

Facebook and Twitter intensify censorship in 2018 elections

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8 November 2018

Stepping up its online censorship less than a day before polls opened for the 2018 mid-term elections, Facebook announced on Monday the shutdown of 115 social media accounts on its Facebook and Instagram platforms. Nathaniel Gleicher, Head of Cybersecurity Policy at Facebook wrote in a newsroom blog post that US law enforcement had “contacted us about online activity that they recently discovered and which they believe may be linked to foreign entities.”

The 30 Facebook and 85 Instagram accounts were blocked, according to Gleicher, because they “may be engaged in coordinated inauthentic behavior” and some of the accounts “appear to be in the French or Russian languages.” Acknowledging the threadbare character of the assertions, Gleicher also wrote that Facebook had not even completed an investigation before shutting down the accounts. He added, “Once we know more—including whether these accounts are linked to the Russia-based Internet Research Agency or other foreign entities—we will update this post.”

Meanwhile, Reuters reported on November 2 that Twitter had deleted 10,000 “automated accounts” in September and October that “wrongly appeared to be from Democrats” and “discouraged people from voting” on election day. Admitting the political motivation behind the censorship, the report said that Twitter took that action “after the party flagged the misleading tweets to the social media company.”

Reuters additionally reported that three sources “familiar with the Democrats’ effort” confirmed that the request to shut down the accounts came from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), an organization that is devoted to the election of Democrats to the House of Representatives. The DCCC was launched after the 2016 presidential elections in response to the barrage of social media posts indicting presidential candidate Hillary Clinton as a stooge of Wall

Street, among other things.

Twitter has acknowledged working closely with federal law enforcement, ruling governments around the world and the political parties of the US ruling elite. Del Harvey, Twitter’s head of Trust and Security, told the *New York Times* that the company began asking for help in 2016. It began coordinating with Homeland Security and is now in regular contact with the FBI and secretaries of state for various states, as well as Democratic and Republican campaign committees and nonprofits that track misinformation, Ms. Harvey said.

The latest censorship measures have been taken for two reasons: (1) to prove to the two-party political establishment that Facebook and Twitter are willing and active participants in the stifling of online speech; and (2) to perfect anti-democratic methods in the era of mass online communications, in cooperation with state institutions, against the growing struggles of the working class and young people.

The pre-election day censorship comes on the heels of the October 26 announcement by Facebook that it had removed 82 pages, accounts and groups “that originated in Iran” for engaging in coordinated inauthentic behavior on its Facebook and Instagram social media platforms. No evidence was presented to substantiate this claim of Iranian influence other than “some overlap with the Iranian accounts and Pages we removed in August.”

As was the case in August, the latest Facebook censorship moves are specifically directed against left-wing and oppositional content on Facebook that is critical of government policies in the US and UK. Under the cover of unprovable claims of inauthentic behavior—an Orwellian phrase that purports to identify people and organizations who misrepresent themselves on social media—Facebook has dropped any reference to “fake news” and is engaging in outright censorship of free speech.

In a Facebook Newsroom post, Gleicher wrote that the shuttered accounts, groups and pages “posted about politically charged topics such as race relations, opposition to the President, and immigration.” Exposing the preposterous and unsubstantiated claims of Iranian influence, Gleicher added, “It’s still early days and while we have found no ties to the Iranian government, we can’t say for sure who is responsible.”

Gleicher shared examples of several posts taken down by Facebook. Among them was a meme of Donald Trump that stated a well-known fact: “The Worst and Most Hated President in American History!” Another contained a widely reported quote by British Labour Party Leader Jeremy Corbyn from December 2015 regarding Trump’s anti-Muslim travel ban: “The idea that somehow or other you can deal with all the problems in the world by banning a particular religious group from entering the USA is offensive and absurd.”

As further justification for shutting down the 30 pages, 33 accounts and three groups on Facebook as well as 16 accounts on Instagram, Gleicher incredibly pointed to \$100 in social media advertising and seven events which 110 people expressed interest in attending. He added, “We cannot confirm whether any of these events actually occurred.”

The pre-election censorship moves are the result of a collaboration between members of Facebook’s election “war room,” US and UK government officials and law enforcement, the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Lab and other unnamed technology companies. Facebook now has more than 20,000 people on its staff working on “safety and security” issues and has also engaged a frantic implementation of artificial intelligence technologies aimed at scanning and moderating the social media activity of its nearly two billion users.

According to a report in the *New York Times*, Facebook launched an election “war room” at its Menlo Park, California campus in mid-September supported by 300 employees. The ostensible purpose of the initiative was to root out “foreign meddling” on its platform in the run up to the midterm US elections. Monitoring political activity on Facebook has become a top priority according to Samidh Chakrabarti, who leads Facebook’s elections and civic engagement team. He said, “We see this as probably the biggest company-wide reorientation since our shift from desktops to mobile phones.”

The open censorship of “divisive” content on Facebook is part of the adoption by the Silicon Valley tech monopolies of a strategic shift away from “unmediated

free speech” on the Internet. As explained in a recently leaked internal Google briefing called “The Good Censor,” the “early utopian period of the Internet has collapsed under the weight of bad behavior” and the tech companies are moving away from a commitment to “the American tradition that prioritizes free speech for democracy over civility” in favor of “civility over freedom.”

This policy shift mirrors the demands by US Congressional figures that the social media monopolies must be placed under government regulation. It also corresponds to the completely false assertion in the capitalist media that the Internet—a technology that heralds an era of unprecedented democratic potential and the unification of people around the world—is responsible for the growth of extreme right-wing and fascistic political tendencies worldwide.

Meanwhile, the mainstream corporate media has mobilized behind censorship by the social media monopolies. Readers will search in vain for a news report or analysis that does not accept without a shred of criticism the unproven assertions about Iran-backed “bad behavior” on Facebook and “automated accounts” on Twitter.

This is true of the *New York Times* as well as major tech publications such as *Wired* magazine along with the online journals of the pseudo-left such as *Jacobin* and *Socialist Worker*. Their complicity and silence on these questions has allowed the far right such as *Breitbart* and *InfoWars* to posture as opponents of online censorship and defenders of free speech.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has been in the forefront of the fight against Internet censorship since the summer of 2017 following Google’s suppression of results on its search engine directed to our site. We have consistently explained that the fight to defend democratic rights and free speech is bound up with the struggle of the working class against the capitalist system and for socialism.



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