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‘Men are Scum’: Self-regulation, hate speech, and gender-based censorship on Facebook

Abstract

Since social media sites practice self-regulation, each site has developed its own community standards, which serve as regulatory tools. However, the processes of content moderation can be unclear, subjective, and discriminatory. Drawing from a series of interviews, this article describes the experiences of women who have been censored on Facebook and explores whether self-regulatory processes on this media format are distinctly gendered. This paper asserts that both explicit censorship (for instance limited displays of the body) and implicit censorship (for example rampant and unchecked hate speech on the platform that silences women’s speech) are operative on Facebook, limiting women’s expressive potentiality. Thus, this article proposes the term gender-based censorship as a lens through which to understand women’s experiences on Facebook. These findings help reveal the pitfalls of industry self-regulation in which profit motives reign supreme over protection of users (especially those who may be already marginalized by offline power dynamics).

Keywords: Facebook, self-regulation, gender, censorship, content moderation, social media

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“Facebook has more power in determining who can speak and who can be heard around the globe than any Supreme Court Justice, any king or any president.”

-George Washington University law professor Jeffrey Rosen (as cited in Helft, 2010)

In the contemporary moment, personal expression on social media is used for identity formation, civic engagement, and political participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012). However, individual posts on social media are shaped by each site’s community standards, which serve as regulatory tools. While these explicit guidelines are listed on the website of each social media company, the processes of content moderation are vague, and users are often unsure what material is acceptable to post. In such a regulatory schema, there is the potential for voices to be weighed unequally and for material to be selectively restricted. Drawing from a series of interviews, this article describes the experiences of women who claim to have been censored¹ and harassed on Facebook and explores whether this company’s regulatory systems are distinctly gendered. This topic is important since an examination of the socially constructed allocation of speech and the implicit biases inherent in self-regulatory² processes on social media can help pave the way for digital reform efforts.

¹ Censorship is a difficult concept to define, especially since the parameters of what constitutes censorship have been interrogated in the postmodern digital age. As a starting point, this article utilizes a definition by legal scholar Paul O’Higgins (1972). O’Higgins describes censorship as “the process whereby restrictions are imposed upon the collection, dissemination and exchange of information, opinion and ideas” (1972, p.12).

² Self-regulation, a concept that will be employed throughout this article, carries a range of meanings, depending on the industry and time period (Price & Verhulst, 2005). In its most simplistic form, self-regulation means “that the industry or profession rather than the government is doing the regulation”

Contextualizing Facebook's Self-Regulation

While online social networks date as far back as the 1950s (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), the emergence of social media sites is rooted in the development of Web 2.0 in the early 2000s. This stage in the Internet's evolution was characterized by increased use of cross-platforms and a greater role for users (O'Reilly, 2007). Social media can be defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p.61). The meteoric rise of social media occurred in the early 2000s, and Facebook, the paradigmatic example, was created by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004 (McKenna, 2017). In 2006, after membership was opened up to include those not enrolled in high school or college, the number of users quickly expanded (McKenna, 2017). Currently, there are over 2 billion Facebook users (more than one fourth of the world's population) who post in more than 80 languages around the globe (Bickert & Fishman, 2017).

Social media sites such as Facebook are regulated in a distinct manner from other media in the United States. The primary piece of legislation for regulating social media is Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (1996). There are two key provisions that impact the governance of social media sites—restricted liability for user content and allowance for these companies to develop their own regulatory schemas. With regard to the former concern, this act states: "No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider" (Communications

(Campbell, 1999, p.715). However, scholars point out that self-regulation is never free from government influence and is instead contingent upon a series of negotiations and compromises between industry and government (Price & Verhulst, 2005; Pickard, 2014).

Decency Act of 1996). Since “technology companies” are not categorized as publishers (i.e., “media companies”), they are not liable for the content users post on their platform (Napoli & Caplan, 2017). However, this piece of legislation empowers companies to regulate speech on their platform if they so desire. Section 230, Subparagraph C of the Communications Decency Act establishes that providers are not accountable for

any action voluntarily taken in good faith to restrict access to or availability of material that the provider or user considers to be obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy, excessively violent, harassing, or otherwise objectionable, whether or not such material is constitutionally protected (1996).

Herein, the phrase “any action voluntarily taken” (Communications Decency Act of 1996) illustrates that these companies are not legally required to restrict content. Further, this section of the Communications Decency Act is entitled “Protection for ‘Good Samaritan’ Blocking and Screening of Offensive Material,” a label that highlights the voluntary rather than obligatory nature of content moderation. This lax framework has been criticized by many scholars, including Georgetown law professor Rebecca Tushnet (2007), who expressed concern that the system grants intermediaries “power without responsibility” (p.986). One exception to the unfettered control by social media companies relates to copyright infringement. According to Section 512 of the 1996 Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), companies must follow a notice-and-takedown procedure when offenses occur.

Processes and Complications of Self-Regulation

As enabled by the Communications Decency Act of 1996, Facebook has established terms of service and community guidelines for users. This company’s stated goal is as follows: “We want people to feel safe when using Facebook” (“Community Standards,” n.d.).

Consequently, Facebook has created several provisions, which the corporation believes will protect users. These guidelines are divided into four sections: “Helping to Keep you Safe,” “Encouraging respectful behavior,” “Keeping your account and personal information secure,” and “Protecting your intellectual property” (“Community Standards,” n.d.).

