

Facebook threatens teachers' groups opposing unsafe school reopenings

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On Monday and Tuesday, Facebook threatened two groups—Illinois Refuse to Return and Educators Rank and File Safety Committee—with being shut down for sharing information that is opposed to the unsafe reopening of schools amidst the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

The Facebook threat was sent to administrators of the two groups in the form of a “Group Quality” communication. The message contained “warnings” about a post by a group member that had been removed because it “goes against our Community Standards on misinformation that could cause physical harm.”

The warning also stated that the approval of the member’s post by administrators was considered an “Admin violation,” and if further instances occur of such violations, “we may disable your group.”

The group member who posted the comment in the two groups was *World Socialist Web Site* writer Benjamin Mateus. Mateus was also notified that this post was considered a violation of Facebook’s Community Standards and that it had been removed.

Benjamin Mateus is the pseudonym used by a practicing physician in the US with extensive clinical experience. Over the past year, he has written dozens of articles on the coronavirus pandemic for the *World Socialist Web Site* and exposed, on the basis of science, the manipulation of data about COVID-19 by corporations and the government to justify the premature and deadly reopening of businesses and schools.

Mateus shared his post on Illinois Refuse to Return on Monday and Educators Rank and File Safety Committee on Tuesday. The post exposed the use by the US Congress and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) of a study coauthored by Brown University economist Emily Oster that justified the loosening of guidelines and claimed that children are not at high risk for COVID-19.

The full text of the post is as follows:

“A person like Emily Oster who has been advocating right wing fashion for schools to open and repeatedly getting it wrong who has no training in public health and infectious diseases should be a red flag for the CDC to use her study. This is no better than the hydroxychloroquine hype promoted by the flawed French researcher to treat COVID-19. Yet, the CDC and congress put on a deadly show for all Americans and teachers. ‘We will manipulate statistics and promote bad data and sell it as sound science to get you back in the classrooms!’”

On Tuesday, when Mateus posted the message to the Educators Rank and File Safety Committee group, he received a message that the comment was removed, and his account had been suspended for 24 hours for two violations of Facebook Community Standards. Suspension of a Facebook account permits a user to log into the social media platform and view content but removes the ability to post comments, share links, “like” other posts or engage with the content in any way.

The administrator of the Educators Rank and File Safety Committee then received a message from Facebook regarding “Benjamin Mateus’s Violation History” saying that a 30-day mandatory “Post Approval” had been turned on for his activity within the group.

A further explanation from Facebook said, “An admin or moderator will have to review anything Benjamin posts during this time.” The options for the admins or moderators include muting, removing or blocking the user.

The actions against Benjamin Mateus are part of a massive operation by Facebook to censor and control the content on its platforms.

On Monday, Facebook announced that it had identified 1.3 billion accounts as “fake” and disabled them between October and December 2020. In a Newsroom blog post from Facebook VP of Integrity Guy Rosen titled “How We’re Tackling Misinformation Across Our Apps,” the

social media corporation provided details about its response to “fake accounts, deceptive behavior, and misleading and harmful content.”

In his blog post—which was published first on the website of the data intelligence company Morning Consult—Rosen writes that Facebook is taking a hard line and blocking “millions of fake accounts each day.” He adds that Facebook also investigates and takes down “covert foreign and domestic influence operations” that are based on fake accounts, and that “over the past three years, we’ve removed over 100 networks of coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB) from our platform.”

Rosen says that Facebook has “built teams and systems to detect and enforce against inauthentic behavior tactics.” As part of this infrastructure, Rosen explains that the company has “built a global network of more than 80 independent fact-checkers, who review content in more than 60 languages.” In total, Rosen writes that Facebook has more than 35,000 people addressing “misinformation” on its platforms.

As Rosen indicates, the publication of this information by Facebook is timed to coincide with hearings being held by the House Energy and Commerce Committee on March 25 on the subject of social media’s role in “promoting extremism and disinformation.” Even though his blog post was very much issued as a public relations statement, Rosen never gets around to explaining precisely what is meant by “misinformation,” “inauthentic behavior,” “harmful content” or “fake accounts.” Moreover, he does not elaborate on the nature and activity of the “covert domestic influence operations.”

In any case, if it is true that 1.3 billion user accounts were shut down by Facebook as “fake” over a three-month period in 2020, this is an extraordinary admission. It would mean that the number one social media company in the world has disabled a quantity of user accounts that is equal to one half of its reported worldwide monthly total active users (2.7 billion).

Rosen’s report follows by one week the announcement by Facebook VP of Engineering Tom Alison about “ongoing work to keep Groups safe.” Facebook Groups are a social media arena for friends and acquaintances to gather virtually and share information and content of common interest. Some groups are “public” and can be joined by any Facebook user while others are “private,” and members must be admitted into the space by Group administrators.

Alison says that Facebook has “taken action to curb the

spread of harmful content” and to make it harder “for certain groups to operate or be discovered, whether they’re Public or Private. When a group repeatedly breaks our rules, we take it down entirely.”

The action taken by Facebook includes throttling content posted by some groups by changing recommendation algorithms and blocking it from spreading or becoming viral. In line with the announcement by Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg last January that the company was launching an effort to “depoliticize” its platforms, Alison says that “we recently removed civic and political groups, as well as newly created groups, from recommendations in the US.”

Other techniques being used on Groups, Alison explains, are aimed at impeding users from joining groups and limiting the number of member invitations that can be sent. Alison also says that administrators and moderators will be forced to “approve all posts when that group has a substantial number of members who have violated our policies or were part of other groups that were removed for breaking our rules.”

Additionally, “When someone has repeated violations in groups, we will block them from being able to post or comment for a period of time in any group. They also won’t be able to invite others to any groups and won’t be able to create new groups.”

Although Rosen and Alison do not explain it, Facebook has shifted its focus on “misinformation” and “harmful content” from the 2020 US elections to combatting “false claims about COVID-19.” In this, the social media monopoly makes no distinction between right-wing pandemic and vaccine conspiracy theories and the growing opposition within the working class to the push by the financial elite, the corporations and the Democrats and Republicans to reopen schools and force people back into workplaces.



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