Facebook’s censor Nick Clegg outlines plans for European elections

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Just two months after joining Facebook as its vice-president of Global Affairs and Communications, Nick Clegg gave his first main speech this week outlining sweeping censorship measures to be imposed during the European elections. These are to be carried out in the name of combatting “disinformation” and “fake news.”

Clegg is the British former leader of the Liberal Democrats, who stood down as leader after the 2015 general election. The former deputy prime minister lost his parliamentary seat in the 2017 election, after taking part in a coalition government with the Conservatives between 2010 and 2015. Busy enriching himself in the corporate world, he receives a reported £4 million per year from the social media giant.

The speech Clegg gave in Brussels confirms why he was hired.

Facebook is still a young company and had “undoubtedly made mistakes and is now entering a new phase of reform, responsibility and change,” said Clegg. Central to this was dealing with “a subject that I imagine is uppermost in your minds … the integrity of elections and specifically Facebook’s plans for the European Parliament elections this coming May.”

Facebook had introduced “important new checks and controls.” Starting “with the US mid-terms last November, we established unprecedented new transparency measures for political advertising.” Facebook “would be deploying similar efforts to help protect the integrity of EU elections …”

To this end, Facebook would set up an “operations centre focused on elections integrity, based in Dublin, this spring.”

The company will play a major role in determining what voices Europe’s population are allowed to hear. In “late March, we will launch new tools to help prevent interference in the upcoming elections and to make political advertising on Facebook more transparent. We will require those wanting to run political and issue ads to be authorised and we will display a paid for by disclaimer on those ads.” The ads would be held in a database for up to seven years.

“This approach will help boost our rapid response efforts to fight misinformation, bringing together dozens of experts from across the company—including from our threat intelligence, data science, engineering, research, community operations and legal teams.”

Facebook’s monitoring will involve “clever engineers that we are going to ship over in an aeroplane later this this year to Brussels.” It would work closely with the highest echelons of the state, including “lawmakers, election commissions, other tech companies, academics and civil society groups to continue the fight against fake news, prevent the spread of voter suppression efforts and further integrate the large number of teams working on these important issues across Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp.”

In the “last decade when Facebook, YouTube and Twitter were founded ... Attitudes to the internet and social media were in their infancy and they were largely uncritical attitudes. People were fascinated with the novel experience of connecting to friends, family and likeminded strangers online.”

Now everyone had to recognise, “Freedom must come with responsibility. We are at the start of a discussion that is no longer about whether social media should be regulated but how it should be regulated … and we are committed to working with policymakers to get it right.”

In the Q&A period, moderator Ryan Heath, the political editor at Politico Europe, asked how Facebook would work with the intelligence agencies in the EU in censoring content: “And intelligence and security services? Is there some kind of hotline when they identify some new group that is going to be explosive, or violent or dangerous? Can they get on the phone to you and shut it down?”

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Clegg replied, “Yes.” He boasted of the “huge volume of material that is removed by Facebook every day because it contravenes the community standards on hate, violence, division and so on and the stuff that is coming down … on Russia related pages and so on, the million fake accounts that we take down before they are even registered every day. You could say we are hardening the parameters in which acceptable content is deemed to be legitimate.”

To underscore the extent of ongoing censorship, Clegg added that the “debate today that is understandably a lot about ‘why do platforms like Facebook leave X, Y, Z up on the platform,’ might very easily topple to … people saying, ‘Why are you taking so much down because a huge amount is coming down.’”

He gave an indication of the staggering resources Facebook is dedicating to actively monitoring and censoring content. It had worked to bolster its content review team, with “more than 30,000 people working around the world on security and safety.” Half of these, “15,000 of whom are dedicated to reviewing and removing content which breaches our community standards.” The “reviewers … deal with millions of comments, videos and comments every day.” There were “huge, huge volumes of content involved, an incredible hundred billion messages are now exchanged on Facebook services every single day.”

Clegg’s acknowledgement that the company is working closely with politicians in framing its censorship, dovetails with the EU’s recently announced plans to step up internet censorship to tackle “disinformation” they claim may affect the outcome of the European elections.

Last October, just weeks before Clegg’s appointment, the EU held a summit at which it announced that censorship of social media would be tightened up in advance of the elections. The European Council said this would include “measures to combat cyber and cyber-enabled illegal and malicious activities and build strong cybersecurity.”

Such measures were required against hacking attacks by Moscow, claimed the EU. In December, European Commission (EC) Vice President Andrus Ansip commented, “There is strong evidence pointing to Russia as a primary source of disinformation in Europe. Disinformation is part of Russia’s military doctrine and part of a strategy to divide and weaken the West.”

The EC wanted to see “Facebook and Google agree to step up efforts to remove misleading or illegal content.” Reuters reported that the EC proposed more resources to “monitor and flag Russian misinformation, raising the budget of the EU’s foreign service EEAS [European External Action Service] for this to €5 million ($5.7 million) from 1.9 million in 2018.”

While welcoming Clegg’s comments in Brussels, EU Commissioner Sir Julian King demanded still more action. Facebook was still taking a “patchy, opaque, and self-selecting” approach. King supported “strengthened efforts to tackle disinformation, including more transparent political advertising, more resources for rapid response, and boosting their capacity to fight fake news.”

The tech giants and the political representatives of the ruling elite are desperate to control social media in order to criminalise political opposition and suppress free speech. In censoring their platforms, they function as the “trusted gatekeepers” for governments and ensure the “correct” interpretation of world events—i.e., spreading *real* fake news.

Their censorship agenda is driven by fear of a mounting and resurgent movement of the working class on every continent, expressed most clearly in Europe in France’s “yellow vest” movement. Under these conditions, the ruling elite view as an overriding imperative preventing the masses from accessing left-wing views and coordinating their struggles via social media.

The author also recommends:

Facebook hires former British Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg
[16 November 2018]

Facebook: The global censor
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