

Australian government sets global precedent with online censorship bill

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In the wake of the fascist attack in New Zealand, the Australian government is bulldozing unprecedented laws through parliament this week that will threaten all social media platforms with severe criminal penalties if they host what government authorities consider “abhorrent violent” material.

By falsely blaming the Internet for the mass shooting of Muslims in Christchurch, reality is being turned on its head. It was not the livestreaming of the attack that was responsible for the atrocity, but the toxic political and social atmosphere created through the vilification of refugees, immigrants and Muslims by the whole political and media establishment over decades.

Over the past two years, as exposed by the *World Socialist Web Site*, the giant social media conglomerates have increasingly collaborated with governments to restrict access to left-wing and progressive websites, employing sophisticated algorithms and armies of “content moderators.” Now Internet censorship is being taken to a whole new level.

Under the Australian bill, not just the social media platforms, but any “Internet service provider” or “hosting service” will face massive fines or imprisonment if they fail to self-censor by blocking or deleting any material that police could prosecute. This will include not just livestreams, but videos, photos, sound recordings and any other postings.

As it has on other fronts, including in the persecution and detention of refugees, the Australian government is providing a “model” for a sweeping attack on basic democratic rights. Attorney-General Christian Porter boasted that the bill is a “world first,” which Prime Minister Scott Morrison would propose as a “globally consistent response” at the G-20 summit in Japan this June.

The passage of the bill is being followed with intense

interest in ruling circles in the US and worldwide. A *New York Times* article this week said “it could be a watershed moment for the era of global social media,” adding: “No established democracies have ever come as close to applying such sweeping restrictions on online communication.”

While nominally directed against the far-right, the bill will be used to step up the offensive against oppositional, left-wing and socialist postings. Predictably, after the Christchurch atrocity, both Prime Minister Morrison and Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton denounced “left extremism.”

The deliberately-vague provisions of the bill are wide enough to ban exposures of violence by the police, military and intelligence services, such as police killings, the torture of prisoners at the US prison cells in Iraq’s Abu Ghraib or the abuse of Aboriginal teenagers in Darwin’s Don Dale juvenile jail.

Under the Criminal Code Amendment (Sharing of Abhorrent Violent Material) Bill, it will be an offence for social media platforms not to “expeditiously” remove “abhorrent violent material.” They will face up to three years’ imprisonment or fines of as much as 10 percent of the platform’s annual turnover.

Social media providers anywhere in the world must also notify the Australian Federal Police “within a reasonable time”—not defined—if they become aware their service is broadcasting prohibited material from Australia, or face fines of up to \$168,000 for an individual or \$840,000 for a corporation.

“Abhorrent violent material” is defined as depicting “terrorist acts,” murders, attempted murders, torture, rape or kidnap, “that reasonable persons would regard as being, in all the circumstances, offensive.” Because of the broad definition of “terrorism” introduced in the “war on terror,” these parameters are far-reaching and

could be used to target allegedly violent political protests.

An online site could be punished for even being “reckless” as to whether material is “abhorrent,” intensifying the pressure on all providers to block or take down any postings that could land them in jail or with heavy fines.

In addition, the government’s e-Safety Commissioner, an online surveillance agency established in 2015, will have the extraordinary power to issue notices to social media providers, forcing them to immediately remove any material it deems “abhorrent,” backed by the threat of prosecution.

Narrow legal defences exist for conducting research, and for news reporting, but only if the news report is “in the public interest” and made by “a person working in a professional capacity as a journalist.” This may protect the corporate media to some extent, but not social media whistleblowers and publishers.

Despite criticising the Liberal-National Coalition government for rushing the bill through parliament in two days, just before an election, the opposition Labor Party is working hand-in-glove with the Coalition. The legislation passed the Senate late last night in just two minutes, without debate, even though most senators had not even seen the bill. It is due to go through the House of Representatives today on a similar basis.

While Greens leader Senator Richard Di Natale voiced “frustration” at the blocking of debate, the Greens called no Senate division on the bill, allowing it to pass “on the voices” without any recorded vote. The bill was one of 19 pushed through the Senate in just 45 minutes, making a mockery of parliamentary democracy.

Labor’s only criticism was that the bill did not go far enough. It complained that the “rushed” bill would not “jail social media executives,” because companies post material, not individuals. In reality, the bill opens up many people and organisations, as well as corporate executives, to serious criminal penalties.

The corporate platforms, including Twitter and Snapchat, are already cooperating extensively with governments. Lobby group DIGI, representing Facebook, Google, Twitter and Amazon, criticised the rushed process, and appealed for more consultation. The government and Labor proceeded with the bill, nevertheless, determined to set a new global benchmark

for Internet censorship.

This is a sharp warning that as social inequality intensifies, popular discontent grows and working class struggles erupt, the capitalist governments and billionaire oligarchs who control the media and communications technologies are intent on suppressing dissent and blocking the vast democratic potential of the Internet.

The WSWS has taken the lead in exposing these moves and in January last year 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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