



The strained relationship: How human rights advocates navigate political censorship in social media

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Platforms and censorship

- Social media associated with empowerment, deliberation and freedom of expression.
- Censorship is against these ideals: moderation is invisible and opaque.
- Politicization of platforms: X supports right-wing content, Meta and TikTok want to be “less political”.
- In January 2025, Meta announced a shift in moderation policy: enhancing freedom of speech and permitting hate speech.
- Political censorship usually studied in authoritarian regimes, where activists turn to social media to escape state control.
- Global platforms extend their censorship mechanisms to democratic societies, creating new and unforeseen obstacles to freedom of speech.

Platforms and censorship

- Meta suppresses content about the Palestine-Israel question (Elmimouni et al., 2025).
- Moderation disproportionately directed to marginalized groups (LGBTQ+ identity, race and ethnicity, body size and physical appearance, ability status, class status (Karizat et al., 2025)).
- ‘Algorithmic privilege’: some users benefit from algorithms on the basis of their identities. TikTok prefers white wealthy lifestyle content produced by influencers (Karizat et al., 2025).
- Being moderated raises anger, frustration, even conspiracy theories: The most contested form of moderation shadowbanning.

Digital activism

- Digital activism is linked with social media logic (van Dijck & Poell, 2013).
- The success depends on the visibility granted by platform algorithms.
- Understanding how algorithms function has become a central aspect of social media activism (Cotter, 2019).
- Activists engage in influencer-like strategies and content to please algorithms.
- Marketization and de-politization of messages (Malafaia & Meriluoto, 2022).

This study

- Finnish activists' and political content producers' experiences of political censorship on social media:
 - (1) How censorship manifests on social media?
 - (2) What kinds of content are subject to censorship in the Finnish context?
 - (3) What kinds of explanations activists themselves offer for content removal or restrictions on their activity?
 - (4) To what extent censorship has influenced their behavior on social media?

Procedure & Data

- 15 in-depth interviews with political content producers.
- Searched on Instagram, TikTok, and X using hashtags and terms such as “censorship” and “activism” and contacted via social media.
- Instagram is the most popular platform for activism - also the most frequently mentioned in relation to censorship.
- Palestine, sex and gender minorities, environmental protection, climate change, feminism, anti-racism, anti-capitalism, governmental politics, anti-vaccine, sex work.

Perceptions of censorship

- Human right advocates: Palestine, transgender/sexual minorities.
- Invisible, fast, automated, unaccountable
- Videos receive only few views compared to normal.
- Not removal of accounts or content, but strange errors and technical mistakes: Not found on For You -page or search, sharing, commenting, uploading content, doing livestream not possible.
- During regional elections 2025, ads did not go through on Meta.

Resisting censorship

- An ongoing struggle for freedom of expression on social media.
- Activists developed shared knowledge on how to resist and circumvent algorithmic suppression.
- Misleading the algorithm, taking breaks, posting non-political, harmless content when they noticed a drop in visibility.
- One interviewee referred to this practice of posting selfies, pictures of pets, and nature as “cleaning the algorithm.” After a while, visibility would return, allowing activist content to be posted again.

Maximizing visibility

- Activists form insider groups to promote each other's posts (e.g., Cotter, 2019).
- Viewcount raised through active engagement (commenting on posts with at least three words, creating joint authorship posts, tailoring content to appeal to the algorithm).
- One activist describes how they strategically create action videos featuring visuals of police and protesters at demonstrations, which have become popular among non-activist audiences.

Conflict of values

- Activists are balancing in the intersection of commercial and political logic through manipulating and pleasing algorithms.
- They strategically mix political content with platform-friendly influencer-like content to keep visibility and avoid censorship.
- Activists need visibility for their cause, not for themselves: it is important to get the message spread beyond followers.
- Censorship is not silencing activists, on the contrary it is fueling the resistance and creativity.
- Power asymmetry: activists need social media but platforms are unreliable and reduce activist content.

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