

Decoding Algorithmic Suppression: How Digital Activists Uncover and Navigate Platform Censorship in Finland?

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Platforms and censorship

- Visibility-driven activism: activists have to increasingly consider platform algorithms.
- Platforms have shifted to algorithmic content reduction and limiting the visibility instead of deleting/deplatforming (Gillespie, 2022).
- **Surveillance capitalism:** silencing suspicious or low value content enables the platform to continue its data collection and surveillance on the users, even when they are silenced (Blunt et al., 2020).

Platforms and censorship

- Political censorship is usually studied in authoritarian regimes: activists turn to social media to escape state-controlled media.
- When global platforms extend their censorship mechanisms to democratic societies, they create new and unforeseen obstacles for freedom of speech.
- Private-owned platforms have the right to control content, but it has become a threat for political expression.

Platforms and censorship

- Moderation disproportionately directed to marginalized groups: LGBTQ+ identity, ethnic minorities, lower socio-economic class (e.g., Karizat et al. 2025).
- Activists in MENA region and Black Lives Matter movement (Elmimouni et al. 2025; Blunt et al. 2020).
- Those who are already marginalized remain underrepresented in social media as well.

This study

- What happens when global platforms extend their moderation practices to different social settings?
- 30 persons were contacted via social media. Their topics varied: LGBTQ+, environment, animal rights, feminism, antiracism, anticapitalism, disability, Palestine, anti-immigration, anti-vaccine, etc.
- 15 in-depth interviews (11 female, 2 male, 2 non-binary; aged 25-56 years).
- Instagram is the most popular platform for activism - also the most frequently mentioned in relation to censorship.

Perceptions of censorship

- Social justice topics: Palestine, transgender, gender diversity.
- Sudden decline in visibility and follower engagement.
- Strange technical disruptions (invisibility on search or algorithmic recommendations, followers removed, videos became blurred, sharing, commenting, or uploading content, doing livestreams not possible).

*“There are all these little bugs, I don’t really know if they’re censorship—like they’re kind of meant to annoy you or interfere with what you’re trying to do. **There’s a clear attempt to discourage you from putting too much effort into pushing the issue forward.**”*

- Under regional elections in spring 2025, campaign ads did not go through on Meta.

Resisting censorship

Activists collectively developed ways to mislead the algorithm:

- Avoiding texts, presenting text on signs rather than as caption, detaching speech and images, semantic distortion of words “G4Z4”, taking breaks from social media.

Influencer-like strategies to maximize visibility and circumvent censorship.

- Selfies, pictures of pets and nature to “clean the algorithm.” After a while, visibility returns, allowing activist content to be posted again.
- Artificial boosting through coordinated likes and comments, collective authorship with popular accounts.

Folk Theories about censorship

Platforms want to appear non-political and support commercial lifestyle content instead of controversial content.

“As Meta’s platforms have increasingly become driven by advertising and capitalism, moving away from their original idea, social media has turned into something entirely different—market driven. And things like genocide or discrimination simply don’t sell.”

Platforms align with the U.S. government politics.

“I’ve been doing activism related to gender minorities on TikTok for many years, and I haven’t had any problems. I’d say it began around the time of the U.S. presidential election. The biggest issue has been with sharing political content—no matter what I say, even if I’m not talking about their politics at all, my content is still under constant review.”

Conclusion

- Platforms are a "necessary evil": Activists need popular platforms to reach large audiences and maximize visibility.
- Concerns of individualization, commercialization and depolitization of activism (e.g., Malafaia & Meriluoto, 2024) are not supported in this study.
- Adapting to algorithms is a necessity.
- What may appear as light influencer content carries a deeper significance: resisting the suppression of political content.

References

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