

Meta censors pro-Palestinian views on a global scale, report claims

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Meta has engaged in a “systemic and global” censorship of pro-Palestinian content since the outbreak of the Israel-Gaza war on 7 October, according to a new report from Human Rights Watch (HRW). In a scathing 51-page report, the organization documented and reviewed more than a thousand reported instances of Meta removing content and suspending or permanently banning accounts on Facebook and Instagram. The company exhibited “six key patterns of undue censorship” of content in support of Palestine and Palestinians, including the taking down of posts, stories and comments; disabling accounts; restricting users’ ability to interact with others’ posts; and “shadow banning”, where the visibility and reach of a person’s material is significantly reduced, according to HRW. Examples it cites include content originating from more than 60 countries, mostly in English, and all in “peaceful support of Palestine, expressed in diverse ways”. Even HRW’s own posts seeking examples of online censorship were flagged as spam, the report said. “Censorship of content related to Palestine on Instagram and Facebook is systemic and global [and] Meta’s inconsistent enforcement of its own policies led to the erroneous removal of content about Palestine,” the group said in the report, citing “erroneous implementation, overreliance on automated tools to moderate content, and undue government influence over content removals” as the roots of the problem. In a statement to the Guardian, Meta acknowledged it makes errors that are “frustrating” for people, but said that “the implication that we deliberately and systemically suppress a particular voice is false. Claiming that 1,000 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. Meta said it was the only company in the world to have publicly released human rights due diligence on issues related to Israel and Palestine . “This report ignores the realities of enforcing our policies globally during a fast-moving, highly polarized and intense conflict, which has led to an increase in content being reported to us. Our policies are designed to give everyone a voice while at the same time keeping our platforms safe,” the company’s statement reads. It is the second time this month that Meta has been challenged over accusations that it routinely silences pro-Palestinian content and voices. Last week Elizabeth Warren, Democratic senator for Massachusetts, wrote to Meta’s co-founder and chief executive officer, Mark Zuckerberg, demanding information following hundreds of reports from Instagram users dating back to October that their content was demoted or removed, and their accounts subjected to shadow banning. On Tuesday, Meta’s oversight board said the company had been wrong to remove two videos of the conflict in particular from Instagram and Facebook. The board said the videos were valuable for “informing the world about human suffering on both sides”. One showed the aftermath of an airstrike near al-Shifa hospital in Gaza via

Instagram, the other a woman being taken hostage during the 7 October attack via Facebook. The clips were reinstated. Users of Meta's products have documented what they say is technological bias in favor of pro-Israel content and against pro-Palestinian posts. Instagram's translation software replaced "Palestinian" followed by the Arabic phrase "Praise be to Allah" to "Palestinian terrorists" in English. WhatsApp's AI, when asked to generate images of Palestinian boys and girls, created cartoon children with guns, whereas its images Israeli children did not include firearms.