

Canada's Liberal government steps up internet censorship with creation of new media fund

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In a further step aimed at strengthening state control over the internet and digital content, Canada's Liberal government has announced a multi-million dollar media fund to be distributed to outlets deemed to be producing "authoritative content." The \$600 million fund, to be launched this fall, will be dispensed by an eight-member government-appointed committee.

The fund, made up of tax credits and incentives to be handed out over the next five years, was first announced last November, under the guise of protecting "the vital role that independent news media play in our democracy and in our communities."

Behind all of the bogus talk about defending "independent media" outlets and "Canadian journalism," the new funding structures are explicitly aimed at censoring the internet in the lead up to and following this fall's federal election. They are part of a global assault on democratic rights and freedom of speech by ruling elites in every country, which has found its most graphic illustration in the persecution of publisher and journalist Julian Assange and courageous whistleblower Chelsea Manning.

Underlining the international character of the censorship efforts, Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland co-hosted the Global Media Freedom Conference earlier this month with British Foreign Minister Jeremy Hunt, who has repeatedly vowed to hand Assange over to the Trump administration. (See: UK government holds Media Freedom Conference while imprisoning Assange)

Promoting a meeting that took place just seven miles from Assange's prison cell, where he is being held alongside terrorists and convicted criminals for the "crime" of exposing the global conspiracies of US imperialism and its allies, Freeland's foreign ministry sought to strike a pose of concern for journalistic

integrity. "Canada and the UK are working together to defend media freedom and improve the safety of journalists who report across the world," declares Global Affairs Canada on its website in a passage that would not be out of place in Orwell's *1984*.

The very language used by the Trudeau government to justify the creation of the media fund, replete with references to "authoritative content" and "independent news outlets," recalls nothing so much as Google's wide-ranging internet censorship program. Launched in April 2017, the global push to demote news sites deemed undesirable to the powers that be led to a sharp drop in traffic for left-wing, anti-war and socialist publications, the *World Socialist Web Site* chief among them.

The government's hand-picked committee will include representatives from News Media Canada, the Association de la presse francophone, the Quebec Community Newspaper Association, the National Ethnic Press and Media Council of Canada, the Canadian Association of Journalists, the Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec, Unifor, and the Fédération nationale des communications.

This advisory panel is anything but independent. The fact that the Liberals have included Unifor, Canada's largest trade union that represents 12,000 journalists, underscores that Trudeau views the unions as a key pillar of support for the capitalist state and its policies of austerity and war. Over the past three decades, Unifor and the union bureaucracy as a whole have sabotaged and suppressed working class struggles. The Liberals therefore have full confidence that the Unifor bureaucrats will prove invaluable in supporting the state-led offensive against voices of opposition and dissent.

Unifor backed the Liberals in the 2015 election campaign, while Unifor president Jerry Dias acted as a

trusted advisor to the Liberal government during the renegotiation of NAFTA. This fact has prompted the only criticism of the fund within ruling circles, with the official opposition Conservative Party declaring that the Trudeau government is stuffing the panel with pro-Liberal representatives.

Predictably, the Tories have expressed no concern with the initiative's fundamentally anti-democratic and authoritarian premises. This is because all of the major parties, including the Liberals, Tories, and NDP, have been complicit in the erection of the scaffolding of a police state over the past 15 years in the name of fighting "terrorism."

The media fund is the latest step Ottawa is taking towards expanding the power of the state to control and censor digital content. It follows a series of international meetings and coordinated measures that Prime Minister Trudeau claims are aimed at keeping Canadians safe from "foreign interference," principally from Russia and China.

The threat of "foreign interference" in the coming federal election was laid out by the Communications Security Establishment, which is part of the US National Security Agency-led "Five Eyes" global spying network, in its update to a report titled "Cyber Threats to Canada's Democratic Process" released in April. The report assessed that it is very likely Canadian voters will encounter foreign cyber interference ahead of, and during, the 2019 general election.

Shortly after, Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland announced during a G7 foreign ministers meeting in France that "Our judgment is that interference [in the federal election] is very likely and we think there have probably already been efforts by malign foreign actors to disrupt our democracy."

In mid May, at the "Christchurch call" summit in Paris where heads of state and big tech officials discussed a closer working relationship, Trudeau announced plans for a Digital Charter to increase the regulation of the tech sector. The Canada Declaration on Electoral Integrity, released later the same month and signed by the government and social media companies, commits social media platforms to "intensify efforts" to combat "disinformation" and "promote safeguards that effectively help address cybersecurity incidents."

Regarding social media regulation, Trudeau announced at a meeting before the International Grand Committee on Big Data, Privacy and Democracy, "I'd much rather do it in partnership with platforms but, if it comes down to it,

we will take measures that we will regret having to take because our imperative is to keep citizens safe."

After details on the Digital Charter were published in late May, Innovation, Science and Economic Development Minister Navdeep Bains warned in vague terms that "violations of the laws and regulations that support these principles" will result in "clear, meaningful penalties."

It is unclear whether "meaningful penalties" mean millions of dollars in fines for press outlets and tech firms, or worse, the persecution, imprisonment, and torture of individual journalists and political dissidents like Assange, who faces extradition to the United States on espionage charges for revealing the global war crimes and conspiracies of US imperialism.

Ottawa's turn to digital censorship is further reflected in federal budget 2019. Measures to "safeguard Canadian democracy" include \$19.4 million in funding over four years for the Department of Canadian Heritage to launch the Digital Democracy Project, an international initiative led by Canada aimed at creating "guiding principles" for combating online "disinformation", and the Digital Citizen Initiative aimed at educating the public on "deceptive practices" used online.

Confronted with growing worker militancy and mass opposition to government policy, the Canadian ruling class in collaboration with its imperialist allies is setting out to establish and formalize mechanisms for state censorship.

The turn towards internet censorship and other authoritarian practices must be seen in the context of rising working class militancy against right-wing provincial regimes in Ontario and Quebec.

As the right-wing populist premiers Doug Ford and Francois Legault gut public services and workers' rights, the ruling elite as a whole fears that the mounting protests could erupt into an all-out challenge to the agenda of capitalist austerity and war supported by all of the established parties. This includes the Trudeau government, which has hiked military spending by over 70 percent and collaborated with the Trump administration's far-right crackdown on refugees and immigrants.



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