Alleging “Russian influence,” Facebook bans left-wing pages

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On February 15 Facebook suspended four pages run by Maffick Media, including In the Now, Soapbox, Back Then and Waste-Ed, which posted content critical of US foreign and social policy.

Facebook removed the articles after CNN ran a report alleging that the pages had connections with Russia Today, a broadcaster partially funded by the Russian government.

Whatever the source of the pages’ funding, their removal is a major new escalation of efforts by the US social media companies, at the behest of the US government, to censor and suppress oppositional political viewpoints.

Rania Khalek, a commentator for Maffick, told CNN, “We should judge journalists on the content that they produce. So, if you want to judge me, judge me on the content. Judge me on the facts I’m presenting.”

She continued, “If I oppose a US war, does that automatically mean I’m going to be accused of being aligned with the Kremlin? I feel like this is a very, very dangerous McCarthyist tactic to start saying that leftist views, anti-war views are just the Kremlin government’s talking points.”

Maffick media does not dispute that they received funds from the Russian government. In a statement on their website Maffick writes, “Similarly to NPR, PBS, BBC, DW, CBC, AJ+ and many other media companies, Maffick is supported in part by government funding. Likewise, while we haven’t posted funding details on our Facebook pages etc, neither have any of our international peers.” The post continues, “The government that helps fund our company is Russia. We did not violate any of Facebook’s policies whatsoever. None of our content promotes disinformation or fake news… This type of new McCarthyism deserves to be called out and needs to stop.”

After the removal of the pages was announced, a Facebook spokesperson stated, “People connecting with Pages shouldn’t be misled about who’s behind them. Just as we’ve stepped up our enforcement of coordinated inauthentic behavior and financially motivated spam over the past year, we’ll continue improving so people can get more information about the Pages they follow.” However, nowhere has Facebook stated a policy that pages must disclose their funding nor was Maffick given any warning before being removed.

Maffick claims that the American news agency CNN played a role in raising the question of funding with Facebook. According to a CNN report titled, “Russia is backing a viral video company aimed at American millennials,” Facebook did not take issue with the pages until CNN was tipped off by the Alliance for Securing Democracy, a right-wing organization staffed by former US intelligence officers and State Department officials with its own funding connected to the US government through the German Marshall Fund.

Quoting reports from the US Director of National Intelligence, they write that RT is the “Kremlin’s principal international propaganda outlet.” Later CNN quotes a representative from the Atlantic Council who stated that RT and Maffick pages “routinely boost Kremlin narratives, especially those which portray the West negatively.”

This is not the first move Facebook has made to censor content it does not agree with. Following the 2016 election Facebook hired over 20,000 moderators to block content. As a result, left-wing pages with millions of views have been removed without any serious explanation.

The WSWS strongly denounces these efforts to

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censor the internet. The public has the right to read and watch any information it wants. It is not for the corporations, working on behalf of the government, to determine what is appropriate for viewing. Free use of the internet for accessing information and sharing ideas is a democratic right.

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