



Social media companies should apply censorship policies ethically



Jack Hunter
Head Graphic Artist

Over the past few years, conversations regarding social media censorship have resurfaced intermittently as various companies have made questionable decisions regarding the distribution of content on their platforms. YouTube has been criticized for hiding and demonetizing videos by LGBT users (citing them as adult content). Twitter has a bad reputation for suspending users unjustly, and recently, Tumblr's botched plan to ban NSFW (not safe for work) content from their site resulted in the incorrect erasure of many non-explicit posts and blogs. In addition, unchecked far-right extremist activity is surprisingly prevalent on all three services. Every reoccurring slip-up leaves many asking: how far should social media sites go when it comes to censorship?

To understand why these sites censor what they do, one needs to understand their terms of service. Rules vary between platforms, but commonly banned subjects include the following: abuse (harassment or intimidation), hateful conduct (as Twitter puts it, "on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, religious affiliation, age, disability, or serious disease"), and the glorification of violence, suicide, or self-harm.

It's important to keep in mind that at their core, these websites weren't built to function as bastions of community and free speech; they're there to make money. These companies and their investors seek maximum engagement from their user bases, so they can advertise to (and collect and sell data from) as many people as possible. Their rules are specifically engineered to create an environment where any given person can interact with massive amounts of content from millions of other users, while simultaneously ensuring content that would deter them from using said platform stays hidden.

When it comes to platforms not only widely used by adults, but also kids and teens, banning sexual, violent, and hateful content makes sense: the companies get to maximize the money they make, and users get an environment that's pleasant to participate in. However, inadequacies have arisen in

the way companies enforce these rules.

In efforts to cut down on the amount of sexual content that deters people from using their sites (and deters app distribution services from offering it on their web stores), several platforms including YouTube and Tumblr have introduced measures to strip NSFW content on their sites: YouTube with a "restricted mode" that hides potentially inappropriate videos, and Tumblr with an outright ban on sexual content altogether. Though it's been established that the companies have every right to do this (even if it frustrates some users), both platforms' algorithms have unintentionally flagged, restricted, and demonetized nonsexual content from LGBT creators or about topics relevant to the LGBT community.

Last year YouTuber Chase Ross, in an interview with *The Verge*, said that his "Trans 101" video series was completely demonetized, despite not containing any sexual content. Other LGBT Youtubers have had similar experiences, seeing their videos that include terms like "lesbian," "gay," and "trans" in the titles immediately demonetized upon upload. It's frustrating to see companies with rules designed to protect these minority groups turn around and actively hurt them with sloppy moderation, in the interest of making a bigger profit.

Furthermore, while these vulnerable communities have been unjustly censored, the presence of far-right politics and hate groups goes unchecked on the same platforms—again, in the interest of profit. Twitter is especially notorious for this. In an article for *TechCrunch*, Josh Constine writes: "It's common to see people posting the screenshots of the messages they get back from Twitter saying that sexist, racist, homophobic, and violent remarks don't violate its policies. Only when they get enough retweets and media attention do those accounts seem to disappear." Though these people and the groups they represent are in violation of the terms of almost every social media service because of routine harassment and hate speech, many go unpunished: as very active users of their respective services, they generate good ad revenue. Companies deny it, but the continued presence of these hate groups is proof enough.

It all comes down to this: though social media companies should censor content they don't want on their site, we as social media users need to hold companies accountable for their lapses in business integrity. Be loud when censorship is applied in damaging ways, support minority groups on all platforms, and make it known that hate is unwelcome in the online spaces we call home.

Censorship Fast Facts

Censorship impacts 1.72 billion people every day.

23.5% come across censorship when on the internet.

Defamation is the top reason a website is blocked or removed.

80% of the world doesn't have completely uncensored internet access.

Censorship worries 60% of North Americans.

Of the 30 most-visited countries, 8 have censored internet.

There were 321 removal requests filed in 2012 in the United States.

45% of internet users live in a country where satirical cartoons, writing, and videos are censored.

61% of users live where criticism of the government, ruling family, or military is subject to censorship.

In 2015, 38% of internet users lived in places where messaging or social media apps were blocked.