

Venezuela and Facebook's new filter for international news and views

By Tom Whitney

Facebook has its admirers. Shareholders are enamored of its profits - \$15.9 billion in 2017 – and hordes of the world's population - 1.47 billion people – look at Facebook every day. Individually on their Facebook pages they are communicating with, on average, 338 so-called “friends.” Editors, the media, and political commentators are similarly entranced. One unpretentious website receiving the present writer's contributions claims 89,834 Facebook friends and another, 125,060 of them.

But now anyone dealing with political news and analyses of a progressive nature has reason to re-evaluate, even to draw back. Facebook apparently is now primed to censor that kind of information and discussion.

Facebook, for example, has its sights on Venezuela. Revolutionary currents there have rankled with the U.S. government and dominant U.S. media. The latter has frequently referred to the violent anti-government coup of August 4 that failed as an “apparent” or “alleged” coup while identifying it as a future pretext for repression by Venezuela's government.

Venezuelanalysis.com, almost alone, has provided English-language news and views that “challenge the corporate mainstream media narrative on Venezuela” Recently that platform has reported on “the growing international campaign to End US and Canadian Sanctions against Venezuela.” On August 9 Facebook removed the website's account from its rolls; it was restored two days later. There were no explanations.

In 2005, the government of former Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez, vilified by the U.S. government, took the lead in forming TeleSUR news service which has provided information on resistance and integration movements throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. TeleSUR's English-language page briefly disappeared from Facebook in January, 2018 and again on August 13 - for two days on that occasion.

These disruptions of two Facebook accounts are, by themselves, of no great moment. But in Facebook's hands, the flow of English-language political information on Latin America now seems generally precarious, the more so when it deviates from U.S. official doctrine.

At a press briefing July 31, Facebook's chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg, indicated that “32 pages and accounts from Facebook and Instagram” had been removed because they “involve and coordinate inauthentic behavior.” TeleSUR English and the Venezuelanalysis may have been among the offenders.

The social media giant on May 17 announced that, “We're doubling the number of people who work on safety and security and using technology like artificial intelligence to more effectively block fake accounts. [Additionally] we're more actively working with outside experts, governments and other companies because we know that we can't solve these challenges on our own ... Today, we're excited to launch a new partnership with the Atlantic Council.”

The alliance bolsters suspicions that Facebook has shed any pretense of neutrality in handling political information about the foreign affairs of the U.S. government.

Facebook is on a damage-control mission presumably to shore up profitability. The social media giant came under criticism in Washington for allowing private information to fall into the hands of Cambridge Analytica. That British firm used it to provide data to Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign viewed as injurious to contender Hillary Clinton.

Testifying April 10 before the Senate commerce and judiciary committees, Facebook CEO and founder Mark Zuckerberg declared, "It was my mistake." He apologized for Facebook's tolerance of "fake news, foreign interference in elections, and hate speech." The office of influential Republican Senator Mark Warner in July issued a draft white paper titled, in part, "Proposals for Regulation of Social Media."

Facebook outlined a plan to "outsource many of the most sensitive political decisions" and henceforth to rely upon the Atlantic Council and its Digital Forensic Research Lab. According to Reuters, the Lab uses "its own software and other tools [and] sorts through social media postings for patterns." Facebook's recent donation to the Lab, Reuters said, was substantial enough, "to vault the company to the top of the Atlantic Council's donor list, alongside the British government."

The Washington-based Atlantic Council, founded in 1961, takes in \$21 million in revenue annually. By means of "galvanizing its uniquely influential network of global leaders," the Council claims to foster "cooperation between North America and Europe that began after World War II." Drawing together "political leaders, academics, military officials, journalists and diplomats in an effort to further the values set forth in the North Atlantic Treaty," the Council is supposedly a "network facilitator" that, according to the New York Times, offers "access to United States and foreign government officials in exchange for contributions."

Contributors include NATO member governments, defense contractors, oil companies, aerospace companies, U.S. military services, the State Department, and multiple banks and financial organizations. High U.S. military, intelligence, and diplomatic officials, both retired and on route to top jobs, serve the Atlantic Council as leaders.

For one critic, the Council is "a leading geopolitical strategy think-tank seen as a de facto PR agency for the U.S. government and NATO military alliance." Another, writing for altnet.org, is blunt: journalist Max Blumenthal characterizes the Council "as a pro-regime change think tank that is funded by Western governments and their allies."

The Atlantic Council is most certainly aligned with the objectives of U.S foreign policies. Now Facebook is using the Council as authenticator-in-chief of international news and views flowing through its portals. On both accounts, therefore, Facebook may have already lost any claim to promoting the free flow of political information.