

Google sets up “news initiative” to censor political opposition and promote mainstream media

By Andre Damon

Google announced Wednesday that it is partnering with the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Financial Times* and other major news outlets to reinforce their monopoly over news coverage by blocking independent news organizations.

The *New York Times*, whose stock price soared after the announcement, said Google’s initiative was aimed at combatting “the epidemic of false and unreliable information on the internet,” by “pledging to spend \$300 million over the next three years to support authoritative journalism.”

In reality, Google’s action is the latest step in a protracted campaign on the part of the major technology companies, working with the Democratic Party and the US intelligence agencies, to censor the Internet.

The campaign for Internet censorship has been spearheaded by the major media outlets, including the *Times* and the *Post*, who have seen their subscription base eroded by the growth of oppositional news outlets and “citizen journalism.” By working with the technology giants and intelligence agencies to censor smaller news outlets, the media giants hope to regain the monopoly over the distribution of news they held before the rise of the Internet.

In April of last year, Google announced measures to promote “authoritative content” over “alternative viewpoints,” which led search

traffic to left-wing, antiwar, and socialist web sites to plunge by over 50 percent.

After Google's announcement last year, other major technology companies followed suit in implementing their own measures to censor the Internet. This year, Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced that it would promote "trusted" news sources, such as the *New York Times*, over public postings by individuals and independent news agencies. At a congressional hearing this year, Facebook said it had hired some 10,000 content moderators, and would double that number by the end of the year.

But despite Facebook's moves to rapidly implement the demands of the intelligence agencies for Internet censorship, leading Democrats, including Senator Mark Warner, have called on them to do more to crack down on social opposition.

Amid a growing strike wave by workers all over the world, including struggles this month by teachers in West Virginia and Oklahoma, university lecturers in the United Kingdom, and Amazon warehouse workers in Spain, leading news outlets have repeatedly warned that Facebook was being used to mobilize social opposition outside of the framework of the trade union establishment.

Within this context, the major news outlets have, in pursuit of their own aims, seized upon revelations that the election data firm Cambridge Analytica harvested the personal information of some 50 million Facebook users without their knowledge in 2014. At the time, the firm was owned by Robert Mercer, a billionaire who would later back the Trump campaign, and was headed by Steve Bannon, who would later serve as Trump's campaign manager.

While the type of data harvesting conducted by Cambridge Analytica raises serious privacy concerns, the media firestorm that has

followed the revelations is highly selective.

Cambridge Analytica had access to only a fraction of the data that Facebook itself collects and uses—often in secret—for political purposes. The company’s actions, moreover, are par for the course for the conduct of bourgeois election campaigns, which have come more and more to rely on data analytics and artificial intelligence to assess and impact voters’ political views.

A recent report by *Investor’s Business Daily* noted “In 2012, the Obama campaign encouraged supporters to download an Obama 2012 Facebook app that, when activated, let the campaign collect Facebook data both on users and their friends.” According to the report, up to 190 million people may have “had at least some of their Facebook data vacuumed up by the Obama campaign — without their knowledge or consent.”

Commenting on the Obama campaign’s data mining operation, former campaign director Carol Davidsen tweeted, “Facebook was surprised we were able to suck out the whole social graph, but they didn’t stop us once they realized that was what we were doing.”

In leaked emails released by WikiLeaks in 2016, Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg told Clinton campaign officials that she “badly” wanted Clinton to win, and that she had met with the candidate and campaign officials on multiple occasions.

While the actions taken by Cambridge Analytica point to a substantial violation of users’ privacy, they pale in comparison to the massive surveillance and content harvesting operation carried out by Facebook itself, with the assistance of the leading US intelligence agencies and Democratic Party, which, in the name of fighting “fake news” and extremist content, aim to review and censor everything posted on the social media platform.

Even more importantly, the Democrats' highly selective outrage over the Cambridge Analytica scandal is being used to hold Facebook's feet to the fire, with the aim of forcing it to more aggressively censor social opposition in the name of cracking down on Russian "bots and trolls." Mark Warner, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee and a leading proponent of internet censorship, seized on the scandal to put further pressure on Facebook to declare that it was "misused" by the "Russians" in the 2016 election campaign.

Warner told ABC, "Facebook, since the beginnings of this investigation, has been reluctant, to say the least, to be fully forthcoming. I think it's time for the CEO, Mr. Zuckerberg, and other top officials, to come and testify, and not tell part of the story, but tell the whole story of their involvement, not only with the Trump campaign, but their ability to have their platform misused by the Russians."

In an op-ed entitled "Facebook Doesn't Get It," *New York Times* columnist David Leonhardt claimed that, "By spreading false news stories and giving a megaphone to Russian trolls, Facebook — a vastly larger social network than Twitter — played a meaningful role in the presidential campaign."

In fact, the massive data mining operations carried out by both the Democratic and Republican parties render absurd the argument that a few hundred thousand dollars of Facebook advertisements allegedly bought by "Russians" swayed the 2016 election. Both parties spent hundreds of millions of dollars on the type of data operations carried out by Cambridge Analytica, seeking to analyze, quantify, and affect the political viewpoints of hundreds of millions of people.

In fact, undercutting his own argument, Leonhardt called alleged Russian meddling a “scapegoat” for the election of Donald Trump and the electoral defeat of Hillary Clinton. Regardless, the “scapegoat” of “Russian meddling” is being used to fuel an even further crackdown on the Internet, in the name of blocking “fake news” and “divisive content.”

In just one example of the growing crackdown on freedom of expression on the Internet, over the past 48 hours, Facebook deleted a link published by the *World Socialist Web Site* to its recent review of the Ken Burns documentary on the Vietnam War, allegedly because the posting contained “nudity.” In fact, the article contained well-known images of Vietnamese civilians fleeing the atrocities of the United States and its proxy South Vietnamese forces; photos that have been published in dozens of leading newspapers all over the world.

With the class struggle heating up throughout the world, the US ruling elite is working with ever-greater speed to block the expression of social opposition on the Internet. We urge workers and young people seeking to defend the freedom of expression to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* and join its campaign against Internet censorship.