

The “new cold war,” censorship, and the future of the internet

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On Tuesday, the *New York Times* published a major editorial statement warning about the “breakup of the web” amid the rise of internet censorship and international geopolitical conflicts. “If things continue along this path,” the newspaper warns, “the next decade may see the internet relegated to little more than just another front on the new cold war.”

The editorial begins by alluding to a warning by Eric Schmidt, the chairman of Google’s parent company Alphabet, that, in the *Times*’ words, “in the next 10 to 15 years, the internet would most likely be split in two—one internet led by China and one internet led by the United States.”

Schmidt, according to the *Times*, “did not seem to seriously entertain the possibility that the internet would remain global.” While agreeing with this appraisal, the newspaper adds, “if anything, the flaw in Mr. Schmidt’s thinking is that he too quickly dismisses the European internet that is coalescing around the European Union’s ever-heightening regulation of technology platforms. All signs point to a future with three internets.”

Censorship will become common to all of these “spheres,” not just that of China, the *Times* warns. “Internet censorship and surveillance were once hallmarks of oppressive governments—with Egypt, Iran and China being prime examples.” But it has become clear that this “isn’t just the domain of anti-democratic forces.”

The warning is ironic, given the fact that the *Times* has, for nearly two years, been at the forefront of justifying the efforts of US technology companies to censor the internet in alliance with leading figures in the Democratic Party, including Senator Mark Warner and Congressman Adam Schiff. For nearly two years, the *Times* has sought to promote and instigate

censorship measures in the name of combating “Russian meddling” in American politics.

That campaign has resulted in a series of sweeping censorship measures, beginning with an initiative, known as “Project Owl,” announced by Google Engineering Vice President Ben Gomes in April 2017, that buried left-wing websites, including the *World Socialist Web Site*, in search results.

Facebook and Twitter have followed with similar actions, demoting oppositional pages in their users’ news feeds and, just last week, shutting down the accounts of left-wing news pages with millions of followers. The *Times* has cheered every step of this campaign, going so far as to label the political pages removed by Facebook as “spam” and “domestic disinformation.”

The *Times* and the American ruling class are now being hoisted with their own petard. Just as the American state and intelligence apparatus have sought to weaponize the internet, so too are other powers, as the internet becomes a battleground for economic and geopolitical conflicts.

What upsets the *Times* is that American companies, and Google in particular, are not tailoring all their actions according to the geopolitical interests of American imperialism.

“American corporations,” the *Times* writes, “do little to counteract Balkanization and instead do whatever is necessary to expand their operations. ... If the future of the internet is a tripartite cold war, Silicon Valley wants to be making money in all three of those worlds.”

What instigated the *Times*’ ire at Google is the company’s insistence that it will operate in China, under rules imposed by the Chinese government, in defiance of protests by leading figures within the American government.

The *Times* pointed to a leaked speech by Gomes that workers and youth all over the world.

made clear that the company's plans to create a censored search engine for the Chinese market are in fact much further along than the company had publicly indicated. "Mr. Gomes's leaked speech from inside Google sounded almost dystopian at times. 'This is a world none of us have ever lived in before,' Mr. Gomes told employees. 'All I am saying, we have built a set of hacks, and we have kept them.'"

Readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* are familiar with the "dystopian" plans of Mr. Gomes, who has played a leading role in Google's campaign to censor the internet in the United States and Europe. When he was working to crack down on political opposition within the US, the *Times* never mentioned his name and defended the censorship program over which he presided.

But now that Google is seeking to implement censorship in cooperation with the Chinese state, the *Times* is complaining about "[t]he power of a handful of platforms and services."

In other words, the *Times*, speaking for the US intelligence apparatus, wants to have its cake and eat it too. It wants US technology companies to censor domestic political opposition in the name of preventing "foreign interference." But it also wants those same companies to reject overtures by foreign governments to prevent "interference" by the Americans, including the US-backed campaign, which the *Times* alludes to, to promote separatist sentiments among Chinese Uighurs.

The *Times*, and the American ruling elite for which it speaks, wants to keep the internet "global" only insofar as its rules are written in the United States, insofar as the American ruling class can control the narrative. That other states and other ruling elites are moving to implement their own rules and restrictions, bound up with their own domestic and geopolitical interests, it considers intolerable.

Aside from the *Times*' hypocrisy, the phenomenon it points to is very real—and dangerous. The internet emerged as a powerful mechanism for spreading information and sharing ideas, and for undermining national divisions and the control of the professional "gatekeepers"—the establishment media. With the proliferation of hand-held devices and social media platforms, vast troves of information are now available

This development terrifies the capitalist ruling elites. The American ruling class, in particular, is fighting a two-front war. It wants to pressure the giant US-based social media and internet companies to suppress domestic opposition, while at the same time undercutting the efforts of its competitors and adversaries, whether in China or in Europe, to establish their own mechanisms of control.

The threat to an open and internationally integrated internet is one expression of the fundamental contradictions of the capitalist system—between a global economy and the division of the world into nation-states, and between socialized production and the subordination of economic life to the accumulation of private profit. Communication systems are global, but they are being manipulated by rival ruling classes. The spread of information is inherently liberating, but the infrastructure for its dissemination remains under the control of powerful corporations.

The social force capable of securing an open and global internet is the working class, the only genuinely international class, whose interests are bound up with opposition to the capitalist nation-state system. The struggle against censorship is the struggle to defend the social, cultural and technological achievements of mankind. It is inextricably connected to the fight against war, inequality and authoritarianism.

It is, in short, a revolutionary question. The international working class must respond to the two-front war of the capitalist ruling elites with a one-front war against the capitalist system itself. The internet must be established on secure foundations, through the establishment of a global, socialist society, based on equality and democratic control of production.



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