

Australian parliamentary inquiry discusses intensifying internet censorship

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A little-reported federal parliamentary hearing last week became a forum, involving Labor, Liberal-National and Greens MPs, media representatives and academics, on expanding the censorship of the internet.

The November 20 session was part of an inquiry into the “conduct of the 2016 federal election and matters related thereto.” Its ostensible purpose was to review whether social media or the internet had been used improperly to “influence” that election. None of those who testified, however, provided any evidence that it had.

Instead, those who spoke claimed it was necessary to combat “fake news.” This is the banner under which the major technology giants, operating in lockstep with the US government, have sought to restrict access to progressive, anti-war and socialist content online.

The speakers warned against growing suspicion of the mainstream media among broad layers of the population and the accompanying interest in alternative sources of information.

Dr Michael Jensen claimed, without any evidence, that Twitter accounts-linked to Russia had sought to “influence” discussions on Australian politics. Jensen is a senior research fellow at the University of Canberra’s Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis, a government-funded think tank with close ties to the state apparatus and intelligence organisations.

Jensen declared that Russian “foreign interference operations” could be carried out by “influential agents,” who “would indirectly act upon a target population by trying to shape their attitudes and eventually their behaviours to act in a way that’s favourable to the foreign country.”

Jensen’s claims dovetailed with a campaign being spearheaded by the Democratic Party and the

intelligence agencies in the United States. Their unsubstantiated allegations blame “Russian interference” for the Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton’s defeat in the 2016 US presidential election.

This McCarthyite campaign has been broadened to present all manner of social discontent as the product of a nefarious plot hatched in the Kremlin. The aim is to criminalise mounting oppositional sentiment.

Likewise, the Australian media and political establishment, is alleging, also without evidence, that China is conducting widespread “interference” in Australian politics, economics and virtually every area of social life.

The Liberal-National Coalition government and the Labor Party opposition used these claims to pass sweeping “foreign interference” legislation last June, directed at outlawing growing opposition to Australian involvement in the aggressive US confrontation with Beijing. The latest draconian legislation, including to fast-track the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme and crack open encryption codes for mobile phones and social media, is being pushed through parliament at present (see: Australian government accelerates anti-democratic “foreign influence” register).

The real target of online censorship is not “foreign interference” but domestic hostility to war and authoritarianism. Jensen declared that Russian “interference” would “likely” aim to weaken “the Five Eyes alliance”—the international surveillance network led by the United States, which monitors the communications of millions of ordinary people and is integral to the preparations for war.

Jensen further claimed that “Russia” and its operatives had “advocated strongly on behalf of Julian Assange, asking for Australia’s intercession regarding

his cause to help free him.” He said this would “become more salient in the near future, as reporting last week has indicated that he is currently under sealed indictment in the United States.”

These comments were an attempt to blackguard widespread opposition to the persecution of the WikiLeaks publisher because of its exposures of US-led war crimes and illegal diplomatic intrigues.

The Socialist Equality Party has spearheaded demands that the Australian government act immediately to secure Assange’s safe passage to Australia, with a guarantee against extradition to the US. This included a powerful rally in June addressed by well-known investigative journalist John Pilger.

The target of online censorship is not “fake news,” i.e., false information, but true news that cuts across the lies of the corporate and political establishment. “The truth or falsity of a statement is often incidental to its utility in influence operations,” Jensen declared.

Chris Zappone, foreign news editor of the Fairfax-owned *Age* newspaper, took up this theme. Over the past two years he has written a stream of articles, claiming that “foreign interference” is a major threat, and that social media imperils “social cohesion.”

Zappone warned the hearing that people “continually asking questions but not with the end goal of reform, but, rather, simply to ask questions … can feed into the growing distrust between the population—the citizens—and the leaders of that country.”

The Fairfax Media journalist declared that it was necessary to determine whether a news article was “helping to clarify a matter for the public” or “actually helping to just break down trust between the public and the leaders in the society.”

Zappone openly invoked the McCarthyite witch hunts of the 1950s, declaring: “They were having this issue then with the communist infiltration and communist propaganda at the time.” His comments pointed to fears within the political and media establishment over the attraction of workers and young people to socialism amid a deepening crisis of world capitalism.

The journalist suggested greater repression. Where “you find that a certain party or group of politicians are relying on a consistent pattern of misinformation, and if it costs money and it takes coordination … That might be a place where the state comes in and there’s some sort of sanction or penalty.”

Tom Sears, a PhD candidate at the Australian Defence Force Academy’s cyber centre, called for a “whole-of-government arrangement” to target “influence operations.” This, he said, could involve the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO)—the domestic spy agency—the Australian Signals Directorate, which intercepts online and phone communications, the Home Affairs Department and the military.

Sears also called for the online dissemination of World War I Anzac mythology, which is aimed at promoting the military, and intimidating widespread anti-war sentiment. “Anzac is an example of a tradition which has easily transferred into the digital and by which Australians are able to understand what a civic culture is,” he said (see: Australia: World War I centenary “celebrations” end with stepped-up militaristic propaganda).

Labor and Greens representatives at the inquiry asked the assembled experts how “influence operations” and “fake news” could be combated. The entire political establishment is committed to the suppression of socialist and left-wing views and websites, as it pursues an agenda of militarism, austerity and authoritarianism opposed by the vast majority of people.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has taken the lead in exposing the moves by capitalist governments and the social media conglomerates to censor the internet and issued a call for the formation of an International Coalition of Socialist, Anti-War and Progressive Websites to fight back against this attack on freedom of speech and basic democratic rights. See here for the latest coverage of this campaign.



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