Facebook’s policies regarding content hinge on two principles: global standards and the responsibility of individual users. Asserting that there is only “one Facebook” (Ammori, 2014, p.2281), this company works to enforce the same standards across the globe. This approach can be problematic since the content users post may be evaluated based on the norms of another culture. Further, the notion of “one Facebook” (Ammori, 2014, p.2281) is complicated by the fact that users’ experiences on the site are not monolithic but instead are deeply shaped by intersectional identifiers such as race, gender, and nationality, making the push for a consistent and fair policy difficult to enact.

To uphold these unitary international standards, Facebook relies upon individual users as well as a team of content moderators. On the platform, users are empowered to report others’ posts by specifying which guideline has been violated, thereby delegating aspects of content moderation to users. Even though the site has over 2 billion users and reviews over one hundred million pieces of content each month (Wagner & Swisher, 2017), to date it employs only 7,500 censors (Madrigal, 2018). Largely outsourced and underpaid (Roberts, 2016), these workers are entrusted with deciding whether content complies with the community guidelines. The vast number of users and the equivocal nature of Facebook’s community standards endows this platform (and censors) with tremendous clout to influence cultural standards. Susan Benesch, director of the Dangerous Speech Project, explains: “Facebook is regulating more human speech than any government does now or ever has... They are like a de facto body of law, yet that law is

a secret” (as cited in Jan & Dwoskin, 2017). This relatively unchecked power (along with Facebook’s lack of transparency) can pave the way to abuse and discrimination on the platform.

The ineffective oversight of Facebook is especially problematic given women’s experiences of hostility and harassment online, which appear to be increasing in the wake of highly visible feminist media campaigns (Lorenz, 2017). To this point, feminist scholar Emma Jane (2014) declares: “misogynistic hostility...has become a *lingua franca* in many sectors of the cybersphere” (p.558). The anonymity of the Internet and the perceived divide between online speech and offline actions have fostered an explosion of hate speech and male trolling. Jane (2017) asserts that “while the internet did not invent sexism, it *is* amplifying it in unprecedented ways” (p.3). Tactics such as “mansplaining” (Poland, 2016, p.18)³ and harassment are rampant on social media platforms. Although women are also purveyors of hate speech, a recent survey revealed that they are twice as likely to be harassed online because of their gender and that they tend to regard such abuse as more problematic than men do (Duggan, 2017). Thus, the light regulation of Facebook and its deprioritization of fair standards for content moderation may enable sexist speech to flourish, disempowering women and silencing them.

Literature Review and Research Questions

Given the prevalence of social media sites and the importance of content regulation, there has been a recent growth in scholarship on this topic. This article draws upon two bodies of scholarship: studies that examine the nature of social media content moderation and works that analyze the gendered dimensions of online interactions.

³ Mansplaining may be seen as condescending speech by men who explain things to women in a patronizing manner.

A major area of focus centers on the legal frameworks, technical affordances, social concerns, and labor practices of content moderation. In a 2016 article, Crawford and Gillespie examine what it means to flag content on social media platforms. While the authors note that flagging practices differ by social media site, they express concern about this form of content moderation. The authors state: “Flags proceduralize and perform collective governance while simultaneously obscuring it” (Crawford & Gillespie, 2016, p.424). Since flags may not approximate community sentiment and because discursive deliberation is beneficial, Crawford and Gillespie (2016) suggest that social media sites adopt “an open backstage model” (p.423) where internal processes of review are publicized. The institutional study of social media regulation has also been advanced by scholars such as Sarah T. Roberts who researches the labor processes of commercial content moderation. After conducting a series of interviews with employees, Roberts (2016) explains that workers who “act as digital gatekeepers for a platform” (p.148) must balance competing demands such as free expression, profit potentiality, and brand protection when deciding on the acceptability of content. Roberts further describes how the opacity of this process contributes to normalization of sexist, racist, and homophobic content on social media, a claim that will be considered in this article.

This body of scholarship also includes works that examine the role of users in influencing content. Exemplifying this approach is a 2013 graduate thesis by Christopher Peterson. Through an examination of listserv posts, models, and artifacts, Peterson (2013) advances a notion of user-generated censorship, which he defines as “an emergent mode of intervention by which users strategically manipulate social media to suppress speech” (p.2). Peterson’s idea effectively ties together technological affordances on social media sites and the actions of users. In sum, works on content moderation are extremely useful in understanding the contours of these

processes on social media, including their inherently value-laden nature. However, even when addressing the role of individuals, these works do not include the perspective of users and thus neglect the question of how users conceptualize content regulation and what impact this moderation has on both their online and offline experiences.

