

Facebook: The global censor

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The year 2018 has seen a vast intensification of internet censorship by Google, Facebook and Twitter, transforming them from tools for exchanging information and communicating around the world into massive censorship dragnets for policing what their users say, do and think.

In August 2017, the *World Socialist Web Site* published an open letter to Google charging that the company, in collusion with the US government, was working to shape political discourse by manipulating search results. The open letter warned that Google's actions set a dangerous precedent for subverting constitutional protections of freedom of speech and demanded that the company cease what the WWSW called "political blacklisting" of left-wing sites.

Sixteen months later, the central argument of the open letter—that Google and its peers are carrying out political censorship—is undeniable. The regime that Google pioneered through its search engine has been expanded to all major US social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

In a front-page article published Friday, titled "How Facebook Controls What World Can Say," the *New York Times* writes that Facebook's actions "make the company a far more powerful arbiter of global speech than has been publicly recognized or acknowledged by the company itself."

Facebook has "quietly become, with a speed that makes even employees uncomfortable, what is arguably one of the world's most powerful political regulators," the article states. "Increasingly," the *Times* concludes, "the decisions on what posts should be barred amount to regulating political speech—and not just on the fringes."

The transformation of Facebook into an instrument for political censorship was driven home in an end-of-year statement by Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg published just hours after the appearance of the *Times*

report.

"We're a very different company today than we were in 2016, or even a year ago," writes Zuckerberg. "We've fundamentally altered our DNA to focus more on preventing harm in all our services, and we've systematically shifted a large portion of our company to work on preventing harm. We now have more than 30,000 people working on safety and invest billions of dollars in security yearly."

Lurking behind the billionaire CEO's sickly-sweet euphemisms about "harm prevention" is a much darker reality. The 30,000 employees Zuckerberg cites—a majority of Facebook's workers—are engaged not in "harm prevention," but "speech prevention." They read the communications of Facebook users, determine what political views are and are not acceptable, and remove, ban or block users and posts.

Zuckerberg boasts that Facebook is "removing millions of fake accounts every day," and working "to identify misinformation and reduce its distribution." Facebook has "built AI systems to automatically identify and remove content related to terrorism, hate speech and more before anyone even sees it."

In other words, every single Facebook post, comment and message is read and analyzed by humans, machines or both to determine whether or not it falls afoul of the company's entirely arbitrary, undefined, amorphous and opaque ("and more") standards.

If Facebook determines that what you post is "sensational," such as a criticism of Israeli massacres of Palestinian civilians, your post may be secretly demoted. If you protest the persecution of Sri Lanka's Tamil minority, your statements may be deleted. And, as Facebook has made clear, in certain unspecified cases it passes on information to the police and intelligence agencies based on users' political statements.

Zuckerberg continues, "We've improved News Feed

to promote news from trusted sources. We're developing systems to automatically reduce the distribution of borderline content, including sensationalism and misinformation."

In plain language, if Facebook determines that what you have to say is "borderline content" (whatever that may be), you will not be able to say it, and you cannot appeal to anyone.

"Trusted" sources, among which Zuckerberg has previously named the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, are to be promoted, while those that question these quasi-official outlets of the American state will be gagged.

The *Times* article cited above concludes: "The company's goal is ambitious: to reduce context-heavy questions that even legal experts might struggle with—when is an idea hateful, when is a rumor dangerous—to one-size-fits-all rules."

It notes that the company has internal rules governing whether its users are allowed to use certain terms. "Words like 'brother' or 'comrade' probably cross the line," the *Times* writes.

It adds that "Moderators say they face pressure to review about a thousand pieces of content per day. They have eight to 10 seconds for each post."

Despite the explosive character of the article's revelations, the report is a controlled release of information intended to push Facebook to systematize its censorship regime in coordination with the US government. Instead of what the article describes as a Byzantine maze of excel spreadsheets and PowerPoint files, the *Times*, one of the leading proponents of internet censorship, is demanding a clear set of government guidelines about what kind of speech Facebook is to remove.

But according to the First Amendment of the US Constitution, as well as various international human rights agreements, the government has no right to tell anyone what he or she can and cannot say. "Congress shall make no law" declares the First Amendment, "abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press."

Facebook's censorship drive has taken place at the direct instigation of the American state. In over a half dozen hearings this year by Senate and House committees, leading figures in the US Congress as well as officials from the intelligence agencies have demanded that the company create exactly the sort of

Orwellian censorship regime that is now being described.

All of this is one great, unconstitutional, illegal conspiracy to destroy the freedom of expression.

The reasons behind the censorship drive are not hard to find.

The year 2018 has been one of mounting social struggle, ending in an international upsurge of the working class expressed most clearly in France's "yellow vest" movement. With a looming global recession, mounting international antagonisms and deepening political crisis in the United States and other countries, the capitalist state faces what its representatives themselves call a "crisis of legitimacy." It is desperately seeking to resolve this crisis by preventing the masses from accessing left-wing views and coordinating their struggles via social media.

But just as the coming year will see a further intensification of the class struggle, it will also see an upswing in the struggle against internet censorship.



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