

Human rights imperialism, social media censorship and the fraud of Facebook's "Oversight Board"

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On June 27, Facebook published a report entitled "Global Feedback and Input on the Facebook Oversight Board for Content Decisions" on the progress of its plan to create an international review committee to oversee its censorship regime. A careful examination of this report shows that the real purpose of the planned Oversight Board—contrary to Facebook's pretensions of creating an "external appeals process" and safeguarding "free expression and safety for all users of our platforms"—is to expand and systematize social media censorship in defense of world capitalism.

In publishing the report, Brent Harris, Facebook's Director of Governance and Global Affairs, explained that the company was closing a six-month "global consultation" period and turning to the selection of the 40 members of its Oversight Board. Harris writes that the selection process will include "engaging consultants and executive search firms" to begin nominations. Indicating just how "open" and "diverse" the board will be, Harris adds, "Facebook will select the first few people and those members will then help select the remaining people."

The heavily footnoted 37-page report is a summary of the responses of 2,000 people from 88 countries who attended 28 "workshops, roundtables, and town halls" on five continents to discuss Facebook's Oversight Board proposal. Facebook representatives also met with "250 people through one-on-one meetings" that included "experts from multiple disciplines in both the private and public sector." None of these corporate and government "experts" are named in the report.

Additionally, Facebook received 1,206 responses to a public online questionnaire and accepted essays from private individuals and white papers from civil society organizations and individuals on the membership, decision-making process and rules of the board. Lastly, Facebook prepared a comparative analysis of eight "oversight models" currently in use across business and government, including those of the academic research community and the US Court of Appeals system. All of these items have been gathered together and published in a 180-page appendix to the main report.

The proposal for the creation of a Facebook Oversight Board began with an announcement by company CEO Mark Zuckerberg in November 2018. At that time—in an ongoing response to pressure from the US political establishment over "fake news" and unsubstantiated claims of Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election—Zuckerberg outlined his concerns about "interference in elections," "misinformation" and "polarization and extremism" on Facebook.

In his "Blueprint for Content Governance and Enforcement," Zuckerberg was explicit in proposing the creation of an "independent body" that will have binding authority to remove content that seeks "to divide us." In other words, under conditions of a global movement to the left by masses of people, Facebook planned to create a committee to ensure that its censorship of the working class and revolutionary socialist

ideas has the imprimatur of an ostensibly impartial body.

Zuckerberg's blueprint was followed last January with the publication of a Draft Charter for the Oversight Board. The draft included a series of eleven questions regarding the membership and decision-making process of the board along with Facebook's own "suggested approach" to the questions.

Following a range of responses by the corporate media and non-government organizations (NGO) to both Zuckerberg's blueprint and the draft charter—some expressing enthusiasm and others skepticism—Facebook initiated its "global consultation" process. Among the more perceptive responses referred to the Oversight Board as a "faux regulator," lampooned it as an "empty gesture" and, in a *Washington Post* column, editorial writer Molly Roberts mocked Facebook as having "declared sovereignty" with its phony Supreme Court-like proposal that does not allow the public to vote on anything.

What all of these bourgeois critics lacked—and are opposed to—however, is an objective assessment of the corporate entity called Facebook and the political and ideological motives behind the drive to create a global censorship infrastructure within the world's largest social media platform. No one should accept for one second Facebook's or Zuckerberg's claim that an Oversight Board is going to halt or even mediate the company's ongoing censorship practices—including the unilateral removal of posts or scrubbing of accounts without explanation.

Facebook is a global US-based corporation with 37,700 employees headquartered in Menlo Park, California and with offices in 22 US cities as well as 47 other corporate centers and 16 data facilities across six continents. As of this writing, Facebook's Wall Street value stands at approximately \$550 billion. This is greater than the Gross Domestic Product of all but the top 20 countries of the world.

The majority of Facebook stock is controlled by the following individuals and organizations: Mark Zuckerberg owns 28.4 percent, the venture capital firm Accel Partners owns 11.4 percent, former Facebook employee Dan Moskowitz owns 7.6 percent, the Moscow-based Digital Sky Technologies owns 5.4 percent and former Facebook employee Eduardo Saverin owns 5 percent. The balance of 42.5 percent (\$234 billion) is shared among a combination of individuals, institutional investors, mutual funds and exchange traded funds.

Despite the negative investment implications of the "fake news" furor and the Cambridge Analytica privacy scandal—Facebook will likely settle a \$5 billion fine with the FTC for violation of a 2011 consent decree—the company earned a net profit of \$22 billion in 2018, up by nearly 40 percent over 2017. The expectations on Wall Street remain high for 2019, as global user numbers continue to climb.

Facebook's primary platforms are Facebook (2.4 billion users), Instagram (1 billion users) and WhatsApp (600 million users). It is by far

the most popular social media company in the world with more than 80 percent of its users outside the United States. For masses of people in countries around the world—especially those that are less developed—Facebook is more than a social media platform; it is the internet.

Herein lies the contradiction facing Facebook, the big technology sector of the economy including Google, Amazon and Apple and the entire ruling elite that has reaped billions since the financial crisis of 2008. On one hand, the world capitalist system depends upon the enormous financial performance of the tech sector, including the growing adoption of wireless broadband internet service, smartphones and social media by the world's population.

