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European Languages

زبانهای اروپائی

AUGUST 16, 2018

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17.08.2018

New Facebook Alliance Endangers Access to News about Latin America

North Americans depending solely on English-language sources for unbiased political information from Latin America have few options. They include TeleSUR's English-language reports on the entire region and news from Venezuela provided by Venezuelanalysis.com. The government of the late Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, vilified by the United States, provided the impetus for TeleSUR.

On August 9 the account of Venezuelanalysis with Facebook inexplicably disappeared. The Facebook account of TeleSUR English did likewise on August 13 – and also briefly in January, 2018. Both accounts were restored within two days.

The message is clear, however, that the flow of essential information from Latin America via Facebook is precarious. Why that might be is now evident.

Generally there is limited access to reliable news for that quarter. One commentator on the August 4 violent coup against the government of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, for example, cites frequent media reference to a coup that is “apparent” or “alleged.” The mainstream media, he notes, is predicting that Maduro's government will use the coup as a pretext for repression.

According to Venezuelanalysis.com, Facebook moved against the platform because it published “important pieces which challenge the corporate mainstream media narrative on Venezuela.” Its coverage of “the growing international campaign to End US and Canadian Sanctions against Venezuela” also played a role.

Basically, however, any Facebook role in suppressing information has more to do with the company's profitability than with ideology. To explain: Facebook has recently come [under pressure](#) in Washington for misusing private information and for failing to reveal private information presumed to be harmful to US interests. Its troubles worsened after it became known that the British firm Cambridge Analytica provided the presidential campaign of Donald Trump with private data obtained through Facebook.

Consequently, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg had to testify April 10 on these matters before the Senate commerce and judiciary committees. He confessed that, "It was [my mistake](#), and I'm sorry ... [W]e didn't do enough to prevent these tools from being used for harm. That goes for fake news, foreign interference in elections, and hate speech, as well as developers and data privacy."

A draft white paper surfacing in July from the office of influential Republican Senator Mark Warner seemed to be aimed at Facebook. Describing "[Proposals for Regulation of Social Media](#)," it calls for identifying "inauthentic accounts" and their origins, for deterring "foreign manipulation," and for establishing legal liability for "failure to take down deep fake ... accounts."

One presumes therefore that Facebook is embarked upon a damage-control mission. At a press briefing July 31, chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg promised transparency. She reported that "[32 pages](#) and accounts from Facebook and Instagram" had been removed because they "involve and coordinate inauthentic behavior." But how is Facebook qualified and equipped to make decisions on troublesome behavior that is political?

Needing help in that regard, Facebook decided to "[outsource many](#) of the most sensitive political decisions." At hand was the Washington-based Atlantic Council, a think tank set up in 1961 ostensibly to promote U.S.-European cooperation.

According [to Reuters](#), the Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab uses "its own software and other tools [and] sorts through social media postings for patterns." The Atlantic Council relies on this facility to be able to extend advice of a political nature to Facebook. Likely as not, the Atlantic Council was involved in Facebook's temporary removal of the accounts of TeleSUR English and Venezuelanalysis.com.

In any event, the process was greased with money. A recent Facebook donation to the Atlantic Council's "Lab" was big enough, reports Reuters, "to vault the company to the top of the Atlantic Council's donor list, alongside the British government."

According [to one critic](#), Facebook is counting on ties with the Atlantic Council to solve its problems in dealing with disinformation. As "a leading geopolitical strategy think-tank

seen as a de facto PR agency for the U.S. government and NATO military alliance,” the Council would theoretically be able to protect Facebook. Council leaders range from “retired military officers, former policymakers, [to] top figures from the U.S. National Security State and Western business elites.”