Social Media Giants Adopt "Mob Rule" Tactics
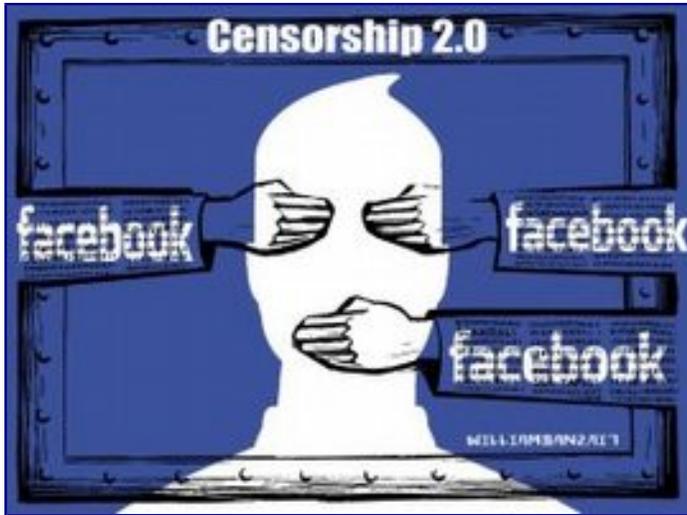
Column: Society

Region: USA in the World

The recent decisions by social media giants Facebook and LinkedIn to adopt user crowd-censoring strategies may be less than benevolent.

According to its recent announcement, Facebook will employ an algorithm, based ostensibly on the numbers of user-generated flags, to reduce or mitigate the distribution of stories flagged as "false." In addition, Facebook has announced that stories flagged in this manner will contain notice that the story has been determined to contain false information.

As stated in Facebook's announcement this past week, "Today's update to News Feed reduces the distribution of posts that people have reported as hoaxes and adds an annotation to posts that have received many of these types of reports to warn others on Facebook. We are not removing stories people report as false and we are not reviewing content and making a determination on its accuracy."

According to Tweaktown, "This change will see posts that include links, photos, videos and general status updates affected – seeing it not limited to company news articles only."

Fox News reports another angle on what constitutes "fake news." According to Fox, "conspiracy theories" are also included. Reports Fox, "It's launching a new feature that will let anyone report a post as being false. Those stories can include reports like celebrity deaths, conspiracy theories and promises of "free" products…"

Conspiracy theories? Like who killed JFK and who was behind the attacks of September 11? Suddenly, Facebook's interest in controlling spam seems less altruistic.

Such a mechanism for crowd or mob determination of truth or falsity contains certain built- in problems. A mechanism such as this, as contrasted to a peer review process, contains the potential for the worst kind of censorship. Gone is the scientific process of weeding out fact from fiction, entailing debate and dialogue and the scrutiny of substantiating evidence. With a mere click of a spam button,

any internet troll– or paid employees of the CIA, for example– can reduce the dissemination of inconvenient truths, along with, of course, obvious scams and hoaxes.

The relationship between Facebook and intelligence agencies has been explored in Edward Snowden's revelations, which portrayed the internet giants as essentially house-boys for CIA and NSA in these agencies' pursuit of harvesting our personal data and demographics. Facebook has also been linked to the Arab Spring and to color revolutions world-wide, events which, upon scrutiny, may have been initiated by US intelligence agencies in pursuit of US global interests. This most recent decision by Facebook to initiate crowd-censorship must of necessity raise certain questions about the intentionality of those who will be flagging posts as "conspiracy theory" or hoax.

LinkedIn has also initiated a form of user-based censorship. SWAM– "Site Wide Auto Moderation" results in a LinkedIn user being denied posting privileges for an indeterminate period of time. SWAMMING can result from a single anonymous user flagging another individual's post as "inappropriate."

An individual who is SWAMMED in one group will find himself on moderation in all LinkedIn groups. Many group owners/moderators are absent and do not take the time to cull through pending posts nor do they respond to group members who write them directly, asking for the auto moderation to be overridden. So what eventuates from the SWAMMING policy is a virtual gag on a user.

Gary Ellenbogen has started a LinkedIn support group for victims of [SWAM](#). Ellenbogen, who is a former Psychology professor (University of Vermont) and now an officer with Vision Architecture, found himself SWAMMED over a year and a half ago and remains on moderation, in what may be the longest running case of SWAMMING yet.

According to Ellenbogen, "I joined a LinkedIn group owned by a man, which is about women in a particular profession. My objective was to learn more about how women function in that profession. This group's intro page DID show that the group is owned by a man! This group's description on that page did NOT state that men will be denied membership in the group. It turns out that the group Manager's Standard Operating Procedure was to admit all Requests To Join, and then Block and Delete and newly found members who are a man rather than a woman."

Even after the group moderator, who deleted him from the group due to his gender, wrote a letter of apology and asked LinkedIn to reinstate his posting privileges, Ellenbogen remains sequestered.

Other LinkedIn SWAM incidents include a reporter, who, upon being invited to join a LinkedIn Journalism group, simply posted a note thanking the group moderator for inviting her. She was immediately SWAMMED by an anonymous member of the group. There is no oversight on LinkedIn as to the reasons a user may choose to flag another's posts, nor is there recourse through contacting LinkedIn management. The general time frame for being unable to post without moderation varies widely.

The use of anonymous crowd- censor controls to inhibit either the dissemination of articles and posts, as seen with both Facebook and LinkedIn, allows faceless and unaccountable individuals, who may

have their own agendas, to control our reality. We can only construct a reasonable perception of the world based on input. News articles in large part determine that reality.

In a sense, the crowd -censor—mob rule—tactics being employed by the social media giants smack of high- tech witch hunts. If we are not now burning witches for heresy, we are certainly seeing "kinder and gentler" means of gagging them.

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