Studies that examine women's participation on the Internet reveal the deeply gendered nature of these interactions. Collectively, this scholarship demonstrates that while early visions of social media (and the Internet in general) were suffused with technological utopianism and views of an enriched public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002), experiences of using the Internet are neither gender neutral nor democratic. Additionally, scholars note the tendency for offline power dynamics to replicate in online spaces, a pattern that is exacerbated by the light regulation of social media sites (Poland, 2016). In her 2012 article, researcher Emma Jane demonstrated the extent of "e-bile" (p.531) and asserted that this kind of speech inhibits women's participation online and reduces the overall level of civility on the Internet. Subsequent research has illustrated the presence of sexist hashtags (Fox, Cruz, & Lee, 2015), gender-based trolling (Mantilla, 2013; Mantilla, 2015), rape threats (Filipovic, 2007; Hess, 2014), revenge porn (Abah, 2016), and misogyny online (Jane, 2016). In combination, these sources reveal how pernicious Internet practices limit women's voice and agency, illustrating the intimate connection between online interactions and offline marginalization. While these sources elucidate many important trends about sexism on the Internet, they rely mostly on textual data. To build upon the aforementioned scholarship, this article draws upon interviews with individuals who have experienced gender-based censorship online, which will deepen the discussion of how women are silenced on social media in general and Facebook in particular.

To address gaps in the literature, this article seeks to answer three central questions:

- 1) How do female Facebook users interface with the platform's community standards?
- 2) How do implicit and explicit censorship govern women's experiences on Facebook?
- 3) What do women's interactions on Facebook reveal about the impact of self-regulation on the expressive potentiality of marginalized groups. Additionally, how can social media sites better foster democratic participation and civil discourse?

Method and Theory

Since the processes of content moderation are difficult to track, this study utilized interviews as the primary method of data collection.⁴ Two sampling methods were used to recruit participants: chain referral sampling and purposive sampling. Chain referral sampling is similar to snowball sampling in the sense that it relies upon referrals from initial contacts; however, in chain referral sampling, "multiple networks are strategically accessed to expand the scope of investigation beyond one social network" (Penrod, Cain, & Starks, 2003, p.102). This method is especially useful when the target population is difficult to find, and there is no known sampling frame (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The initial links in the chain referrals for this study were a comedian and a photographer who opened up their networks of friends with similar experiences on Facebook. This method of sampling was supplemented by the use of key informant surveys (a type of purposive sampling), which "targets individuals who are particularly knowledgeable about the issues under investigation" (Schutt, 2014, p.171). In this round of sampling, researchers, lawyers, representatives from Facebook, and individuals from non-profit organizations were contacted.

Facebook was contacted directly for an interview four times (through emails to the press office) and indirectly two times through contacts from non-profit organizations. Despite these

⁴ This protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the author's university.

attempts, the author never received a response from this company. Consequently, the discussion of Facebook’s policies is informed by official statements in addition to news articles and related materials rather than an interview with a company representative.

Through both sampling methods, a total of 26 interview requests were sent, which led to 13 interviews. These interviews took place during January and February 2018 over the phone, through Skype, via Facetime, over email, or face-to-face, depending on the availability and preference of the interviewee. All interviews were uncompensated, conducted in English, and lasted approximately 20-30 minutes. The table below lists the pseudonym, profession, and location of participants as well as the mode of interview.

Table 1
Participants

Interviewee	Occupation	Location	Interview Format	Date
Keesha Anderson	Comedian/Paralegal	United States	Phone Call	26-Jan-18
Tami Smith	Comedian	United States	Phone Call	29-Jan-18
Liz Wilson	Comedian/Activist	United States	Phone Call	29-Jan-18
Jessica Jones	Comedian	United States	Phone Call	29-Jan-18
Abby Wood	Business Owner	United States	Phone Call	30-Jan-18
Catherine Perry	Artist	Australia	Skype	30-Jan-18
Rós Helgadóttir	Activist	Iceland	Email	31-Jan-18
Maria Miller	Researcher/Activist	Germany	Skype	8-Feb-18
Olivia Lee	Photographer	Australia	FaceTime	8-Feb-18
Sommer Cooper	Writer/Activist	United States	Phone Call	9-Feb-18
Ryan Lewis	Lawyer/Professor	United States	Face-to-face	13-Feb-18
Ava Gagnon	Photographer/Doula	Canada	Phone Call	14-Feb-18
Alana Johnson	Comedian	United States	Phone Call	23-Feb-18

Interviews were semi-structured, and questions were based upon known information about participants. Questions for individuals related to experiences of content removal on

Facebook, awareness of community guidelines and opinions about how content should be moderated on social media sites. Academics/activists were asked about the legal dimensions of content regulation, the complications of self-regulation by social media sites, and trends related to the flagging of specific content categories. Given the lack of prior scholarship on this topic, open coding (by hand) was used to analyze the interview transcripts. Corbin and Strauss (2008) define open coding as an inductive method whereby “data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, compared for similarities and differences, and questions are asked about the phenomena as reflected in the data” (p.62). Within open coding, a constant comparative method was utilized to make connections across the interviews. Coding topics relate to both the means of censorship (i.e., unequal regulation and the proliferation of hate speech) and issues related to corporate social responsibility (such as accountability, transparency, and accessibility).

This article weaves together corporate social responsibility, Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, and feminist theorizations of censorship. In its discussion of the motivations undergirding the implementation of self-regulation, this essay employs the notion of corporate social responsibility (CSR). CSR is a general principle explaining how in the absence of external regulation, corporations try to appease multiple stakeholders, balancing both economic and social demands (Carroll, 1991). However, this calculus is weighted as the economic responsibility to turn a profit undergirds all other considerations such as legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities. The fact that companies are beholden to their profit motive may therefore impact processes of content moderation since companies are incentivized to over-restrict material to avoid potential conflict with shareholders, leading to a “chilling effect” (Schauer, 1978, p.685) that may be most impactful for those who do not have other avenues of

speech. Thus, the principle of CSR and its associated pitfalls will be used throughout this essay to characterize Facebook's inadequate response to women's concerns.

