

Thought Police for the 21st Century

By [Chris Hedges](#)

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

The abolition of [net neutrality](#) and the use of [algorithms](#) by Facebook, Google, YouTube and Twitter to divert readers and viewers from progressive, left-wing and anti-war sites, along with demonizing as foreign agents the journalists who expose the crimes of corporate capitalism and imperialism, have given the corporate state the power to destroy freedom of speech. Any state that accrues this kind of power will use it. And for that reason I traveled last week to Detroit to join [David North](#), the chairperson of the international editorial board of the World Socialist Web Site, in a [live-stream event](#) calling for the formation of a broad front to block an escalating censorship while we still have a voice.

“The future of humanity is the struggle between humans that control machines and machines that control humans,” Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, said in a statement issued in support of the event. “Between the democratization of communication and usurpation of communication by artificial intelligence. While the Internet has brought about a revolution in people’s ability to educate themselves and others, the resulting democratic phenomena has shaken existing establishments to their core. Google, Facebook and their Chinese equivalents, who are socially, logistically and financially integrated with existing elites, have moved to re-establish discourse control. This is not simply a corrective action. Undetectable mass social influence powered by artificial intelligence is an existential threat to humanity. While still in its infancy, the trends are clear and of a geometric nature. The phenomena differs in traditional attempts to shape cultural and political phenomena by operating at scale, speed and increasingly at a subtlety that eclipses human capacities.”

In late April and early May the [World Socialist Web Site](#), which identifies itself as a [Trotskyite](#) group that focuses on the crimes of capitalism, the plight of the working class and imperialism, began to see a steep decline in readership. The decline persisted into June. Search traffic to the World Socialist Web Site has been reduced by 75 percent overall. And the site is not alone. AlterNet’s search traffic is down 71 percent, Consortium News is down 72 percent, Global Research and Truthdig have seen declines. And the situation appears to be growing worse.

The reductions coincided with the introduction of algorithms imposed by Google to fight “fake news.” Google said the algorithms are designed to elevate “more authoritative content” and marginalize “blatantly misleading, low quality, offensive or downright false information.” It soon became apparent, however, that in the name of combating “fake news,” Google, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are censoring left-wing, progressive and anti-war sites. The 150 most popular search terms that brought readers to the World Socialist Web Site, including “socialism,” “Russian Revolution” and “inequality,” today elicit little or no traffic.

Monika Bickert, head of global policy management at Facebook, told the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation [in a hearing Wednesday](#) that Facebook employs a security team of 10,000—7,500 of whom “assess potentially violating content”—and that “by the end of 2018 we will more than double” it to over 20,000. Social media companies are intertwined with and often work for U.S. intelligence agencies. This army of censors is our Thought Police.

The group, Bickert said, includes “a dedicated counterterrorism team” of “former intelligence and law-enforcement officials and prosecutors who worked in the area of counterterrorism.” She testified that artificial intelligence automatically flags questionable content. Facebook, she said, does not “wait for these ... bad actors to upload content to Facebook before placing it into our detection systems.” The “propaganda” that Facebook blocks, she said, “is content that we identify ourselves before anybody” else can see it. Facebook, she said, along with over a dozen other social media companies has created a blacklist of 50,000 “unique digital fingerprints” that can prevent content from being posted.

“We believe that a key part of combating extremism is preventing recruitment by disrupting the underlying ideologies that drive people to commit acts of violence,” she told the committee. “That’s why we support a variety of counterspeech efforts.”

“Counterspeech” is a word that could have been lifted from the pages of [George Orwell’s dystopian novel “1984.”](#)

Eric Schmidt, who is stepping down this month as the executive chairman of Google’s parent company, Alphabet, has acknowledged that Google is creating algorithms to “de-rank” Russian-based news websites RT and Sputnik from its Google News services, effectively blocking them. The U.S. Department of Justice forced RT America, on which I host a show, [“On Contact,”](#) that gives a voice to anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist voices, to [register as a “foreign agent.”](#) Google removed RT from its “preferred” channels on YouTube. Twitter has blocked the Russian news service agencies RT and Sputnik from advertising.

This censorship is global. The German government’s Network Enforcement Act fines social media companies for allegedly objectionable content. French President Emmanuel Macron has vowed to remove “fake news” from the internet. Facebook and Instagram erased the accounts of Ramzan Kadyrov, the dictator of the Chechen Republic, because he is on a U.S. sanctions list. Kadyrov is certainly repugnant, but this ban, as the American Civil Liberties Union points out, empowers the U.S. government to effectively censor content. Facebook, working with the Israeli government, has removed over 100 accounts of Palestinian activists. This is an ominous march to an Orwellian world of Thought Police, “Newspeak” and “thought-crime” or, as Facebook likes to call it, “de-ranking” and “counterspeech.”

