

From breastfeeding to politics, Facebook steps up censorship

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Who's in charge here? It's not us. jdlasica

Facebook has recently tried to close down the popular Anarchist Memes page on its site in the latest of a string of crackdowns on political online activism. It's just one more example of the social media police in action.

We have become increasingly accustomed to the notion that the social media platforms we use will have certain terms and conditions attached to regulate how we communicate on them. These can help ensure some level of respect and decency on an online space of millions of users. But predictably, much public debate so far on what this means has centered around nudity, sexual content and violence. Only recently Facebook found itself having to explain why it had censored images of women breastfeeding while allowing for images of beheadings to remain on its network.

Getting political

However, in the last few months we have seen the debate shift towards what is increasingly looking like Facebook acting as our social media police force.

Anarchist Memes is a page dedicated to anti-capitalist, anti-racist, feminist, and pro-LGBTQ rights that after five years of operation had acquired 90,000 likes and hundreds of comments every day.

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Although an older version of the site has now replaced it, the page was recently shut down, prompting the artist and activist Ben Nolton to ask whether **Facebook is actually flirting with fascism**.

As Nolton points out, Facebook has demonstrated startling double standards in what it chooses to remove, leaving blatantly racist and white supremacist pages untouched, and allowing misogyny to remain rife and entrenched in Facebook culture. **Photos of beaten women and violent death and rape threats permeate the network** often under some warped conception of humour and free speech. This, of course, is not to mention the absurd amounts of corporate sexist propaganda that women regularly get bombarded with every time they read through their Facebook news feed.

The battle over Anarchist Memes is part of a broader strategy to take closer control of political activity that takes place on Facebook. The social media giant participated in a convention in Philadelphia in October, where it discussed ways in which “**partnerships**” between Facebook and police could be established that would block certain individuals, uses, and pages. And in the lead-up to the royal wedding in the UK in 2011, it was reported that Facebook had, within a short period of time, closed down a number of pages for UK-based political groups in what seemed to be part of a **wider crackdown** on potential protests by British authorities.

Of course this is in addition to the questions that still surround **the role** Facebook has played in governmental online surveillance programmes. It all reveals the company to be an increasingly active participant in the control of our social and political lives.

You might say that political activists should just go somewhere else. And increasingly, in a post-Snowden digital world, people are. But with a user-base of over a billion people, Facebook holds a privileged position as a space of public opinion. What is and is not allowed within that space therefore matters.

Facebook has come to occupy an important role not just in our everyday communication, but also in the shaping of broader social and political processes and how we come to understand the world around us. It’s a space perceived as a platform to reach people and speak out. As such, it has become important for political actors, not least people who consider themselves activists.

Yet at the same time, the control and ownership of this platform lies squarely in private hands. It is, as far as users are concerned, entirely unaccountable. The actual moderating of Facebook’s pages and posts is apparently being outsourced to low-wage workers in the developing world who are charged with the unenviable task of scrolling through **reported material** every day for very little money.

In many ways, therefore, longstanding concerns about unaccountable corporate media can equally be levied against Facebook. Facebook is a media corporation like any other that will seek to serve shareholders and profits first and foremost.

Who is ‘us’?

But there are some important differences that make these latest moves by Facebook even more concerning. The sheer entrenchment of Facebook into our everyday communications as a social media platform and the concerted efforts it has made to become an entry-point to information about our social worlds has provided it with enormous power in, perhaps particularly, communication between individuals as collectives. And no one is trying to push this narrative about Facebook more than Facebook itself.

This idea that Facebook is the collective communication space for you and me, us, the people, is central to its branding. It’s part of what Nick Couldry has described as the “myth of us”. This is the idea that platforms like Facebook appear to underpin natural collectivity and are then able to make claims about what “we” are now doing together. And, of course, no one was more eager to embrace the label “Facebook revolution” in accounts of the Arab Spring than Mark Zuckerberg himself, who happily credited his company with being a **force for liberation**, a place where the powerless could come together and rise up.

This narrative of social media as a people-driven force and a grassroots network has become so commonplace it is now increasingly being used strategically by different kinds of interest groups that, in tangent with mainstream media, are keen to speedily describe protests and movements as social-media driven to grant them credibility and a sense of authenticity. It has become part of our de facto way of understanding and describing contemporary resistance.

This gap between the perceptions and realities of corporations like Facebook makes for a convoluted environment in which a lack of transparency dominates the activities that are taking place within our communication platforms. And it allows for unaccountable, private agencies to make deeply political decisions about what kind of content, views, and activities we should or should not engage with without ever consulting us, all the while pertaining to be our voice. This paradox will only become more and more troubling as Facebook moves further and further into policing the meaning of “us”.



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