The economic directive of Facebook, a publicly owned corporation, will be linked to Gramsci's theory of hegemony. This theory suggests that leaders enforce conformity to the existing social order by convincing individuals that their interests are prioritized while masking forces of domination and coercion undergirding the system (Gramsci, 1929/1995). As social media companies are primarily beholden to shareholders, they seek to restrict controversial content that could potentially alienate users and thus reduce their profits. The desire to expunge such content maintains prevailing ideologies as the hegemonic viewpoint is rarely deemed controversial since it has become naturalized by social processes. The theory of hegemony may be applied to social media self-regulation because even though this structure upholds dominant interests at the expense of marginal viewpoints, it has won the support of users who report each other for posting certain content. These users accept "voluntary servitude" (Romele, Gallino, Emmenegger, & Gorgone, 2017, p.204) without realizing that social media's egalitarian appeals to self-regulation obscure the subjective decisions that undemocratically appointed censors make regarding content.

This article also applies theorizations of censorship by feminist scholars. While Facebook's community guidelines may be considered an explicit form of censorship, implicit censorship (i.e., "powerful operations of censorship that are not based in explicit state policy or regulation") also occurs on Facebook (Butler, 1998, p.249). Implicit censorship, which "may be more efficacious than explicit forms in rendering certain kinds of speech unspeakable" (Butler, 1998, p.250) is operative on Facebook in two ways. First, when content moderators make subjective, personalized decisions about permissible content, these choices are often guided by

implicit biases that reflect the dominant social order; consequently, the expression of marginalized groups can be censored without a formal directive. Second, hate speech against women may be seen as another form of implicit censorship. Hate speech that seeks to delegitimize women may be postulated as “illocutionary disablement” (Langton, 1993, p.319) in which the speaker’s words “fail to be taken with their intended illocutionary force” (Green, 1998, p.297). Langton (1998) outlines the power dynamics that operate during illocutionary disablement:

One’s power to do illocutionary things with words can sometimes be constrained and circumscribed by someone else’s speech-that some speech builds a space that makes other speech possible and still other speech impossible. (p.274).

Illocutionary disablement is applicable to a gendered study of social media since a climate of misogyny, hate speech, and threats may render women’s speech less effective and undermine their expressive potential on the platform. Combining concepts outlined by feminist scholars, this article proposes the term gender-based censorship as a lens through which to understand women’s experiences on Facebook. Gender-based censorship may be understood as encompassing explicit guidelines and implicit regulatory methods such as subjective and inconsistent decisions by content moderators as well as unregulated and pernicious hate speech against women, two factors that are exacerbated by the unfettered control of social media ...whcompanies.

Gender Wars

This project was born when the author came across Facebook Jailed, a website dedicated to “exposing Facebook’s double standard with regard to monitoring hate speech” (“Facebook

Jailed,” n.d.). While the website’s gallery of misogynistic posts supports claims that the company’s monitoring process is deeply flawed and gendered, it is important to contextualize both the creation of the site and users’ narratives of gender-based censorship on Facebook.

In October 2017, Alana, a feminist comedian and interviewee, became fed up with the relentless harassment and sexist speech directed at her friend on Facebook. After her friend posted 211 photos of sexist comments (that were not removed by censors), Alana posted: “Men are Scum” on her friend’s photo album. The comedian was subsequently reported by another user for perpetuating hate speech and was banned for 30 days from the platform.⁵ This punitive action stands in sharp contrast to Facebook’s nonresponsive approach to the males who continued to hurl sexist insults at Alana’s friend even after she had filed a series of complaints. Rallying behind Alana, 500 female comedians (several of whom were interviewed for this project) posted “Men are Scum” on Facebook in November 2017 to protest the company’s inconsistency in censoring content, and almost every one of these women experienced a ban from the site as a result (Lorenz, 2017). In response, Facebook Jailed was created to draw ongoing attention to this issue (Reghay, 2017).

Interviewees who support the “Men are Scum” movement expressed concerns that hate speech policies are adjudicated differently for posts directed at men and women.⁶ Business owner Abby complained about the company consistently granting men latitude when making sexist comments about women but restricting women who fire back in kind:

When the roles are reversed and you report something that is sexist and degrading toward women, it never gets taken down, and Facebook sends you a cute little message back saying we reviewed this, and it doesn’t violate our standards. (interview, 30 January, 2018).

⁵ Facebook follows an escalation policy, meaning users who have previously posted material that was reported as violating community guidelines receive longer bans from the site (Gibbs, 2017).

⁶ There have also been claims of racial bias in Facebook moderation as well (Jan & Dwoskin, 2017).

This sense of inequity fuels resentment over Facebook's regulatory standards, which reinforce the hegemonic social structure by blocking criticisms of men. In fact, several participants believe the company's discriminatory approach provides evidence of a growing backlash against women. Comedian Jessica linked the censorship of women on Facebook to recent socio-political changes, including the rise of hashtag social movements:

It seems like a very organized effort is happening, maybe in response to the political climate and #metoo and men getting called out. I don't know what's going on, but it just seems like a woman can't write anything mean about a man, even as a joke, not any women I know, without it getting taken down. (interview, 29 January, 2018).

