

Facebook blocks all news content in Australia

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In an extraordinary attack on democratic rights and the freedom of information online, Facebook this morning blocked the sharing and posting of all news content in Australia. The indefinite ban also prevents Australians from accessing international news on the platform.

Because of the corporation's monopolistic share of the social media market, Facebook has effectively shut down a considerable portion of the Australian internet, with major consequences not only for publishers, but virtually every facet of civil society and the country's 25 million citizens and residents.

The move is in response to the passage yesterday of a news media bargaining code by the Australian House of Representatives. With bipartisan support from the Liberal-National Coalition government and the Labor Party opposition, the legislation was set to be ratified by the Senate, the upper house of Australia's parliament, and to become law.

Facebook and Google have bitterly opposed the code, which would require them to divert a portion of their advertising revenue to Australian news corporations. Google last month threatened to block access to its search engine in Australia if the bill was passed. It has since rescinded the ultimatum and entered into talks with the media companies over revenue-sharing arrangements.

With its news shutdown, Facebook is essentially declaring that it will not submit to any attempts by national governments to regulate its business practices. The ban is intended to send a menacing warning to other countries that are considering adopting similar media codes.

More is at stake than the immediate conflict between the Australian media conglomerates and the social media monopolies over the respective proportion of online advertising revenue that their billionaire owners and wealthy shareholders will control.

Facebook is establishing a precedent for preventing entire populations from accessing and discussing news developments and political issues. Its news ban is of a piece with a dramatic escalation of online censorship over

recent years, and a turn by the ruling elites internationally towards authoritarian measures aimed at suppressing growing social and political opposition.

The scope of the Facebook shutdown was outlined in a statement issued yesterday by William Easton, the company's managing director for Australia and New Zealand. Under the Orwellian heading "Changes to Sharing and Viewing News on Facebook in Australia," it outlined a series of measures that could be compared to a declaration of online martial-law.

The statement announced that Australian publishers are "restricted from sharing or posting any content on Facebook Pages." International media organisations "can continue to publish news content on Facebook, but links and posts can't be viewed or shared by Australian audiences."

The Australian people "cannot view or share Australian or international news content on Facebook or content from Australian and international news Pages." In other words, they are being subjected to a total news blockade. The measure affects the world population, with Facebook banning everyone, wherever they may be, from sharing Australian news content.

Ordinary people have expressed their shock and outrage after seeking to post news content today and receiving a pop-up message informing them that they are not able to. The Facebook pages of major publications have been stripped of all content, with the records of thousands of postings and comment sections being wiped out overnight.

There are already indications that the Facebook measures are an even broader attack on democratic rights than the company indicated in its statement. The Australian Council of Trade Unions, the national union federation, announced this morning that links from its website cannot be shared on Facebook. This raises the spectre of a broader shutdown of political organisations.

The Bureau of Meteorology (BOM), the national weather service, also reported that its "Facebook page has been impacted by the broader Facebook changes." This,

on a day when there is a “catastrophic danger” of bushfires in Western Australia and warnings of possible flooding in the state of Queensland. The BOM is one of the primary agencies for alerting the population to dangerous weather events, including those that threaten lives.

Facebook has responded by claiming that some pages, such as the BOM’s, have been inadvertently caught up by the ban in the digital equivalent of collateral damage.

In any case, the measures have the character of a nihilistic attack on society, and especially the working class, carried out by a corporation that will not let anything get in the way of its bottom line.

According to figures last December, more than 50 percent of the Australian population receives its news from social media, primarily through Facebook. Workers, who are under immense financial, economic and time pressure, frequently check Facebook to see the latest news developments when they are able to spare a minute or two. Amid a global pandemic, and the major social, economic and political upheavals associated with it, millions of people are being cut off from their primary means of accessing news.

The federal government and the media conglomerates have expressed their “shock” and “outrage” at the ban. Their concern is not over the assault that it represents on the rights of ordinary people.

The media bargaining code has always been aimed at augmenting the profits of the largest media companies and shoring up their market dominance. The code is based on the dubious premise that the social media companies should provide vast sums to the media conglomerates, for the privilege of indexing their content in search results and having their users post links to articles.

The code explicitly stipulates that only “registered news business corporations” accepted by federal authorities and with a revenue of more than \$150,000 a year are covered. The primary beneficiaries will likely be News Corp, Rupert Murdoch’s media empire, along with Seven West Media and Nine Entertainment Corporation.

In addition to shaking down the social media companies for hundreds of millions or even billions of dollars, the aim of the media conglomerates is to entrench their position as semi-official sources of news.

On Monday, Seven West announced that it had signed a \$30 million a year deal for its content to be featured in Google’s “News Showcase,” with News Corp following suit today. The “News Showcase” is a new, curated feature that will direct users to “authoritative” and “high-

quality” news sources, i.e., primarily those owned by multi-billion dollar corporations with close ties to the political establishment.

This is directed against the increasing popularity of alternative and independent media sites, whose readership has grown through the expansion of the internet and widespread hostility to the role of the media companies as “gatekeepers” that uncritically promote the claims of governments, the intelligence agencies and big businesses.

Proponents of the bill, in the government and the media companies, have explicitly touted it as a means of marginalising “fake news,” a catch-all term for any information that is not in line with government and state propaganda.

This is of a piece with a sharp escalation of online censorship over recent years. In 2017, Google effectively blacklisted the *World Socialist Web Site* from a raft of search results, while diverting traffic from other left-wing and progressive outlets to corporate publications. Facebook has carried out similar measures, aimed at reducing the spread of alternative news sites. This included a crackdown on the pages of socialist organisations and the personal profiles of their leading members last month.

The Facebook news ban demonstrates the scale of the threat posed by online censorship. The response of the news corporations in seeking to become the official partners of the social media companies, as they further sideline alternative publications, demonstrates that this agenda is supported by the entire political and media establishment.

The fight against these attacks requires a political movement of the working class, directed at transforming the social media monopolies into publicly-owned utilities, democratically controlled by working people.



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