

Forbidden in France: the words 'Twitter' and 'Facebook'

A new French law forbids domestic TV and radio broadcasters from using the names of the two American social media giants in an attempt to prevent 'clandestine advertising.' But media experts and commentators call the ban 'chauvinist,' 'out of touch,' and 'stupid.'

By [Robert Marquand](#), Staff writer / June 7, 2011



France announced a new restrictive ban on the words 'Facebook' and 'Twitter' in French media.

PHOTO: Melanie Stetson Freeman/Staff, ILLUSTRATION: Jacob Turcotte/Staff
PARIS

“There are rules you must respect,” say French officials about a new restrictive ban on the words “Facebook” and “Twitter” in French media.

The ban announced by France’s audiovisual authority aims to stop “clandestine advertising” of the two American social media giants, and is the latest in a long history of attempts to regulate images and words ranging from “e-mail” to Coke in La Republique.

Yet initial reaction from French bloggers and reporters shows scant love or respect for official efforts to excise Facebook and Twitter – words that for better or worse have become common currency here.

IN PICTURES: Top 10 countries that say Internet access is a basic right “Tweeter” (meaning “to tweet”), for example, is now a verb entered into Robert’s French dictionary as a new word last year. Various meetings and social gatherings in France are carried off as “Facebook events.”

“This decision is not only stupid and hypocritical, it is also scary because behind the legal alibi, it reeks of anti-Americanism, chauvinism, and a complete misunderstanding of today's world,” says Karim Emile Bitar, a frequent commentator on French affairs at aParis think tank.

'Out of touch'

Under laws announced May 27 and that went largely unnoticed until this week, French TV and radio employees must use a generic phrase like “social network” or “reseaux sociaux,” rather than Facebook or Twitter. Exceptions involve citing sources of information, as one might use the newspapers [Le Monde](#) or [Le Figaro](#) to cite the origin of a news story.

A chorus of French media mavens argue the law is a parochial effort that forcibly constricts speech to preserve a French sense of control over commerce and cultural sensibility.

SOUND OFF: [How would you respectfully describe Facebook or Twitter, without using their names?](#)

Defenders say that Facebook and Twitter have become too invasive and the laws protect social media small fry from being crushed.

“Why give preference to Facebook, which is worth billions of dollars, when there are many other social networks that are struggling for recognition? This would be a distortion of competition,” [Christine Kelly](#), board member of the [French Superior Audiovisual Council](#) (CSA) that made the ruling. “If we allow Facebook and Twitter to be cited on air, it’s opening a Pandora’s Box – other social networks will complain to us saying, ‘why not us?’”

[French President Nicolas Sarkozy](#) met with Facebook founder [Mark Zuckerberg](#) at the [G-8 summit](#) here just days ago for a photo opportunity. But [Pierre Haski](#), the editor of the online French daily Rue 89, says that beyond that celebrity moment, France is showing itself as “out of touch” thanks to the new law.

“The disruptive effect of the Web has come as a surprise to the cozy and well-organized relationship within the French establishment, including the news media industry,” Mr. Haski writes.

Verbal gymnastics

On a Monday drive-time radio talk program on France Inter, journalists in the studio wisecracked on air over what they called a ludicrous law. One said that Facebook had become enshrined in the global lexicon through such events as the “Arab spring,” and ended by noting that he had used the word Facebook some 24 times and Twitter some 18 times on air.

On French Internet industry website Transeet, a blogger named Mansour Youn pointed out Monday that media presenters will now have to perform awkward verbal gymnastics or “find circumlocutions” to describe simple references to Facebook or Twitter.

“This measure has sparked off an uproar from different media which, in order to spite the CSA, have been defying the ban,” he added.