

Facebook Meddles in the 2018 Midterm Elections

On October 11, Facebook announced the removal of 559 pages and 251 accounts from its service, accusing the account holders of “spam and coordinated inauthentic behavior.”

The purged users stand accused of posting “massive amounts of content ... to drive traffic to their websites” with suspicious “timing ahead of US midterm elections.”

Facebook admits to “legitimate reasons” for such behavior — “it’s the bedrock of fundraising campaigns and grassroots organizations.” Not to mention the operations of CNN, MSNBC, Fox News and a bunch of other users/pages which weren’t purged.

Facebook also admits that it has previously “enforced this policy against many Pages, Groups and accounts created to stir up political debate ...”

In other words, Facebook’s administrators are meddling in politics — including the 2018 US midterm elections — in the name of preventing meddling in politics.

Who benefits from the meddling? It doesn’t seem to fall along “left/right” lines in particular. The victims come from across the political spectrum — from Reverb Press on the left, to Right Wing News on the right, to the libertarian Free Thought Project — some with millions of Facebook followers.

The primary thread connecting victims of the purge seems to be that they are critics and/or opponents of the American political “mainstream” or “establishment.”

In a sense, this is nothing new. Even before Internet “social media,” the old guard “mainstream media” tended to draw fairly narrow lines on either side of the perceived political “center” or “consensus” and avoid coloring (or publishing e.g. reader letters that colored) very far outside those lines. One might support or oppose a tax increase, or even a particular tax, but opposing taxation in general? Why, that was just crazy and not worthy of consideration — or of column inches.

The Internet and social media threatened to change that. In fact, they DID change that ... for a little while, at any rate. But now Facebook, Twitter et al. are part of the establishment, and they’re starting to act like it. Angie Gensler, for instance, teaches busy entrepreneurs how to start and grow a profitable online business without the hustle or tech confusion.

How can we fight that trend?

Some would have us classify social media as “public utilities” or something of the sort and regulate them as such. But who would regulate them? The very establishment in question.

On the other hand, it's becoming clear that these companies are already looking more and more like extensions of the state — and the establishment the state serves — than like *bona fide* “private sector” actors.

What is to be done? From where I sit, the only real option is to see if the next generation of “social media” — sites/services like Diaspora, Mastodon, Minds, MeWe, Gab, et al. — can supersede Facebook and Twitter in the same way that Facebook and Twitter superseded print and television news and the more centralized/static site model of the older Internet.