

The conspiracy to censor the Internet

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The political representatives of the American ruling class are engaged in a conspiracy to suppress free speech. Under the guise of combating “trolls” and “fake news” supposedly controlled by Russia, the most basic constitutional rights enumerated in the First Amendment are under direct attack.

The leading political force in this campaign is the Democratic Party, working in collaboration with sections of the Republican Party, the mass media and the military-intelligence establishment.

The Trump administration is threatening nuclear war against North Korea, escalating the assault on health care, demanding new tax cuts for the rich, waging war on immigrant workers, and eviscerating corporate and environmental regulations. This reactionary agenda is not, however, the focus of the Democratic Party. It is concentrating instead on increasingly hysterical claims that Russia is “sowing divisions” within the United States.

In the media, one report follows another, each more ludicrous than the last. The claim that Russia shifted the US election by means of \$100,000 in advertisements on Facebook and Twitter has been followed by breathless reports of the Putin government’s manipulation of other forms of communication.

An “exclusive” report from CNN last week proclaimed that one organization, “Don’t Shoot Us,” which it alleges without substantiation is connected to Russia, sought to “exploit racial tensions and sow discord” on Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Tumblr and even Pokémon Go, a reality game played on cell phones.

Another report from CNN on Monday asserted that a Russian “troll factory” was involved in posting comments critical of Hillary Clinton as “part of President Vladimir Putin’s campaign to influence the 2016 election.” All of the negative commentary in news media and other publications directed at Clinton, it implied, were the product of Russian agents or people duped by Russian agents.

As during the period of Cold War McCarthyism, the absurdity of the charges goes unchallenged. They are picked up and repeated by other media outlets and by politicians to demonstrate just how far-reaching the actions of the nefarious “foreign enemy” really are.

While one aim has been to continue and escalate an anti-Russia foreign policy, the more basic purpose is emerging ever more clearly: to criminalize political dissent within the United States.

The most direct expression to date of this conspiracy against free speech was given by the anticommunist ideologue Anne Applebaum in a column published Monday in the *Washington Post*, “If Russia can create fake ‘Black Lives Matter’ accounts, who will next?”

Her answer: the American people. “I can imagine multiple groups, many of them proudly American, who might well want to manipulate a range of fake accounts during a riot or disaster to increase anxiety

or fear,” she writes. She warns that “political groups—on the left, the right, you name it—will quickly figure out” how to use social media to spread “disinformation” and “demoralization.”

Applebaum rails against all those who seek to hide their identity online. “There is a better case than ever against anonymity, at least against anonymity in the public forums of social media and comment sections,” she writes. She continues: “The right to free speech is something that is granted to humans, not bits of computer code.” Her target, however, is not “bots” operating “fake accounts,” but anyone who seeks, fearing state repression or unjust punishment by his or her employer, to make an anonymous statement online. And that is only the opening shot in a drive to silence political dissent.

Applebaum is closely connected to the highest echelons of the capitalist state. She is a member of key foreign policy think tanks and sits on the board of directors of the CIA-linked National Endowment for Democracy. Married to the former foreign minister of Poland, she is a ferocious war hawk. Following the Russian annexation of Crimea, she authored a column in the *Washington Post* in which she called for “total war” against nuclear-armed Russia. She embodies the connection between militarism and political repression.

The implications of Applebaum’s arguments are made clear in an extraordinary article published on the front page of Tuesday’s *New York Times*, “As US Confronts Internet’s Disruptions, China Feels Vindicated,” which takes a favorable view of China’s aggressive censorship of the Internet and implies that the United States is moving toward just such a regime.

“For years, the United States and others saw” China’s “heavy-handed censorship as a sign of political vulnerability and a barrier to China’s economic development,” the *Times* writes. “But as countries in the West discuss potential Internet restrictions and wring their hands over fake news, hacking and foreign meddling, some in China see a powerful affirmation of the country’s vision for the internet.”

The article goes on to assert that while “few would argue that China’s Internet control serves as a model for democratic societies... At the same time, China anticipated many of the questions now flummoxing governments from the United States to Germany to Indonesia.”

Glaringly absent from the *Times* article, Applebaum’s commentary and all of the endless demands for a crackdown on social media is any reference to democratic rights, free speech or the First Amendment.

The First Amendment, which asserts that “Congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom of speech,” is the broadest amendment in the US Constitution. Contrary to Applebaum, there is no caveat exempting anonymous speech from Constitutional protection. It is a historical fact that leaders of the American Revolution and drafters of the Constitution wrote articles under pseudonyms to avoid repression by the British authorities.

The Constitution does not give the government or powerful corporations the right to proclaim what is “fake” and what is not, what is a “conspiracy theory” and what is “authoritative.” The same arguments now being employed to crack down on social media could just as well have been used to suppress books and mass circulation newspapers that emerged with the development of the printing press.

The drive toward Internet censorship in the United States is already far advanced. Since Google announced plans to bury “alternative viewpoints” in search results earlier this year, leading left-wing sites have seen their search traffic plunge by more than 50 percent. The *World Socialist Web Site’s* search traffic from Google has fallen by 75 percent.

Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms have introduced similar measures. The campaign being whipped up over Russian online activity will be used to justify even more far-reaching measures.

This is taking place as universities implement policies to give police the authority to vet campus events. There are ongoing efforts to abolish “net neutrality” so as to give giant corporations the ability to regulate Internet traffic. The intelligence agencies have demanded the ability to circumvent encryption after having been exposed for illegally monitoring the phone communications and Internet activity of the entire population.

In one “democratic” country after another governments are turning to police-state forms of rule, from France, with its permanent state of emergency, to Germany, which last month shut down a subsidiary of the left-wing political site Indymedia, to Spain, with its violent crackdown on the separatist referendum in Catalonia and arrest of separatist leaders.

The destruction of democratic rights is the political response of the corporate and financial aristocracy to the growth of working class discontent bound up with record levels of social inequality. It is intimately linked to preparations for a major escalation of imperialist violence around the world. The greatest concern of the ruling elite is the emergence of an independent movement of the working class, and the state is taking actions to prevent it.

Andre Damon and Joseph Kishore

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