The censorship, justified in the name of combating terrorism by blocking the content of extremist groups, is also designed to prevent a distressed public from accessing the language and ideas needed to understand corporate oppression, imperialism and socialism.

“Don’t you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought?” Orwell wrote in “1984.” “In the end we shall make thought-crime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it. Every concept that can ever be needed will be expressed by exactly *one* word, with its meaning rigidly defined and all its subsidiary

meanings rubbed out and forgotten. ... Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller. ...”

Corporate capitalism, and the ideology that justifies it—[neoliberalism](#), the free market, globalization—no longer has any credibility. All of the utopian promises of globalization have been exposed as lies. Allowing banks and corporations to determine how we should order human society and govern ourselves did not spread global wealth, raise the living standards of workers or implant democracy across the globe. The ideology, preached in business schools and by pliant politicians, was a thin cover for the rapacious greed of the elites, elites who now [control most of the world's wealth](#).

The ruling elites know they are in trouble. The Republican and Democratic parties' abject subservience to corporate power is transparent. The insurgencies in the two parties that saw Bernie Sanders nearly defeat the seemingly preordained Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton, and the election of Donald Trump terrify the elites. The elites, by attacking critics and dissidents as foreign agents for Russia, are seeking to deflect attention from the cause of these insurgencies—massive social inequality. Critics of the corporate state and imperialism, already pushed to the margins, are now dangerous because the elites no longer have a viable counterargument. And so these dissidents must be silenced.

“What's so specifically important about this is that in a period of growing political radicalization among young people, among workers, they start to look for oppositional information, they become interested in socialism, revolution, terms like 'equality,' those terms which previously would bring thousands of readers to the World Socialist Web Site, now were bringing no readers to the World Socialist Web Site,” North said. “In other words, they were setting up a quarantine between those who may be interested in our site and the WSWS. From being a bridge, Google was becoming a barrier, a guard preventing access to our site.”

The internet, with its ability to reach across international boundaries, is a potent tool for connecting workers across the earth who are fighting the same enemy—corporate capitalism. And control of the internet, the elites know, is vital to suppress information and consciousness.

“There is no national solution to the problems of American capitalism,” North said. “The effort of the United States is to overcome this through a policy of war. Because what, ultimately, is imperialism? The inability to solve the problems of the nation-state within national borders drives the policy of war and conquest. That is what is emerging. Under conditions of war, the threat of war, conditions of growing and immeasurable inequality, democracy cannot survive. The tendency now is the suppression of democracy. And just as there is no national solution for capitalism, there is no national solution for the working class.”

“War is not an expression of the strength of the system,” North said. “It is an expression of profound and deep crisis. Trotsky said in the [Transitional Program](#): ‘The ruling elites toboggan with eyes closed toward catastrophe.’ In 1939, they went to war, as in 1914, aware of the potentially disastrous consequences. Certainly, in 1939, they knew what the consequences of war were: War brings revolution. But they could not see a way out. The global problems which exist can only be solved in one of two ways: the capitalist, imperialist solution is war and [...] fascism. The working-class solution is

socialist revolution. This is, I think, the alternative we're confronted with. So, the question that has come up, in the broadest sense, [is] what is the answer to the problems we face? Building a revolutionary party."

"There is going to be, and there is already unfolding, massive social struggles," North said. "The question of social revolution is not utopian. It is a process that emerges objectively out of the contradictions of capitalism. I think the argument can be made—and I think we made this argument—that really, since 2008, we have been witnessing an acceleration of crisis. It has never been solved, and, indeed, the massive levels of social inequality are themselves not the expression of a healthy but [instead] a deeply diseased socioeconomic order. It is fueling, at every level, social opposition. Of course, the great problem, then, is overcoming the legacy of political confusion, produced, as a matter of fact, by the defeats and the betrayals of the 20th century: the betrayal of the Russian Revolution by Stalinism; the betrayals of the working class by social democracy; the subordination of the working class in the United States to the Democratic Party. These are the critical issues and lessons that have to be learned. The education of the working class in these issues, and the development of perspective, is the most critical point ... the basic problem is not an absence of courage. It is not an absence of the desire to fight. It is an absence of understanding."

"Socialist consciousness must be brought into the working class," North said. "There is a working class. That working class is open now and receptive to revolutionary ideas. Our challenge is to create the conditions. The workers will not learn this in the universities. The Marxist movement, the Trotskyist movement, must provide the working class with the intellectual, cultural tools that it requires, so that it understands what must be done. It will provide the force, it will provide the determination, the emotional and passionate fuel of every revolutionary movement is present. But what it requires is understanding. And we will, and we are seeking to defend internet freedom because we want to make use of this medium, along with others, to create the conditions for this education and revival of revolutionary consciousness to take place."

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