

Human Rights Watch reports mass censorship of opposition to Gaza genocide

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Human Rights Watch (HRW) released a report on Thursday alleging that the social media company Meta, which owns Facebook and Instagram, has engaged in “systematic censorship” of pro-Palestinian content on its platforms before and during the US-backed Israeli campaign of genocide in Gaza.

The fifty-one page document entitled “Meta’s Broken Promises” reveals that two of the most active social media sites in the world—Facebook has over 3 billion users and Instagram has 2 billion users—have engaged in long-standing censorship of posts and accounts expressing support for Palestinians, and this censorship has been intensified since October 7.

In a press release published Wednesday, HRW says its report “documents a pattern of undue removal and suppression of protected speech including peaceful expression in support of Palestine and public debate about Palestinian human rights.” This evaluation is based on HRW’s review of 1,050 cases of online censorship from over 60 countries.

Human Rights Watch is a non-governmental organization founded in 1978 that conducts research and advocacy on human rights internationally. The New York City-based organization publishes reports on violations of the rights and freedoms of all human beings as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948.

Among the patterns of social media censorship identified by HRW is content removal, suspension or deletion of accounts, inability to engage with content, inability to follow or tag accounts and “shadow banning” or decreasing the visibility of a specific users posts or stories. Meanwhile, many of the censored users were not permitted to appeal the decisions to remove their posts or accounts because the appeal mechanism

malfunctioned.

The HRW press statement points out that Meta was informed in 2021 of its censorship of the discussion of human rights issues pertaining to Israel and Palestine, and the platforms were “silencing many people arbitrarily and without explanation.” In a response, Meta claimed that its content moderation practices “appear” to adversely impact the rights of Palestinian users. In 2022, Meta’s Oversight Board claimed it would address the issue. However, the new report demonstrates that the censorship of pro-Palestinian views has been intensified.

Deborah Brown, acting associate technology and human rights director at HRW commented on the findings of the report, saying, “Meta’s censorship of content in support of Palestine adds insult to injury at a time of unspeakable atrocities and repression already stifling Palestinians’ expression. Social media is an essential platform for people to bear witness and speak out against abuses while Meta’s censorship is furthering the erasure of Palestinians’ suffering.”

The summary of the HRW report characterizes the censorship of content related to Palestine on Instagram and Facebook as “systemic and global.” As to the “underlying, systemic factors that contributed to the censorship,” the report identified four sources including “flaws in Meta policies” that identified support for Palestinians as Dangerous Organizations and Individuals (DOI); “inconsistent and opaque application of Meta policies;” “deference to requests by governments for content removals, such as requests by Israel’s Cyber Unit and other countries’ internet referral units to remove content” and heavy reliance on “automated tools for content removal to moderate or translate Palestine-related content.”

The third of these underlying causes points directly to

the political forces behind the censorship of pro-Palestinian social media content by Meta. The report states, “According to media reports on November 14, Israel’s Cyber Unit sent Meta and other platforms 9,500 content takedown requests since October 7, 2023, 60 percent of which went to Meta. Platforms are reported to have responded with a 94-percent compliance rate, according to an Israeli official.”

In other words, while Israel’s intelligence agencies have lied to the public repeatedly—from the facts of what took place on October 7 to the scale and scope of the genocide in Gaza—Facebook and Instagram have complied with thousands of requests from the Israeli state to take down social media posts, including those documenting Palestinian suffering or death.

HRW reported that attempts to contact the Israeli Cyber Unit to learn specifics about the posts that were targeted for takedown were not responded to.

In a statement released to the Guardian, Meta said that it makes errors that are “frustrating” to people, but “the implication that we deliberately and systemically suppress a particular voice is false. Claiming that one thousand examples, out of the enormous amount of content posted about the conflict, are proof of ‘systemic censorship’ may make for a good headline, but that doesn’t make the claim any less misleading.”

The documenting of systematic censorship by Facebook and Instagram against pro-Palestinian content by HRW, regardless of the size of the sample and whatever the technical issues involved, exposes the collaboration of Meta, a \$1 trillion corporation, with the political establishment and corporate media in pushing the US-Israeli propaganda that is justifying ethnic cleansing in Gaza.



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