

QUARTZ

A Complete Guide to All the Things Facebook Censors Hate Most

If Facebook ever had a secret master plan to take down conservative news, its cover is definitely blown. In the wake of reports that the social-media site had been manipulating its “trending topics” to suppress conservative news outlets and stories, Mark Zuckerberg had a high-profile meeting with leading conservatives, the United States Congress proposed an investigation, and weeks of media attention ensured that the whole world knew about the scandal.

But conservatives are far from being the only people who feel wronged by Facebook. They’re simply the loudest. As someone who has followed the issue of online censorship by corporations for more than half a decade, I can say with certainty that this incident has received more attention than nearly any other. For years, activists of many stripes (including conservatives) have complained about the social media platform’s censorious ways. This year, we’ve seen complaints from groups from groups across nearly every walk of life. Here are ten recent examples.

Plus-sized women

Users of both Facebook and the company’s subsidiary Instagram have complained of bias against fat women. This controversy started back in 2014, when a college student found her Instagram account deactivated after she’d posted a photo of herself in a bra and panties. Although the company reinstated her account and apologized for the error, the damage was done. Soon, other women came forward with stories of their full-figured portraits being censored.

In recent months, both platforms have faced fresh accusations of censoring photos of plus-sized models. In late May, an advertisement featuring model Tess Holliday was banned by Facebook. Cherchez La Femme, the Australian group that posted the ad, said they received a message from Facebook reading, “Ads may not depict a state of health or body weight as being perfect or extremely undesirable.”

More recently, a fashion blogger in Singapore found her photo—of herself and two other plus-sized women wearing bikinis—taken down for violating the community guidelines. Said the blogger: “Obviously fatphobic trolls had reported the image and Instagram blindly removed it. Which really angered me.”

Mothers

Facebook has a long history of censoring breastfeeding mothers. Although the company’s community standards were adjusted in March 2015 to clarify that breastfeeding photos were allowed, mothers still regularly complain that such photos are taken down. New mothers who share birthing photos have also complained that they are censored by the company, even inside private groups set up for that express purpose.

Women, generally

Facebook’s community standards read: “We [restrict] some images of female breasts if they include the nipple, but we always allow photos of women actively engaged in breastfeeding or showing breasts with post-mastectomy scarring.”

The latter pledge is untrue in practice, as demonstrated by the continued censorship of breastfeeding photos. Meanwhile, it is clearly discriminatory to broadly restrict images of female breasts in the first place. Women post topless photos for a number of reasons, many of which serve an educational or medical purpose.

In March, I wrote about my own run-in with the Facebook police for posting a photo from a breast cancer awareness campaign. Similar stories abound. There’s the Breast Shape Dictionary that couldn’t advertise on Facebook, even though their images contained only bras. Then there is the young woman who sought to normalize menstruation by posting images to Instagram that included blood on her underwear. Whatever the social-media giant claims its principles to be, its actions clearly betray a deep discomfort with women’s bodies.

Sexual health organizations

When the US-based National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy tried to buy an advertisement for an article entitled “Six things you should know about your well-woman visit,” it was rejected on the grounds that the language used in the tagline was “profane, vulgar, threatening or generates high negative feedback.” The language in question? “You’re so sexy when you’re well.”

Meanwhile, a recent breast cancer awareness campaign by Pink Ribbon Germany—the same campaign that got me a 24-hour ban—intentionally nipped at Facebook’s policies. Called “Check it before it’s removed,” the campaign encouraged users to post their images of women exposing a breast in the hopes of raising awareness of breast cancer (and perhaps awareness of bad social-media policy as well). Many users reported censorship after posting the images.

Indigenous groups

After indigenous rights activist Celeste Liddle gave a speech in March 2016, she posted the text of that speech to Facebook along with an image of two topless Aboriginal women. Shortly after doing so, she found her account had been suspended. In response, Liddle posted a Change.org petition entitled “Aboriginal women practicing culture are not offensive.” Facebook defended their decision, however, on the basis that the women in the photograph violated their nudity policy.

Journalists

Although it was Facebook’s manipulation of trending topics that angered the right, individual conservative journalists have previously had their posts taken down. In one recent incident, Todd Starnes, a Fox radio host, had his page blocked after posting a fairly innocuous message about being proud to be “politically incorrect.”

Journalists outside of the US have found their content removed as well. Recently, Facebook took down a post by veteran Philippine journalist Ed Lingao that criticized Rodrigo Duterte, president-elect of the country, for his statement justifying the murder of journalists. (The company said it had made a mistake and restored the post.)

Cannabis advocates

Facebook’s community standards prohibit both criminal activity and the purchase, sale, or trade of prescription drugs and marijuana, among other things. Marijuana dispensaries in jurisdictions where the substance is legal often find their accounts shut down. Some reports have surmised that Facebook is adhering to federal, rather than local, law.

Similarly, a pro-cannabis Australian music festival recently had its event page removed. Representatives for the festival suggested that they thought the New South Wales police had contacted Facebook to have the page taken down.

Europeans

In late May, the European Commission announced that it had struck a deal with four major companies—including Facebook—to “help fight against the spread of hate speech in Europe.” Specifically, the deal would require companies to “review the majority of valid notifications for removal of hate speech in less than 24 hours and remove or disable access to such content,” as well as “educate and raise awareness” with their users about the companies’ guidelines.

Removal of hate speech might seem like a good idea to Europeans, given that prejudice is clearly on the rise. But in light of Facebook’s censorship track record, this deal is surely to result in the takedown of plenty of speech that would be legal in Europe. Several European digital rights groups, including Index on Censorship and the European Digital Rights Initiative, have spoken out against the decision.

Artists, museums and galleries

So far, 2016 hasn’t been a great year for artists seeking to spread their work on Facebook. Last October, a Brooklyn gallery received warning that it would need to remove certain images or lose its advertising privileges. In January of this year, the same gallery found its account frozen, according to reports, for featuring a partially nude woman in an advertisement for an exhibit that was featured on the page.

In January, the Philadelphia Museum of Art suffered a similar blow. After posting “Ice Cream,” a 1964 pop art painting by Evelyne Axell, to their Facebook page, the museum was notified that the post had been removed for containing “excessive amounts of skin or suggestive content.” The painting is far from excessive. It shows a woman licking an ice cream cone.

LGBTQ groups and individuals

Facebook has a tenuous relationship with the queer community. Although the company rolled out 51 gender options for profiles, sponsors a float for San Francisco Pride, and has an active LGBTQ employee group, its real-name policy has also been called discriminatory and even dangerous—particularly for transgender individuals.

In 2014, a number of drag performers were suspended by the company for using their drag names, forcing Facebook to apologize and slightly modify their enforcement policy.

Still, many in the LGBTQ community feel that Facebook hasn't done enough to address their concerns. As Lil Miss Hot Mess, the self-proclaimed "people's drag queen" wrote in 2015: "[T]oday, while I should be popping open a bottle of champagne ... to celebrate the anniversary of our victory, I'm still getting messages from people whose accounts are unfairly reported and blocked."

It isn't only the real-name policy that's causing harm to the community. An advertisement for a book featuring an "LGBT vision of Jesus" was rejected multiple times. An artist who photographs gay soldiers has seen his work repeatedly censored. And most recently, an Italian LGBTQ campaign against racism was banned for being "pornographic," although the illustration accompanying it was of a bare-chested man. There was nothing offensive or pornographic about the illustration. But the fact that Facebook took it down anyway reveals how the company's built-in biases exercise a dangerous influence over the content its users see.