Additionally, the ongoing production and management of these technologies are based upon ever greater forms of exploitation of the international working class from the high-tech assembly factories in Asia to Amazon's sweatshop warehouses in Europe and North America. This is the basis upon which the enormous profits of these companies have been generated and is expected into the future.

However, on the other hand—as the international class struggle is reemerging and masses of people are gravitating toward socialism—the ruling elite is terrified that these technologies will also become the instruments of social and political struggle in the hands of the masses against the capitalist system itself.

These objective factors form the backdrop of the discussions taking place about Facebook's "content decisions." Knowing that they cannot overtly censor left-wing and oppositional views on their platforms, the social and political forces behind Facebook are seeking to erect an infrastructure based upon the same language used for decades by US imperialism to cover its criminal war aims, regime change operations and occupational conquests. The American ruling establishment is directing Facebook to proceed with an international censorship regime under the cover of spreading "democracy," "freedom" and "human rights."

That the Facebook Oversight Board project corresponds to the global interests of US imperialism is proven by the participants involved directly in the initiative. Although none of the private and public sector "experts" who were interviewed for the project are mentioned by name, several key individuals and organizations are credited in the document for their contributions. The following biographies are significant:

- Zoe Mentel Darmé is Facebook's Manager of Global Affairs and Governance; she is credited with writing the Oversight Board report. Darmé has been with Facebook since December 2018 and was clearly brought on for the purposes of this project.

Prior to her employment at Facebook, she worked for six years at the United Nations as a Policy and Planning Officer, specializing in the Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions in the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO). This department, which traces its roots back to the US-dominated arrangements after World War II, has been involved in every operation of American imperialism since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and integration of the countries of the former USSR and the Eastern bloc into the world capitalist system.

On her LinkedIn page, Darmé boasts of her work in various UN departments and functions, including drafting "a wide variety of strategy papers, reports, funding proposals and other documents necessary for the smooth conduct of divisional business" as Communications/Programme Officer for the Police Advisor to the UN DPKO.

- Kevin Steeves is, according to Facebook, an independent researcher credited with helping Darmé write the Oversight Board report. Steeves promotes himself on LinkedIn as an Independent Advisor and Consultant on Global Affairs, Peace and Security from Alsace, France.

Prior to working as Director of the imperialist think tanks European Implementation Network in Strasbourg and Chatham House in London, Steeves also worked in New York City for nine years as a Policy Officer

and Special Assistant for the UN's DPKO. In the late 1990s and early 2000s he worked for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), a major post-war institution of American and European imperialism dedicated to "arms control" and "human rights."

In 1999, Steeves was a professional consultant for the OSCE in Croatia with an office in Zagreb involved in securing Western imperialist interests in the former Yugoslavian territory under the cover of protecting "national minorities" and promoting "democratic institutions" and defending "human rights."

- Noah Feldman is currently a professor of Law at Harvard University. According to the Facebook report, Prof. Feldman is the author of two white papers that have been the basis of the Oversight Board concept and he has worked with Zuckerberg directly on the project since the original announcement of November 2018. The Facebook report says, "Core features of Feldman's white paper remain, and he has been advising Facebook on the Board throughout its development."

After graduating from Yale Law school in 1997, Feldman worked as a law clerk for Supreme Court Justice David Souter. He is currently an adjunct fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, a think-tank of US imperialism going back to World War I and a fellow at New America Foundation, a more recent organization established to support US imperialist interests that includes Eric Schmidt, Executive Chairman of Google's parent company, Alphabet.

After the invasion of Iraq by the Bush Administration in 2003, Feldman distinguished himself by working on the Iraqi Constitution which was drafted and approved in 2005. Feldman provided liberal justifications—including the publication of documents such as "The new Iraq: An Experiment in Islamic Democracy"—for the overthrow and brutal execution of Saddam Hussein and the transfer of the Iraqi oil fields to the imperialist petrochemical monopolies such as British Petroleum and Exxon-Mobil.

These are among the most significant and known individual contributors to Facebook's plans for a censorship Oversight Board. There are undoubtedly more "experts" whose names have yet to come to light. It is also worth mentioning the participation of the corporate law firm Baker McKenzie and the marketing agency George P. Johnson (GPJ).

Baker McKenzie, which has specialized in human rights law and boasts its progressive credentials by having elected a female chair of its global executive committee, represents "venture capital funds, investment banks, tech powerhouses, household names, multinational technology companies, famous consumer brands, world-leading automotive companies and private equity houses."

GPJ is multinational corporation that specializes in corporate branding and "event marketing." With deep roots in corporate America that go back to the early twentieth century, GPJ counts among its clients the big three American auto companies as well as Toyota and Nissan and the tech companies IBM, Cisco Systems, Siebel and Intel.

Behind all the talk by Zuckerberg and Facebook executives about aligning social media content decisions with "democratic ideals and enlightenment philosophy of free thought and free expression" is a strategy to safeguard the interests of corporate America and the global agenda of US imperialism in every corner of the globe. The creation of an Oversight Board for Facebook—like so many local police department oversight committees that have supervised a steady increase in police violence and murder of working class and poor people across the US—is so much window dressing behind which the censorship of social media content will be intensified.

The defense of free speech and the right to utilize social media tools to organize the growing struggles of the working class and youth against unemployment, poverty, low wages, college debt, police violence and war cannot be trusted to any faction of the ruling establishment or giant tech company. Only the working class can defend the most basic democratic

rights through an internationally coordinated struggle against the capitalist system and for socialism.



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