Twitter's ban on political advertisement: A new move to censor the internet

1 November 2019

On Wednesday, Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey announced that his company would ban all political advertisements on its platform. Advertising, Dorsey said, "brings significant risks to politics, where it can be used to influence votes to affect the lives of millions."

The announcement comes in the midst of an increasingly aggressive campaign by the US intelligence agencies, congressional Democrats and the media to impose censorship, in the guise of "fact-checking."

Twitter's action is politically reactionary, with far-reaching consequences. It converts a private corporation, subject to innumerable political and economic pressures, into the arbiter of what may or may not be written and publicized.

Twitter and Facebook acquired mass audiences by facilitating the free flow of information. But having obtained this audience, they are using their power to carry out censorship on behalf of the government.

Dorsey's action has been counterposed favorably in the media to the stance of Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, who has publicly opposed calls for social media companies to ban or "fact-check" political advertisements.

"I don't think it's right for a private company to censor politicians or news in a democracy," Zuckerberg said in a speech at Georgetown University last month. "Banning political ads favors incumbents and whoever the media chooses to cover."

Zuckerberg is hardly a poster child for the defense of democratic rights. But here he happens to have made a correct point. In response to these statements, he has received a congressional grilling far more severe than Boeing CEO Dennis Muilenburg, whose company is responsible for the deaths of 346 people in crashes involving the 737 Max 8.

His statements have also prompted an outpouring of denunciations in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the broadcast TV networks, which have for years been waging a campaign to censor the internet.

The argument is constructed using a well-worn technique. Various examples of false information or potential lies are cited, including from Donald Trump, as a dangerous threat. This is then used to justify wholesale censorship of political speech, which will inevitably be directed primarily against the left.

A similar method was used after the September 11, 2001 terror attacks. In *The Lesser Evil*, published in 2004, Michael Ignatieff declared that "a terrorist emergency" may "require us to take actions in defense of democracy which will stray from democracy's own foundational commitments to dignity."

What would the government have to do, he argued, if it captured a terrorist who had critical information about an imminent attack? Would not all methods, including torture, be necessary to elicit the knowledge needed to "save lives"? What is not permissible to stop the "mushroom cloud"? The implications of these arguments were realized in the dungeons of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay.

Now the same pretext is being concocted: a supposed imminent threat to democracy—"fake news"—is used to justify the most sweeping attacks on democratic rights.

What is striking, even more so than under the Bush administration, is the degree to which "liberal" and upper-middle class layers in and around the Democratic Party have been recruited into this campaign.

In an op-ed published by the *Times* yesterday, screenwriter Aaron Sorkin—who should know better—wrote that "crazy lies pumped into the water supply" are corrupting "the most important decisions we make together." These lies "have a very real and incredibly dangerous effect on our elections and our lives and our children's lives."

Freshman congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, earlier this month demanded that Facebook "take down lies."

Her thoughtless, ignorant arguments, which expose nothing but a complete absence of democratic consciousness, are being used to legitimize a campaign for censorship.

The underlying assumption is that the determination of what is truth and what are "crazy lies" is a purely objective process, unrelated to class or social interests. In fact, bourgeois politics by its very nature is built on lies, which serve, as Leon Trotsky explained, to cover over the deep contradictions in capitalist society.

Who is to be given authority to decide what is the truth? Giant corporations with intimate connections to the state, like Google, Facebook and Twitter? Or publications like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, which serve as mouthpieces for the intelligence agencies? Or is it to be the intelligence agencies themselves?

Bill Keller, the former editor of the *Times*, once warned that the internet has undermined the role of "gatekeepers"—that is, institutions that vet the information to which the public has access.

These "gatekeepers" are, in fact, not politically neutral. According to the *Times*, for example, anyone who questions the circumstances behind the death of Jeffrey Epstein is engaged in unfounded "conspiracy theories." Those opposing the entire anti-Russia narrative of the intelligence agencies—which has been used to justify internet censorship—are propagating "fake news."

The implications of these types of arguments are perhaps most crassly revealed by *Times* columnist Thomas Friedman.

To Zuckerberg's statement that "people should be able to see for themselves" what politicians say, Friedman declares, "Yeah, right, as if average citizens are able to discern the veracity of every political ad after years of being conditioned by responsible journalism to assume the claims aren't just made up."

"Years of… responsible journalism!" Friedman takes his readers for fools. Sixteen years ago, Friedman served as a propagandist for the Bush administration's war in Iraq, promoting the White House's lies about "weapons of mass destruction," while declaring he had "no problem with a war for oil."

In 2017, Friedman declared that "only a fool would not root for" Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Just over a year later, bin Salman personally ordered *Washington Post* contributor Jamal Khashoggi to be sawed into pieces at a Saudi consulate.

Presumably those who attacked Friedman for his role in promoting the lies of the state should have been censored for "propagating lies."

As for those who should determine what is true, Friedman writes: "Diplomats, intelligence officers and civil servants" are "the people who uphold the regulations—and provide the independent research and facts—that make our government legitimate."

That is, the task of the government, through its "intelligence officers" is to provide the "facts" that lead citizens to believe the government legitimate.

What is to be done with people who have exposed the "facts" that "intelligence officers" believe should not be public? They are to end up, like Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning, languishing in prison, and the publications that distribute their revelations are to be gagged.

Let's call things by their real names. This is nothing but censorship. The *New York Times* is in the business of selling lies. And the public is getting tired of it, so the *Times* wants to prevent them from having a choice.

Since the 2016 election, the US intelligence agencies have advocated internet censorship in the name of fighting "fake news." The main target of this campaign has not been Trump, but rather left-wing, anti-war and progressive websites and organizations. In 2017 Google, announced that it would promote "authoritative" news sources over "alternative viewpoints," leading to a massive drop in search traffic to left-wing sites. Facebook and Twitter followed suit, removing left-wing accounts and pages with millions of followers.

Under relentless pressure from the Democrats and intelligence agencies, these companies will only intensify their offensive against left-wing, anti-war and socialist organizations.

Andre Damon