

Macron and Facebook announce joint social media censorship plan in France

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On Monday, less than a week after he provoked disgust among working people in France and beyond, by praising France's Nazi-collaborationist dictator, Philippe Pétain, French President Emmanuel Macron held meetings with Facebook to plan the censoring of social media in France.

At an official Forum for the Governance of the Internet at UNESCO in Paris, Macron argued that the world is on the brink of catastrophe due to the exercise of free speech on the internet. While the internet was initially a "fantastic opportunity," he declared, now "it is also starting to be described as a threat to our democratic societies."

Macron denounced "anonymity" online, warning that the "internet is being used in our democracies by totalitarian regimes to destabilize us." He called on France to find a Third Way between a supposedly unregulated "California internet" and the heavily censored "Chinese internet."

As a result, for six months starting at the beginning of 2019, French officials are to operate a joint program with Facebook giving them access to the tools that Facebook uses to censor "racist, anti-Semitic, homophobic or sexist" speech. Macron added, "This is a first. It is a very innovative experimental method which illustrates the cooperative methods I support."

This program is a fundamental assault on democratic rights. The target of Macron's internet censorship campaign is not the threat posed by foreign totalitarian enemies or far-right hate speech, but domestic left-wing political opposition in general, and the *World Socialist Web Site* in particular.

Macron's presentation is a pack of lies from start to finish, aiming to provide pseudo-democratic cover for the building of a regime of police-state censorship. This process is well underway in both Europe and the United States, where the major tech firms have thousands of employees working on censoring the internet. The

"California internet" Macron held up as a terrible model of free speech is, in fact, run by a handful of powerful corporations implementing mass censorship.

Facebook, Macron said, "will soon host a delegation of French regulators tasked, together with Facebook experts, with making precise, concrete joint recommendations on the struggle against hateful and offensive speech."

A dozen anonymous individuals, working either for Facebook or the French government, will apparently run this censorship program, without public oversight or reporting of what content they are deleting from social media. Their power to eliminate content that they claim someone might construe as "hateful and offensive" amounts to a license to delete virtually any political content. This constitutes a blatant attack on freedom of expression.

Le Monde reported that the French presidency had also contacted Google, asking for similar access to the tools Google uses to censor internet search results. The Elysée palace has stated that this is a way for tech firms to "show whether or not firms are acting in good faith and making the necessary efforts" to remove content the French state objects to. Google has until now refused to develop a collaboration with the French state censors.

Macron was undeterred, however. "There will inevitably be more regulation in the future," he declared at the Monday Forum, adding: "It is not the big firms' job to fix doctrine about hate or free speech ... But we must escape the black-and-white dichotomy between editors of content (with strong legal responsibility) and firms hosting content (like YouTube or Facebook). The big firms must not be exonerated from all responsibility. These platforms must accept reinforced obligations, because they are accelerators of content."

The attempt to pass off censorship as a defense against foreign totalitarian enemies—echoing Charles de Gaulle's denunciation of masses of striking communist workers as

tools of the Kremlin during the May–June 1968 general strike, 50 years ago—is a political fraud. So are the attempts by Macron, who recently hailed Pétain the genocidal anti-Semite, to portray his censorship as being driven with deep concern about the struggle against racism.

Both in Europe and in the United States, where mass censorship on Facebook and Google began last year, the target is growing political opposition in the international working class to policies of austerity and militarism that have been implemented over decades.

During a congressional hearing calling for internet censorship last year, former FBI official Clint Watts declared: “Civil wars don’t start with gunshots, they start with words. America’s war with itself has already begun. We all must act now on the social media battlefield to quell information rebellions that can quickly lead to violent confrontations and easily transform us into the Divided States of America. ...Stopping the false information artillery barrage landing on social media users comes only when those outlets distributing bogus stories are silenced...”

It is widely known in official circles in France that censorship targets left-wing opposition. In January 2018, Pierre Rimbert wrote in the well-known monthly *Le Monde diplomatique* on Google CEO Eric Schmidt’s promise to demote Russian state media in search results. Noting the WSWS’s analyses of this censorship’s impact on readership of anti-war web sites, he asked whether internet censorship is “killing pluralism in the name of better informing the public.”

He wrote: “How to separate the wheat from the chaff? ‘In a statement issued on April 25, Ben Gomes, the company’s vice president for engineering, stated that Google’s update of its search engine would block access to “offensive” sites, while working to surface more “authoritative content,”’ write Andre Damon and David North of the *World Socialist Web Site* (wsws.org, August 2, 2017). Using an internet tracking firm, the Trotskyist site measured the effect of new algorithms that, by default, see the dominant media as reliable and the alternative press as suspect. ‘A massive loss of readership observed by socialist, anti-war and progressive web sites over the past three months has been caused by a cumulative 45 percent decrease in traffic from Google searches.’”

This censorship is being continually escalated. Coincidentally or otherwise, as Macron announced his Facebook censorship plan on Monday, Facebook was

removing a WSWS article from social media, claiming it violated “community standards.”

Macron is launching his censorship program as his approval ratings collapse to a historic low of 21 percent. Universally reviled in the working class as the “president of the rich,” his government is on high alert in the face of a planned mass protest and blockade of French cities on November 17 by truck and car drivers protesting a regressive proposed gasoline tax. Fifty years after the May–June 1968 general strike, France and Europe are on the brink of a revolutionary explosion.

Under these conditions, sections of the media are demanding that the state censor expressions of opposition to Macron. In one remarkable article, *La Voix du Nord* denounced its own readers, boasting that it was censoring their online comments about its coverage of Macron.

“Thus under each article on his trip commemorating World War I,” it wrote, “we have deleted dozens of comments and insults against this president you say is ‘indifferent to the people’ and ‘only helping the rich.’ ... The level of violence in comments on the president is unprecedented. Each of his actions provokes hundreds of comments on our social networks, calls for hate and violence. And let us not forget the particularly violent and sexist comments that followed the publication of the article on the death of Brigitte Macron’s elder brother.”

Criticisms of Macron and similar governments are not the expression of dangerous foreign totalitarian subversion, but of growing, legitimate social anger in the working class. To the extent that the French state sees as its goal the suppression of social anger and the class struggle through such means as censorship and states of emergency, it will be treading a path returning to the type of regime overseen by Macron’s military hero, Philippe Pétain.



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