

Facebook moves forward with “depoliticization” of News Feed

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On Wednesday, Facebook published a short statement on its Newsroom blog entitled, “Reducing Political Content in News Feed,” that says the company is moving forward with testing the “depoliticization” of its platform.

Written by Aastha Gupta, Product Management Director, the statement reveals specific measures that will be taken in “the next few months” to restrict political content on Facebook as mentioned by company CEO Mark Zuckerberg during a conference call with investors on January 27.

As reported here on the *World Socialist Web Site* on Wednesday, it is clear from everything that Zuckerberg said in his earnings call, along with statements by US government officials and the capitalist press on the subject, that the primary target of the “depoliticization” of Facebook is progressive, left-wing and socialist political content on the platform.

The Newsroom post further reinforces this analysis. Gupta writes, “As a first step, we’ll temporarily reduce the distribution of political content in News Feed for a small percentage of people in Canada, Brazil and Indonesia this week, and the US in the coming weeks,” and that the testing is necessary to “explore a variety of ways to rank political content in people’s feeds using different signals, and then decide on the approaches we’ll use going forward.”

Gupta goes on to say that Facebook will “determine how effective these new approaches are” by surveying “people about their experience during these tests.” Both Gupta—and Zuckerberg previously—claim unconvincingly that “Our goal is to preserve the ability for people to find and interact with political content on Facebook, while respecting each person’s appetite for it at the top of their News Feed.”

The reference to the “appetite” is tied in with the

claims made by Facebook that moderation of the flow of political posts on Facebook is necessary because “one common piece of feedback we hear is that people don’t want political content to take over their News Feed.”

However, Gupta reports that Facebook made an analysis in the US, and “political content makes up about 6% of what people see” on the platform and that “even a small percentage of political content can impact someone’s overall experience.”

The News Feed is the primary stream of content seen by users each day on their Facebook accounts. It can include a variety of content posted by friends of users, such as profile changes, photos, birthdays and comments on any number of topics. The News Feed also includes corporate advertisements and other types of promoted content, including posts from political parties and organizations, government officials and news publishers commenting on contemporary events, along with shares of this content by individual users who can make their own comments about it.

Gupta did not disclose the actual number of the “small percentage of people” in the four countries that would have their political content throttled in News Feed. Since there are more than 500 million Facebook users in these countries (137 million in Brazil, 140 million in Indonesia and 244 million users in the US and Canada), even 1 percent would mean that more than 5 million users who would have their political content manipulated.

A report in the *Washington Post* included the comments of Facebook spokesperson Lauren Svensson, who said the countries were selected because they had “the most complaints about seeing too much political content.” Svensson also told the *Post* that “using a machine learning model that is trained to look for

signals of political content and predict whether a post is related to politics. We'll be refining this model during the test period to better identify political content and may or may not end up using this method longer-term.”

Neither Svensson nor Gupta explained precisely what the term “signal” means in connection with the artificial intelligence algorithms used by Facebook and the political content posted by users.

That the purpose of the new Facebook policy is to be directed against left and socialist political content is revealed by the fact that neither Gupta nor Zuckerberg referred to the use of the platform by the far-right and fascist political organizations and individuals who stormed the U.S. Capitol on January 6—on behalf of Donald Trump and the majority of the Republican Party—to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential elections.

While there is ample evidence that the fascists used Facebook and other social media platforms to both organize and livestream their January 6 insurrection—including the promotion of advertisements for weapons accessories and body armor next to false information about the “stolen election” and posts by “patriot” and militia groups—this is not the focus of Facebook’s new initiative.

Instead, Gupta spotlighted the need for controlling content about the deadly pandemic, writing, “COVID-19 information from authoritative health organizations like the CDC and WHO, as well as national and regional health agencies and services from affected countries, will be exempt from these tests. Content from official government agencies and services will also be exempt.”

The emphasis on reducing political content about the pandemic—with no mention of the conspiracy theories of the extreme right—reveals that the primary concern of Facebook and its advisors from within the ruling establishment is the growing mass political opposition to the placing of the profit interests of the capitalist class above the health and lives of the working class.

An indication of this political censorship of socialist views was demonstrated concretely on Wednesday when shares of the *World Socialist Web Site* article entitled “British Medical Journal calls pandemic response ‘social murder’” were labeled by Facebook as “False Information.” In a direct reference to a phrase used by Friedrich Engels—co-founder with Karl Marx of

scientific socialism—the prestigious journal, which has been published since 1840, termed as “social murder” the willingness of “politicians and experts to allow tens of thousands of premature deaths for the sake of population immunity.”



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