

Building the Iron Wall: Facebook, Google, Twitter Algorithms That Steer Traffic Away From Progressive Websites

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Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas, along with 18 members of the House of Representatives—15 Republicans and three Democrats—has sent a letter to Attorney General Jeff Sessions demanding that the Qatari-run Al-Jazeera television network register as a foreign agent under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). The letter was issued after Al-Jazeera said it planned to air a [documentary by a reporter who went undercover](#) to look into the Israel lobby in the United States. The action by the senator and the House members follows the decision by the Justice Department to [force RT America](#) to register as a foreign agent and the [imposition of algorithms](#) by Facebook, Google and Twitter that steer traffic away from left-wing, anti-war and progressive websites, including Truthdig. It also follows December's abolition of net neutrality.

The letter asks the Justice Department to investigate “reports that Al Jazeera infiltrated American non-profit organizations.” It says that the

“content produced by this network often directly undermines American interests with favorable coverage of U.S. State Department-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations, including Hamas, Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda’s branch in Syria.”

“American citizens deserve to know whether the information and news media they consume is impartial, or if it is deceptive propaganda pushed by foreign nations,” the letter reads.

The ominous assault on the final redoubts of a free press, through an attempt to brand dissidents, independent journalists and critics of corporate power and imperialism as agents of a foreign power, has begun. FARA, until recently, was a little-used regulation, passed in 1938 to combat Nazi propaganda. The journalists Max Blumenthal and Ali Abunimah do a good job of addressing the issue [in this clip on The Real News Network](#).

Those who challenge the dominant corporate narrative already struggle on the margins of the media landscape. The handful of independent websites and news outlets, including this one, and a few foreign-run networks such as Al-Jazeera and RT America, on which I host a show, “[On Contact](#),” are the few platforms left that examine corporate power and empire, the curtailment of our civil liberties, lethal police violence and the ecocide carried out by the fossil fuel and animal agriculture industries, as well as cover the war crimes committed by Israel and the U.S. military in the Middle East. Shutting down these venues would ensure

that the critics who speak through them, and oppressed peoples such as the Palestinians, have no voice left.

I witnessed and was at times the victim of black propaganda campaigns when I was a foreign correspondent. False accusations are made anonymously and then amplified by a compliant press. The anonymous site PropOrNot, replicating this tactic, in 2016 published a blacklist of 199 sites that it alleged, with no evidence, “reliably echo Russian propaganda.” More than half of those sites were far-right, conspiracy-driven ones. But about 20 of the sites were progressive, anti-war and left-wing. They included AlterNet, Black Agenda Report, Democracy Now!, Naked Capitalism, Truthdig, Truthout, CounterPunch and the World Socialist Web Site.

PropOrNot charged that these sites disseminated “fake news” on behalf of Russia, and the allegations became front-page news in The Washington Post in a story headlined “Russian propaganda effort helped spread ‘fake news’ during the election, experts say.” Washington Post reporter Craig Timberg wrote in that article that the goal of “a sophisticated Russian propaganda effort,” according to “independent researchers who have tracked the operation,” was “punishing Democrat Hillary Clinton, helping Republican Donald Trump and undermining faith in American democracy.”

To date, no one has exposed who operates PropOrNot or who is behind the website. But the damage done by this black propaganda campaign and the subsequent announcement by Google and other organizations such as Facebook last April that they had put in filters to elevate “more authoritative content” and marginalize “blatantly misleading, low quality, offensive or downright false information” have steadily diverted readers away from some sites. The Marxist [World Socialist Web Site](#), for example, has seen its traffic decline by 75 percent. AlterNet’s search traffic is down 71 percent, Consortium News is down 72 percent, and Global Research and Truthdig have seen declines. And the situation appears to be growing worse as the algorithms are refined.

Jeff Bezos, the owner of The Washington Post and the founder and CEO of Amazon, has, like Google and some other major Silicon Valley corporations, close ties with the federal security and surveillance apparatus. Bezos has a \$600 million contract with the CIA. The lines separating technology-based entities such as Google and Amazon and the government’s security and surveillance apparatus are often nonexistent. The goal of corporations such as Google and Facebook is profit, not the dissemination of truth. And when truth gets in the way of profit, truth is sacrificed.

Google, Facebook, Twitter, The New York Times, The Washington Post, BuzzFeed News, Agence France-Presse and CNN have all imposed or benefited from the algorithms or filters—overseen by human “evaluators.” When an internet user types a word in a Google search it is called an “impression” by the industry. These impressions direct the persons making the searches to websites that use the words or address the issues associated with them. Before the algorithms were put in place last April, searches for terms such as “imperialism” or “inequality” directed internet users mostly to left-wing, progressive and anti-war sites. Now they are directed primarily to mainstream sites such as The Washington Post. If you type in “World Socialist Web Site,” which has been hit especially hard by the algorithms, you will be directed to the site—but you have to ask for it by name. Searches for associated words such as “socialist” or “socialism” are unlikely to bring up a list in which the World Socialist Web Site appears near the top.