While these complaints appear to have merit, it is also important to consider the complexity of content moderation on a social media platform as widely used as Facebook. Censors examine posts in a decontextualized manner, which some argue is more likely to be the reason for inconsistent policies than "internalized misogyny" (Lorenz, 2017) on the part of moderators. Since the identity of the user is stripped, and the surrounding context of the post is removed when sent to censors for review, moderators have difficulty interpreting humor or irony, especially as they race to delete an average of 288,000 posts a month that are deemed hate speech (Jan & Dwoskin, 2017). In an article posted on *The Daily Beast*, Taylor Lorenz (2017) explains: "When moderators can't make this distinction they punish innocent parties and embolden trolls." However, power dynamics undergirding posts were seen by interviewees as an important element that shapes the decision about whether content is considered hate speech on the platform.

Notably, participants did not conceptualize their comments as hate speech but rather considered posts such as "Men are Scum" to be a means of "punching up" (interview, 29 January, 2018) and "critiquing the power structure" (interview, 29 January, 2018). Respondents

believed that their posts challenged the patriarchal order they had been socialized into: “There is not an equal balance of men and women for you to even consider it hate speech” (interview, 26 January, 2018). In this manner, they connected their posts to offline power dynamics. Alana asserted that the site’s decontextualized approach fuels discrimination toward women since the platform has established that “misogyny and racism are equal to misandry and ‘reverse-racism’ and they’re ignoring the power structure” (as cited in Reghay, 2017). Ironically, while the policy of hiding personal identifiers associated with posts is employed to protect users, this procedure may harm women who require content moderators to consider the context of their posts, which may be a form of counter-speech and self-defense.

Community Standards and the Perpetuation of Hegemonic Norms

Facebook’s enforcement of community standards is fraught with inconsistency and subjectivity, disproportionately impacting those who are socially marginalized. Rules relating to hate speech indicate the problematic nature of social media self-regulation. Facebook censors monitor posts made against protected categories (i.e., race, sex, gender, religion, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and disability) but do not block comments directed at subsets of protected categories that include intersections of these traits (Angwin & Grassegger, 2017).⁷ Consequently, groups such as white men are protected since both race and gender are defended but subgroups such as female drivers or Muslim children are not protected from hate speech

⁷ The author of this paper experimented with Facebook’s hate speech rules by creating and reporting posts directed at subgroups such as: “Honestly feminism is what is wrong with America” and “Does anyone actually think that female drivers are good?” As predicted, both posts were deemed by Facebook content moderators as compliant with the community standards since feminism does not explicitly refer to women, and “female drivers” is an unprotected subset of the protected category of females. This finding indicates that individuals seeking to perpetuate hate speech can craft their message in such a way to circumvent detection by censors.

since neither the categories of drivers nor children fall under Facebook's classificatory scheme (Angwin & Grassegger, 2017). Further, since content moderation is executed overwhelmingly by humans (rather than artificial intelligence) and because Facebook's rules establish that censors do not have to take down material that addresses subgroups, subjective opinions govern this process. Under such conditions, there is a tendency for conventional views to be upheld as hegemonic norms "mark the boundaries of permissible discourse" (Lears, 1985, p.570) and thus would exclude hate speech directed at dominant groups as outside the bounds of acceptable discussion.

When interviewed, writer/researcher Sommer acknowledged the daunting task of monitoring hate speech on Facebook and how the sheer volume of posts contributes to inconsistent content moderation:

They are processing millions and millions and millions of reports a day. They do it in 30 second increments with very little context with no jurisdictional clarity, with cultural and sociocultural issues that they cannot ever possibly take into account. (interview, 9 February, 2018).

When censors are pressed to make quick decisions using vague guidelines, they are likely to fall upon conventional views of social dynamics to avoid alienating dominant interests. Although moderators are provided with some level of sensitivity training ("Controversial, Harmful and Hateful Speech on Facebook," 2013), interviewee Alana expressed concern that "human biases are not really evaluated or checked in any way" (interview, 23 February, 2018). Thus, Facebook's self-regulation (which is relatively unsupervised) appears to be engineered in such a way as to prop up the hegemonic social order, which limits the expression, comfort, and safety of marginalized groups. As a result, this platform replicates problematic offline social dynamics, placing women at risk instead of adequately protecting them. This pattern runs contrary to Facebook's lofty proclamation: "We want people to feel safe when using Facebook"

(“Community Standards,” n.d.), indicating that this platform’s espoused commitment to user protection may be more ideal than real (exemplifying the pitfalls of CSR).

Several participants linked discriminatory censorship to the demographics of Facebook employees. Statistics from 2017 show that 65% of Facebook’s employees worldwide are male (“Distribution of Facebook employees worldwide from 2014 to 2017, by gender,” 2018), and 89% of employees in the United States (where the company is based) are either white or Asian (“Distribution of Facebook employees in the United States from 2014 to 2017, by ethnicity”). Given the paltry number of female employees, interviewees who had direct contact with Facebook (a rare occurrence) felt that it was manipulative and “calculated” (interview, 23 February, 2018) of the company to have only female employees respond to users about their complaints regarding gender discrimination. Thus, a frequent objection of interviewees was that the positionality of Facebook employees shapes the way this company conceptualizes and responds to hate speech and threats.

