UK parliament committee demands sweeping social media censorship

Robert Stevens
22 February 2019

Parliament's Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee (DCMS) has called for the sweeping censorship of Facebook and other social media.

Reporting its 18-month investigation into "Disinformation and 'fake news'," the select committee's explicitly anti-Russian agenda was clear from the outset, with a remit to tackle accusations of foreign interference in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, the 2016 referendum on the UK's European Union membership and the 2017 general election.

The committee is chaired by leading Conservative Damian Collins, with 11 members in total (five Tory MPs, five Labour and one Scottish National Party MP.) The introduction to the report declares, "Democracy is at risk from the malicious and relentless targeting of citizens with disinformation and personalised 'dark adverts' from unidentifiable sources, delivered through the major social media platforms we use every day.

"Much of this is directed from agencies working in foreign countries, including Russia."

The report denounced Facebook in unprecedented language, stating, "Companies like Facebook should not be allowed to behave like 'digital gangsters' in the online world, considering themselves to be ahead of and beyond the law."

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg is accused of showing "contempt" towards the committee by choosing not to appear before it last year and sending senior executives to answer questions. Collins said that Zuckerberg had given incomplete, disingenuous and "at times misleading" evidence. Facebook had "intentionally and knowingly" violated data privacy laws and should be subject to a probe by the UK's competition and data watchdogs.

Such denunciations of Zuckerberg are from the right, justifying regulation and censorship by using the crimes of the internet corporations, real, imagined and manufactured, to clamp down on free speech and to ensure that the only news and opinions that can be disseminated are those published by their own favoured propaganda outlets.

The report states, "In a democracy, we need to experience a plurality of voices and, critically, to have the skills, experience and knowledge to gauge the veracity of those voices. While the Internet has brought many freedoms across the world and an unprecedented ability to communicate, it also carries the insidious ability to distort, to mislead and to produce hatred and instability. It functions on a scale and at a speed that is unprecedented in human history."

The committee adds, "We must use technology… to free our minds and use regulation to restore democratic accountability. We must make sure that people stay in charge of the machines."

The "people" the DCMS want in charge are representatives of the ruling elite, who can determine what can and cannot be accessed through social media. Collins said, "The age of inadequate self-regulation must come to an end."

The DCMS declares, "Social media companies cannot hide behind the claim of being merely a 'platform' and maintain that they have no responsibility themselves in regulating the content of their sites." It demands the creation of a "compulsory Code of Ethics … overseen by an independent regulator, setting out what constitutes harmful content. The independent regulator would have statutory powers to monitor relevant tech companies…"

Social media companies would be required by law to remove what is deemed as "disinformation," as well as "harmful content," or face potential fines. The regulator's office would be paid for by tech firms that have operations in the UK and be given extraordinary "powers to obtain any information from social media companies that are relevant to its inquiries."

The report notes approvingly that under the Network

© World Socialist Web Site

Enforcement Law passed in January, tech firms operating in Germany must remove material deemed "hate speech" in 24 hours and "unlawful content" in seven days, or face a fine of £20 million. One in six of Facebook's thousands of "moderators" (censors) are employed monitoring and taking down content, with the DCMS welcoming this as "practical evidence that legislation can work." It also applauds "a new law in France, passed in November 2018, allowing judges to order the immediate removal of online articles they decide constitutes disinformation during election campaigns.

The report demands that the state be allowed to totally regulate social media despite being forced to admit—after a series of blatantly contradictory statements—there was *no proven* foreign interference in any of the elections it has spent 18 months investigating. It declares, without attempting to explain why millions are turning away from the political parties and mainstream media echo chambers of the capitalist class, that, "The speed of technological development has coincided with a crisis of confidence in institutions and the media in the West. … This has enabled foreign countries intent on destabilising democratic institutions to take advantage of this crisis."

"Proof" of Russian meddling is contained in the final report, which states that a PDF of the government's response to the MPs interim report was viewed just 346 times, including by some people with IP addresses based in Moscow and St Petersburg!

Buried in the latter parts of the report are statements that give the lie to the entire Kremlin "meddling" framework. It declares that in response to the Committee's previous report, "the Government made it clear that 'it has not seen evidence of successful use of disinformation by foreign actors, including Russia, to influence UK democratic processes'… When the Secretary of State was questioned in oral evidence over what constitutes 'successful'… Jeremy Wright MP, responded: 'We have seen nothing that persuades us that Russian interference has had a material impact on the way in which people choose to vote in elections. It is not that they have not tried, but we have not seen evidence of that material impact'."

The Committee responds in the manner of every classic witch-hunt, that this admission changes nothing. "It is surely a sufficient matter of concern that the Government has acknowledged that interference has occurred, irrespective of the lack of evidence of impact."

It demands, "The Government should be conducting analysis to understand the extent of Russian targeting of voters during elections … The Government also cannot state definitively that there was 'no evidence of successful interference' in our democratic processes, as the term 'successful' is impossible to define in retrospect."

The government welcomed the report and said its "forthcoming white paper on online harms will set out a new framework for ensuring disinformation is tackled effectively." In addition, the "culture secretary will travel to the United States to meet with tech giants including Google, Facebook, Twitter and Apple to discuss many of these issues."

The Labour Party declared its full support for the report, with its right-wing deputy leader and Shadow Culture Secretary Tom Watson repeating "the era of self-regulation for tech companies must end immediately. We need new independent regulation with a tough powers and sanctions regime to curb the worst excesses of surveillance capitalism and the forces trying to use technology to subvert our democracy."

Giving grist to the report's implication that Facebook and Zuckerberg are essentially Russian dupes, Watson continued, "Few individuals have shown contempt for our parliamentary democracy in the way Mark Zuckerberg has."

Given that Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc., have masses of data on tens of millions of Britons, the proposed regulation measures against social media would represent a major escalation of state electronic surveillance already in place. By 2022, the number of monthly active Facebook users in the UK is projected to reach 42.27 million individuals—an increase of over 7 million new users from 35.13 million users in 2015.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site