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The Democrats' campaign for internet censorship: Who is to determine what are "lies"?

In recent weeks, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have published innumerable editorials and op-eds arguing that Facebook has a responsibility to carry out political censorship, or in their words, to “moderate” political speech online.

Replying to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg’s declaration that “people should be able to hear for themselves what politicians are saying,” *New York Times* columnist Timothy Egan mockingly declared, “Yes, of course—let the people hear for themselves, no matter if it’s true or not. They can decide. *Except, they can’t.*” (“Why doesn’t Zuckerberg get it?”)

In an editorial published earlier this month, the *Washington Post* demanded that Facebook “step up to the plate and call lies out when it sees them.” (“Free speech doesn’t mean Facebook must run dishonest ads”).

In an op-ed published by the *New York Times* earlier this week, Columbia University law professor Tim Wu argued that Facebook should stop “the spread of misinformation” in following Twitter in banning political advertisements. Facebook, he wrote, is “now the outlier” for “insisting on accepting not only political advertising, but even deliberate and malicious lies if they are in the form of paid advertisements.” (“Facebook isn’t just allowing lies, it’s prioritizing them”)



Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg testifies before a House Financial Services Committee hearing in Washington [Credit: AP Photo/Andrew Harnik]

The campaign in the press has been joined by effectively the entire gamut of the Democratic Party. Last week, Hillary Clinton demanded that Facebook take down “false, deceptive or deliberately misleading content” or “pay a price.” Her statements echoed those of presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren, who condemned Facebook for allowing “politicians to run ads with known lies—explicitly turning the platform into a disinformation-for-profit machine.”

Last month, Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, demanded that Facebook “take down lies.” She was joined by Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib, who condemned Facebook for allowing “politicians” to make “untruthful statements.”

While couched in demagogic language accusing Facebook of “profiting” off of “disinformation,” the Democrats’ campaign for internet censorship is devoid of any progressive content. It is a pretext for censorship.

To oppose censorship is not to support Facebook as a private company. This monopoly should be taken out of private hands and run as a public utility. But the Democrats’ campaign has nothing at all to do with opposing Facebook’s monopoly power or the wealth of its billionaire CEO. Rather, it is part of a protracted, years-long campaign by the US intelligence agencies to suppress left-wing, anti-war, and progressive viewpoints.

All the dishonesty of the campaign for internet censorship is contained in the failure to answer, much less consider, one central question: Who is to determine what is true and

what is false? What constitutes “lies,” “deliberate and malicious lies,” “known lies,” “deliberately misleading content,” “untruthful statements” and “disinformation”?

The “authoritative” media and politicians, both Democrats and Republicans, lie constantly. They lie about the underlying motivations for their actions, dressing up imperialist crimes in the language of “human rights” or claims about “weapons of mass destruction.” All of bourgeois politics is, in fact, “deliberately misleading content,” in one form or another.

Should Facebook side with the *Washington Post*, owned by the world’s richest man, when it declares the findings of the world’s leading authorities on social inequality—Thomas Piketty and Gabriel Zucman—to be factually flawed? Or, to take another side, given that the Mueller report failed to find any evidence of “collusion” between the Trump campaign and the Russian government, should all of the newspapers that advocated this theory be censored, as Trump would prefer, for peddling “fake news”?

In late 2016, all of the major US newspapers suddenly began fueling a hysteria about a supposed epidemic of “fake news” that was allegedly overrunning the internet.” WikiLeaks, Hilary Clinton said, spread “wild tales” about the “terrible things I must have said behind closed doors and how as president I would be forever in the pocket of the shadowy bankers who had paid my speaking fees.”

But no one in the Clinton campaign ever disputed the veracity of the documents released by WikiLeaks, including the transcript of a paid speech by Clinton at Goldman Sachs where she advocated removing restrictions on wealthy people involving themselves in politics.

If someone disputes the claims of Clinton, et. al. that WikiLeaks is spreading “fake news,” are they to be censored? Is the position that Jeffrey Epstein did not kill himself, broadly believed in the American population but condemned by the *Times* as a “conspiracy theory,” to be branded as “disinformation”?

In fact, when the Democrats demand that Facebook adjudicate truth and lies, they are directly attacking political speech. Inevitably, the powers given to giant corporations and the state will be utilized to reinforce the conceptions and positions of the social interests that determine their actions.

To arm the state—or, in this case, one of its proxies—with the power to determine truth and falsehood is to provide it with the power to totally obliterate the freedom of speech.

The campaign by broad sections of the political establishment to obliterate free speech expresses the increasingly oligarchic character of American society, which is constantly

coming into conflict with democratic forms of rule. Sections of the upper middle class, represented by the likes of Ocasio-Cortez, have moved sharply to the right, providing their own justifications and pretexts for authoritarianism and censorship.

In 1938, the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky wrote:

Theory, as well as historic experience, testify that any restriction to democracy in bourgeois society is eventually directed against the proletariat. Bourgeois democracy is usable by the proletariat only insofar as it opens the way for the development of the class struggle. Consequently, any workers “leader” who arms the bourgeois state with special means to control public opinion in general, and the press in particular, is a traitor.

As Trotsky understood, the real target of censorship is the working class. Underlying all the demands for greater control of the internet and the spread of information through platforms like Facebook is the fear of the growth of the class struggle and the ability of workers to share information outside of the control of the establishment media, the trade unions, and the parties of the ruling class.

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