While the demographics of Facebook employees worldwide are published, several participants stressed the importance of making the demographics of content moderators transparent. Comedian/paralegal Keesha articulated this concern as follows: “if we don’t know who is flagging and removing posts and censoring them then how are we to trust them?” (interview, 26 January, 2018). Since the demographics of Facebook content moderators may play a key role in shaping the gender dynamics of the platform, it is problematic that the company has not been forthcoming about this information. Additionally, Facebook’s opacity and poor communication with users who file complaints stokes suspicion and distrust.

Facebook as a Face-less Entity: Corporate Social Irresponsibility

A recurrent theme in the interviews was frustration about Facebook's lack of accountability, accessibility, and transparency. Ironically, while Facebook's mission statement is to "give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together" ("About: Business info," n.d.), this social media platform distances itself from its users, intentionally making itself unreachable.

Difficulty connecting to Facebook is particularly problematic when issues related to hate speech and censorship arise. Interviewees were exasperated about their inability to reach Facebook representatives when appealing a ban or gathering information about the censorship process. In fact, only two of the interviewees (the creator of Facebook Jailed and the originator of the "Men are Scum" movement) were successful in getting a response from the company (likely due to the fact that these two individuals were able to drum up attention from the press). Australian photographer Olivia described Facebook's inaccessibility:

The thing is like you get banned on Facebook, you can't contact Facebook. So there is nobody to talk to. There is no human to talk to. You can't email them. Like there is absolutely nothing; you're just banned. And once you're banned once, and you're banned again, your bans just keep adding. (interview, 8 February, 2018).

The fact that a site predicated upon fostering social connection fails to reach back to users in addressing their concerns is not only ironic but is also troubling as it exposes the profit-driven nature of the company (despite its professed commitment to CSR). Ava, a Canadian photographer/doula, considered Facebook's lack of responsiveness to be "disheartening and discouraging" (interview, 14 February, 2018). Interviewees, like Ava, who rely on Facebook for their business were especially frustrated when they could not reach the company to overturn their ban and were therefore unable to use this platform to contact clients.

Interviewees linked their positionality and the gendered nature of their concerns to Facebook's lack of responsiveness. Several women felt disregarded by the company and believed the company's inaccessibility indicated a broader pattern, as reflected by the following statements: "I realized nothing that is racist or sexist against marginalized people matters to Facebook" (interview, 29 January, 2018), "I think the overarching theme is Facebook does not really seem to care at the end of the day about anyone who is not a white male" (interview, 30 January, 2018), and "I think it's about time that Facebook starts listening to their female customers. Women have been pointing this problem out for years and Facebook has always gotten away with ignoring them" (interview, 31 January, 2018). Facebook's refusal to acknowledge the voice of users when they speak up about concerns is particularly troubling and constitutes an implicit form of gender-based censorship on this platform.

Facebook Weaponized by Misogynists

Misogyny on Facebook manifests through both hurtful words and threats on the site. Interviewees recalled countless stories of rape and death threats on this platform and their inability to elicit a response from the site. An acquaintance of Alana had her face Photoshopped to look like she had been battered but was unable to get the site to remove this disturbing image until she involved the press (interview, 23 February, 2018). Similarly, Icelandic Activist Rós described her harrowing experience reposting screen shots of threats against women on Facebook. This outing of misogyny led to pushback from other users as the interviewee subsequently received death threats via phone calls to her house and experienced self-reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Rós declared: "I don't understand a world where men can get away with threatening to rape women but women are punished for re-posting such

threats” (interview, 31 January, 2018). This statement reveals a powerful inequity in which women are penalized for reporting what men said to them, illustrating a tendency for the platform to silence women who try to assert themselves (thereby opposing hegemonic norms) but to protect men who step outside the bounds of civil discourse.

From the perspective of these women, censors harm female users when they delete “warning posts about a specific person who is being predatory” (interview, 26 January, 2018).

Taking down these posts undermines community activism and endangers women.

Comedian/paralegal Keesha told of a friend who had been advised by the local police to make a Facebook post warning other women about a man who threatened her. However, her attempt to provide community protection for other women backfired as “Facebook not only removed her post but also removed the block she made of the man. They removed a block and put a woman at risk” (interview, 26 January, 2018). Unfortunately, the way the company handled this incident directly contradicts Zuckerberg’s stated goal for users to rely on Facebook for community building, indicting a contradiction between the goals of the site and the way the platform is experienced by female users.

Facebook’s inaction with regard to stopping threats against women may be linked to the company’s difficulty evaluating credible threats and its unclear policies regarding such problems. In its review of Facebook’s internal documents, *The Guardian* uncovered that the following posts were not considered serious threats by the company’s censors: “To snap a bitch’s neck, make sure to apply all your pressure to the middle of her throat” and “Little girl needs to keep to herself before daddy breaks her face” (Hopkins, 2017). It is notable that both of these examples reference the female pronoun “her,” leading one to suspect that the gender identity of the receiver may contribute to minimization of the threat. It may be the case that threats against

women are so commonplace (and thus naturalized) that these statements on Facebook are not deemed problematic enough to be removed from the site, which perpetuates abuse against women on the platform.⁸

