is no place for terrorism on Facebook and we share the goal of the European Commission to fight it, and believe that it is only through a common effort across companies, civil society and institutions that results can be achieved.

"We've made significant strides finding and removing terrorist propaganda quickly and at scale, but we know we can do more."

YouTube said it "shared the European Commission's desire to react rapidly to terrorist content and keep violent extremism off our platforms."

Juncker claimed, "Several of the recent terrorist attacks in the EU have shown how terrorists misuse the internet to spread their messages."

In fact, the most serious terror incidents in Europe have been carried out by organisations or individuals known to the security agencies. A large number have been active in, and supportive of, the proxy forces used by the Western imperialist powers to pursue their geo-strategic aims in the Middle East and Africa.

While the proposed measures deal specifically with "terrorist" content—whose definition will be up to the censors—previous guidelines have used even broader categories of "extremist" or "grossly offensive" material to enforce its removal.

The now default resort to the threat of "terrorism" in order to justify draconian censorship by the authorities is a fraud. These measures have nothing to do with protecting Europe's population from terror attacks. Rather, they are designed to gag them in the face of austerity, militarism and the build-up of right-wing forces across the continent.

Juncker's call for unprecedented levels of internet censorship has overwhelming support in the European Parliament and the national parliaments of each EU member state. As the EU fractures under the impact of the global capitalist crisis, one thing its constituent governments agree on is the danger posed by rising social discontent and opposition in the working class. The European Commission's proposals make clear they will spare no efforts in imposing authoritarian measures to suppress this development.

In April 2017, Ben Gomes, who is responsible for Google's search engine, met with leading German politicians. Shortly afterwards, Google began censoring the *World Socialist Web Site* and other anti-war and progressive web sites.

In his April 25, 2017 blog post announcing the changes to Google's algorithm, Gomes linked to the guidelines issued to the company's evaluators, which made clear that its search engine should show results from sites presenting "alternative viewpoints" only if "the query clearly indicates the user is seeking an alternative viewpoint."

Within two months, a manner consistent with this mechanism, many pages from the *World Socialist Web Site* were removed from search results.

In January of this year, the *World Socialist Web Site* issued an open letter calling for socialist, anti-war, left-wing and progressive web sites, organizations and activists to join an international coalition to fight internet censorship.

The WSWS explained, "Without access to alternative news and social media, workers in different countries will not be able to effectively coordinate their common struggles. Unfettered access to the Internet will facilitate the international unity of the working class in the global fight for socialism, democracy and equality."

We urge everyone seeking to fight the grip of the technology monopolies and intelligence agencies over the internet to contact us and join the fight against censorship!

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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