

The New York Times | <https://nyti.ms/2afhRI9>

TECHNOLOGY

Twitter Bars Milo Yiannopoulos in Wake of Leslie Jones's Reports of Abuse

By MIKE ISAAC JULY 20, 2016

SAN FRANCISCO — For years, one of the main grievances among Twitter users has been the ability of anonymous trolls to send abusive comments to other people on the service.

But on Tuesday, Twitter barred one of the most egregious and consistent offenders of its terms of service, Milo Yiannopoulos, in an attempt to show that it is cracking down on abuse.

The ban against Mr. Yiannopoulos, a technology editor at the conservative news site Breitbart and known by his Twitter handle, @Nero, follows a campaign of prolonged abuse against Leslie Jones, a comedian and co-star of the recently released “Ghostbusters” movie. The film and its stars have come under fire from various parts of the internet for months, after it was first revealed that the reboot of the 1984 film would feature an all-female cast.

Ms. Jones in particular has borne the brunt of the online abuse in recent days, especially since the release of “Ghostbusters” in the United States on Friday. Hundreds of anonymous Twitter commenters hurled racist and sexist remarks at the star’s Twitter account, rallied and directed by Mr. Yiannopoulos this week. The news

media picked up on the abuse after Ms. Jones began retweeting screenshots of the litany of comments sent to her over the past few days.

On Monday evening, Ms. Jones quit using Twitter with a final message of exasperation after days of near-nonstop abuse. “I leave Twitter tonight with tears and a very sad heart,” Ms. Jones tweeted. “All this cause I did a movie.”

In a statement, a Twitter spokesman said: “People should be able to express diverse opinions and beliefs on Twitter. But no one deserves to be subjected to targeted abuse online, and our rules prohibit inciting or engaging in the targeted abuse or harassment of others.”

Twitter did not comment directly on Mr. Yiannopoulos’s account or actions of the past 48 hours, but the spokesman said over that period, “We’ve seen an uptick in the number of accounts violating these policies and have taken enforcement actions against these accounts, ranging from warnings that also require the deletion of tweets violating our policies to permanent suspension.”

In a brief interview on Tuesday evening, Mr. Yiannopoulos said, “This is the beginning of the end for Twitter.”

“Some people are going to find this perfectly acceptable,” he said. “Anyone who believes in free speech or is a conservative certainly will not.”

The move stops short of providing Twitter’s 300-million-plus users with effective tools to combat trolls and abuse on a much larger scale, an issue that celebrities and everyday users alike deal with on a regular basis.

In the past, Twitter, the San Francisco-based social media company, has faced criticism for its handling of the so-called GamerGate controversy, as women in the gaming community were increasingly harassed on Twitter — often to the point of receiving death threats — in the wake of a dispute in the online gaming community.

Twitter has said that dealing with abuse and “trust and safety” issues is one of its top priorities, though it has not detailed how it will handle the issues in the future.

“We know many people believe we have not done enough to curb this type of behavior on Twitter,” the company said in a statement. “We agree.”

Twitter said it is investing in improving its tools and enforcement systems, and is in the process of reviewing its hateful conduct policies “to prohibit additional types of abusive behavior and allow more types of reporting, with the goal of reducing the burden on the person being targeted,” according to a statement. Twitter said it expected to detail more of that in the coming weeks.

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