As a result of the company's repeated failure to respond to inconsistencies, inequities, and threats, some women have resourcefully circumvented Facebook to force change. The creation of Facebook Jailed is one type of protest and workaround system where women found a way to harness the power of the Internet to rally against the abuses of social media companies. In 2013, activists called attention to violent imagery and graphic language on the site by impacting Facebook's advertising profits, which totaled 84% of its global revenue at the time (Fuchs, 2014). Interviewee Sommer was involved in the 2013 petition for Facebook to adopt a stricter stance in blocking threats against women ("Controversial, Harmful and Hateful Speech on Facebook," 2013). After she "tried working with Facebook for about nine months politely and diligently and that went nowhere," Sommer initiated "a campaign that bypassed Facebook" (interview, 9 February, 2018). Along with other activists, she sent companies screen shots of their ads, which were situated next to abusive imagery of women on the site, a strategy that successfully elicited a response. A photo featured in this campaign are shown below:

⁸ This interpretation may be linked to the 2015 Supreme Court case *Elonis v. U.S.* in which the court reversed the conviction of a man who made a threat against his ex-wife on Facebook ("Fold up your [protection-from-abuse order] and put it in your pocket/Is it thick enough to stop a bullet?"). The Court's decision that the standard for subjective intent was not met may have been influenced by the fact that the threat was made against a woman and that the statement was issued on a social media site. Although online threats have been linked to offline violence, there is an undervaluing of this connection in both popular conceptualizations and American jurisprudence.

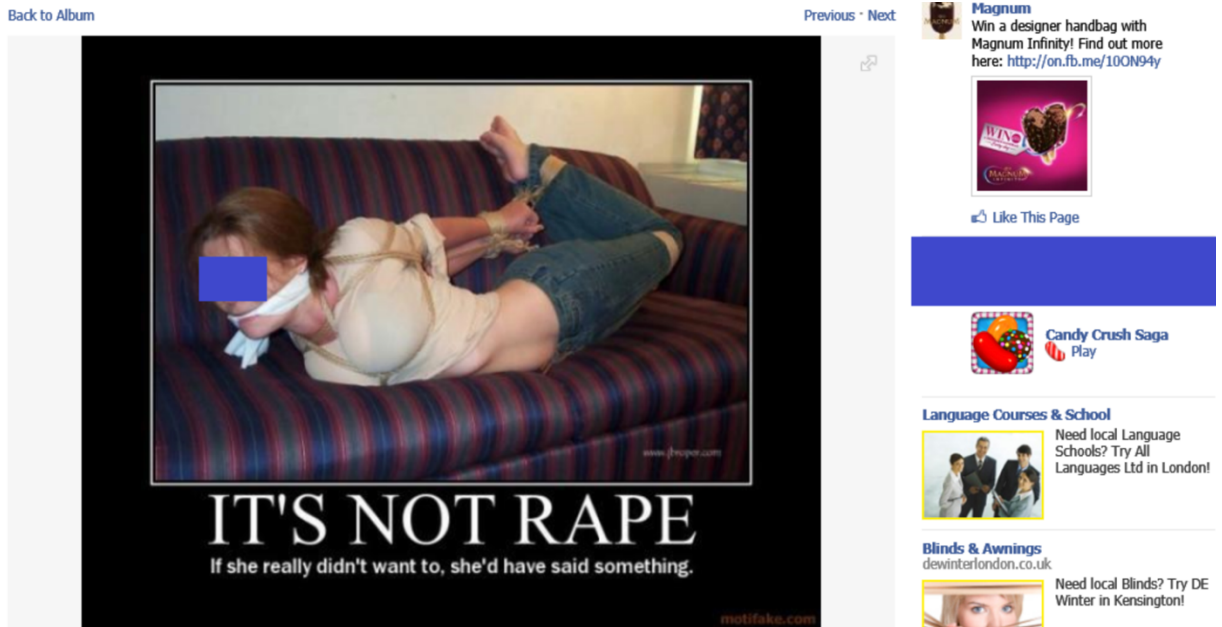


Figure 1: This image, which was sent to advertisers and companies, shows corporations’ paid messages next to graphic imagery of women (“Examples of Gender-Based Hate Speech on Facebook,” n.d.).

As advertising revenue dropped off, Facebook acknowledged the petition and engaged in negotiations with consumer advocacy groups, leading to outcomes such as greater involvement with activists, increased training of censors, and more frequently updated community standards. However, Facebook’s responsiveness to advertisers rather than users reveals the company’s continued focus on the bottom line, demonstrating one of the structural problems of weakly enforced self-regulation. Legal communications scholar Adedayo Abah (2016) explains that CSR is often realized through “lax implementation systems...[which] are known to be self-serving and non-binding” (p.38), disproportionately impacting those who challenge the hegemonic socio-political order. As exemplified by the statements of interviewees, Facebook’s commitment to shareholders and advertisers runs deeper than its responsibility to protect users, illustrating how the intention to safeguard the public may be compromised when CSR exists exclusively as an internal directive.

While the 2013 campaign initially brought much needed reform, interviewees attest to the fact that sexism, threats, and degradation of women on Facebook persist. Facebook's ineffectual response to gendered threats has continued, leading women to fear for their safety on the site, as exemplified by the following quotes: "Facebook is not a place that I can safely express myself on" (interview, 29 January, 2018) and "I as a female very rarely feel safe on Facebook" (interview, 30 January, 2018). When Facebook refuses to adequately police threats against women, this platform implicitly sanctions the censorship of women and increases their vulnerability. In essence, the silence of this company speaks volumes about the disparity between its publicly stated values and the priorities it demonstrates in practice.