There are 10,000 “evaluators” at Google, many of them former employees at counterterrorism agencies, who determine the “quality” and veracity of websites. They have downgraded sites such as Truthdig, and with the abolition of net neutrality can further isolate those sites on the internet. The news organizations and corporations imposing and benefiting from this censorship have strong links to the corporate establishment and the Democratic Party. They do not question corporate capitalism, American imperialism or rising social inequality. They dutifully feed the anti-Russia hysteria. An Al-Jazeera [report on this censorship](#) begins at 14:07 in this link.

The corporate oligarchs, lacking a valid response to the discrediting of their policies of economic pillage and endless war, have turned to the blunt instrument of censorship and to a new version of red baiting. They do not intend to institute reforms or restore an open society. They do not intend to address the social inequality behind the political insurgencies in the two major political parties and the hatred of the corporate state that spans the political spectrum. They intend to impose a cone of silence and the state-sanctioned uniformity of opinion that characterizes all totalitarian regimes. This is what the use of FARA, the imposition of algorithms and the attempt to blame Trump’s election on Russian interference is about. Critics and investigative journalists who expose the inner workings of corporate power are branded enemies of the state in the service of a foreign power. The corporate-controlled media, meanwhile, presents the salacious, the trivial and the absurd as news while fanning the obsession over Russia. This is one of the most ominous moments in American history. The complicity in this witch hunt by self-identified liberal organizations, including The New York Times and MSNBC, will come back to haunt them. When the voices for truth are erased, they will be next.

The steps to tyranny are always small, incremental and often barely noticed, as [Milton Mayer](#) wrote in “They Thought They Were Free: The Germans 1933-1945.” By the time a population wakes up, it is too late. He noted:

But the one great shocking occasion, when tens or hundreds or thousands will join you, never comes. That’s the difficulty. If the last and the worst act of the whole regime had come immediately after the first and the smallest, thousands, yes, millions would have been sufficiently shocked. If, let us say, the gassing of the Jews in ‘43 had come immediately after the “German Firm” stickers on the windows of non-Jewish shops in ‘33. But of course this isn’t the way it happens. In between come all the hundreds of little steps, some of them imperceptible, each of them preparing you not to be shocked by the next. Step C is not so much worse than Step B, and if you did not make a stand at Step B, why should you at Step C? And so on to Step D.

And one day, too late, your principles, if you were ever sensible of them, all rush in upon you. The burden of self-deception has grown too heavy, and some minor incident, in my case my little boy, hardly more than a baby, saying “Jew swine,” collapses it all at once, and you see that everything, everything has changed and changed completely under your nose. The world you lived in—your nation, your people—is not the world you were born in at all. The forms are all there, all untouched, all reassuring, the houses, the shops, the jobs, the mealtimes, the visits, the concerts, the cinema, the holidays. But the spirit, which you never noticed because you made the lifelong mistake of identifying it with the forms, is changed. Now you live in a world of hate and fear, and the people who hate and fear do not even know it themselves; when everyone is transformed no one is transformed. Now you live in a system which rules without responsibility even to God. The system itself could not have intended this in the beginning, but in order to sustain itself it was compelled to

go all the way.

Despots, despite their proclaimed ideological, national and religious differences, speak the same language. Amoral, devoid of empathy and addicted to power and personal enrichment, they are building a world where all who criticize them are silenced, where their populations are rendered compliant by fear, constant surveillance and the loss of basic liberties and where they and their corporate enablers are the undisputed masters.

The Israeli newspaper Haaretz reported that the Qatari government is seeking to improve relations with the Trump administration by forging alliances with right-wing Jewish organizations in the United States. It has promised Jewish leaders, the paper reported, not to air the Al-Jazeera documentary about the Israel lobby. Al-Jazeera in 2016 shut down Al-Jazeera America, which broadcast to U.S. audiences. With no broadcaster in the U.S., the program would have reached few American viewers even if Al-Jazeera had put it on the air.

Haaretz reported that Jewish organizational leaders who have visited Qatar in recent months include Mort Klein of the Zionist Organization of America; Malcolm Hoenlein, the executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations; Jack Rosen of the American Jewish Congress; Rabbi Menachem Genack of the Orthodox Union; Martin Oliner of the Religious Zionists of America; and attorney Alan Dershowitz.

“What these leaders share is that none of them are considered critics of the right-wing Netanyahu government in Israel or the Trump administration in Washington,” Haaretz correspondent Amir Tibon wrote in the newspaper.

The despotism of the United States and the despotism of Israel have found an ally in the despotism of Qatar. Professed beliefs are meaningless. Israel is bonded with the regime in Saudi Arabia and the Christian right in the United States, each of which is virulently anti-Semitic. Dissidents, including Jewish and Israeli dissidents, are attacked as “self-hating Jews” or anti-Semites *only* because they are dissidents. The word “traitor” or “anti-Semite” has no real meaning. It is used not to describe a reality but to turn someone into a pariah. The iron wall is rising. It will cement into place a global system of corporate totalitarianism, one in which the old vocabulary of human rights and democracy is empty and where any form of defiance means you are an enemy of the state. This totalitarianism is being formed incrementally. It begins by silencing the demonized. It ends by silencing everyone.

“You walk into the room with your pencil in your hand,” [Bob Dylan sang](#) in “Ballad of a Thin Man.” “You see somebody naked and you say, ‘Who is that man?’ You try so hard but you don’t understand just what you will say when you get home. Because something is happening here, but you don’t know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones?”

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