How Facebook tried to censor Indigenous struggle

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The social media platform banned over 200 accounts immediately before a day of online action. At a time when coronavirus has made digital action disproportionately important, crackdowns like this pose a serious threat to Indigenous land defenders and international solidarity in general.

On 19 September, over 200 people woke to a strange message. Opening their Facebook accounts, they were told they could not post, message, or engage with any Facebook content for three days. They had been 'zucced' – temporarily banned from the social media platform. What could explain this? The 200 people were spread wide across the world, in fact, there was little in common between all the accounts. Except one thing. All the people suspended had been organising in support of the Wet'suwet'en cause..

Solidarity with the Wet'suwet'en

For several years, the Wet'suwet'en people have been engaged in a struggle to protect their land from the Coastal GasLink (CGL) pipeline in so-called British Columbia. The CGL project, pushed forward by businesses and Canada's colonial government, would encroach on territories without the Wet'suwet'en people's consent. Over the last few years, the Wet'suwet'en set up several checkpoints and engaged in non-violent actions to assert their sovereignty, the most notable being the Gidimt'en and Unist'ot'en Checkpoints. In response, Canada let loose the RCMP, its colonial police force, in several violent raids in early 2020, attempting to force access into the territories. The Wet'suwet'en remain unabashed, continuing their struggle, with solidarity actions bringing trains to a stop across Canada and mobilising people across the world, including the UK.

Within the UK, as is usually the case with such fossil fuel projects, there are a variety of banks and private equity investors who are stakeholders in the CGL pipeline. In response to the international call for support, Wet'suwet'en Solidarity UK emerged ready to tackle these colonial investors head on, as well as engaging in acts of solidarity with the Wet'suwet'en and other Indigenous peoples under attack. One investor, KKR & Co, who intended to buy a major stake in the CGL project, saw their London offices occupied in February 2020. The emergence of the Covid-19 crisis forced such activities to move online, but the group continued undeterred.

Over the course of 2020, groups like Wet'suwet'en Solidarity UK have been engaging in 'communications blockades' against investors in the CGL project. This tactic sees companies subject to mass emails, phone calls, and other communications from people demanding they cease investment in and work on the pipeline. Businesses that are usually comfortable pretending their investments are environmentally and socially friendly, are faced with the full spectrum of opposition to their activities.

The next of these blockades was originally scheduled for 21 September, one day before the three-

day Facebook suspension would have ended. Every page co-hosting this blockade, and all profiles administrating those pages, received the suspension at once. Facebook claims the suspensions were caused by an error and not the intervention of any third party – such as one of the businesses targeted. This heavy-handed response saw suspensions for Wet'suwet'en figures, Greenpeace activists, and those involved in the UK solidarity movement. This was a silencing of Indigenous voices and those organising with them, at a time calculated to undermine their efforts to assert Indigenous sovereignty.

Anti-social networks and the left

This incident points to a contemporary challenge for those organising for social change. Our means of communication, organising, and international solidarity are owned by the ruling class. Digital organising in defence of Indigenous sovereignty, in opposition to fossil fuel infrastructure, and against police violence, are all at risk of being silenced.

Whilst social networks create spaces for novel organising strategies and international networks – like these digital communications blockades – they also create new vulnerabilities and challenges for the left. At no point in human history have our lives ever been so open, with the possibility of repression from businesses and states made ever likely by our own transparencies. Movement leaders can be identified and swiftly dealt with by the police. Employers can inspect the digital footprint of their employees, targeting those who organise in the workspace. Even small groups designed for the discussion of revolutionary theory can be subject to censorship. The assumption that social networks are neutral public spaces for people to meet ignores the reality that these platforms are controlled privately and subject to the interests of colonial capitalism.

This has been shown in many international struggles against oppression over the past two decades. Governments have banned their citizens from Twitter and other social media platforms in attempts to quell resistance, such as Turkey in 2014 and Egypt in 2011. David Cameron threatened to do the same during the 2011 riots in England. The most intense expression of this has been in Kashmir, where the occupying Indian government has blocked all internet access across the region in order to weaken resistance and prevent information about the brutality of the occupation spreading internationally. When applied across the board, these blanket restrictions have often stoked outrage and even sparked uprisings. The 2019 October Revolution in Lebanon was partially sparked by government attempts to introduce a charge on the use of WhatsApp. But while these government bans have been well documented, the relationship between private interests and individual censorship remains shadowy. Alongside the targeting of accounts linked to Indigenous struggle, Facebook has been accused of systematically blocking and censoring the accounts of Palestinians posting about the occupation of their lands.

If the late twentieth century is defined by the collapse of left-wing print, it is also marked by the absence of substantial leftist inroads into new media. In most of the world, there are no major left-wing television stations, national radio is increasingly held by large private conglomerates, and digital spaces like YouTube have been dominated most notably by far-right figures. Whilst the advent of the internet provides spaces for websites, podcasts, videos, and more, none of these platforms have seemed to distinctly favour the advance of left-wing ideas. Currently, we only have partial and conditional access to the material preconditions of online communication – servers, wires, and hardware. Just as early revolutionary movements sought printing presses and soapboxes, the modern socialist movement requires secure servers and software, and serious strategies to safeguard our communications access. Without control of the means of communication, we cannot advance the movement for the means of production.

This incident, which saw Indigenous people, revolutionaries, and climate activists, silenced

overnight, points to a simple truth – technology in the hands of the coloniser and the exploiter remains an instrument of oppression. In the short term, to combat colonial capitalism, movements must urgently rethink their cyber security practices. But this is not enough, those fighting for a better world must also find ways to build our own vectors of communication, and to take control of the digital space from businesses and states. These attacks on Indigenous sovereignty and the political left, whether in person or online, cannot be allowed to continue unchallenged. Too much is at stake.

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