Censorship and Speech: Silencing Voices

Facebook's censorship of women reveals and reinforces the gendered nature of speech allocation. In an interview, writer/activist Sommer explained that self-regulation of social media content presupposes "some sort of utopian space where everybody has equal access to speech, which of course we know is not the case" (interview, 9 February, 2018). According to Sommer and several other interviewees, the rhetoric of egalitarian speech on social media sites masks power dynamics that undergird these networks:

So to think that there isn't already socially constructed allocation of speech and its power is false. We know that speech allocations are socially constructed depending on where you stand in the hierarchy of power that is related to money or resources or technology... Your speech is going to be more or less limited. (interview, 9 February, 2018).

Facebook's policies compound this inequity in two ways. First, the site's toleration of hateful language against women operates as a silencing mechanism since "abuse and harassment

diminish free speech” (Bernstein, 2014, p.1). Thus, threats against women and gendered hate speech on Facebook constitute a form of censorship. When women are forced to worry about the offline implications of their statements, they may alter their speech or refuse to speak altogether. Karla Mantilla, managing editor of *Feminist Studies*, locates pernicious Internet practices as part of the broader trajectory of censoring women:

Gendertrolling, then, follows in the long historical tradition of attempting to control women’s access to public and professional spaces, using abuse, harassment, and threats in an effort to silence women’s speech and to intimidate women from fully participating in public discourse. (2015, p.141).

Therefore, Facebook’s regulatory schema and inconsistent policing exacerbate an underlying and enduring tendency to block women’s civic engagement, a pattern that is particularly troubling when one considers the clout, reach, and influence of Facebook globally.

Facebook also silences women through its inconsistent moderation procedures that weigh voices unequally, an inequity that is of great concern in the current socio-cultural climate. Comedian/activist Liz explained how speech represents invaluable currency in the #metoo moment: “as you see the push back, you see who is getting silenced” (interview, 29 January, 2018). Silencing thus operates as a way to perpetuate the status quo, hegemonic norms, and entrenched gender dynamics. Further, censorship on social media marginalizes certain social positions through patterns of “illocutionary disablement” (Langton, 1993, p.319) that dilute the power of a speaker’s words. Comedian Alana expressed a concern of this nature: “you’re censoring the people who need that platform the most and giving more of a voice to the people who already have it” (interview, 23 February, 2018). In this manner, people who require protection online are being blocked by regulatory practices that reinforce the dominant social order. This pattern highlights the importance of reforming Facebook’s content moderation

processes and standards in order to amplify muted voices and to provide for a more democratic and safe social forum.

Conclusion

In a time where social media is used so heavily to share information and spread ideas, the pattern points to pressing questions: Whose voices are amplified and whose are silenced? Who gets to lead conversations about race and gender on the internet? Who is asked to take a seat? (Reghay, 2017).

Facebook isn't some kind of Frankenstein monster beyond social control. Humans can and must intervene. (Pickard, 2018).

In the contemporary moment of social and political polarization, the ability to speak out has taken on renewed importance. However, social media platforms, once conceptualized as utopian spaces (Papacharissi, 2002), have exacerbated underlying tensions as they block speech that opposes prevailing norms. Those who occupy marginalized positionalities are especially impacted by the inconsistent, self-serving, and discriminatory policies of social media sites. As a product of its opaque moderation process and its attempt to create global standards, Facebook has limited women's expression both explicitly and implicitly. Gender-based censorship on Facebook demonstrates one of the major pitfalls of self-regulation and CSR as companies are beholden to shareholders instead of users and are not adequately monitored by external entities. This lack of oversight grants the social media behemoth power to create its own standards (which often align with hegemonic norms) and to enforce such standards on a discretionary basis.

Interviewees offered a variety of suggestions for reforming Facebook's content moderation. Participants expressed a desire for community activists to play a greater role in the creation of regulatory norms. Additionally, some argued for greater transparency by providing users with demographic information about content moderators. When material is being evaluated

by censors, interviewees suggested that moderators should be able to consider the context of given statements and that these individuals should try to make their rulings as consistent as possible across those occupying different subject positions. Interviewees also stressed the importance of an appeals process for users, which would facilitate communication between individuals and corporate representatives, making the company more accountable and accessible. Lastly, participants recommended that this site allow users to inform their Facebook contacts when they have been banned, which would reduce miscommunications and would especially benefit those who use this platform for business.

However, to date, little progress has been made in adjusting Facebook's self-regulation to make it more equitable and gender neutral. Guided more by profit than by social conscience, Facebook perpetuates hegemonic norms rather than harnessing the power of its platform to promote positive social change. If Facebook is unwilling to modify its content moderation process, it risks alienating users who feel unsafe and discriminated against on the site, replicating offline dynamics of silencing and marginalization. To honor its mission statement to "give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together" ("About: Business info," n.d.), Facebook should first examine its own policies and make necessary changes in its infrastructure (Pickard, 2018). It is only when gender-based censorship is rectified that Facebook can be entrusted with amplifying the voices of those who need to be heard.

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