A Human Rights Watch Investigation Finds That Facebook Wrongfully Suppressed Content Regarding Israeli Abuses Against Palestinians

Human Rights Watch (HRW) has issued a report highlighting social media giant Facebook's removal and censorship of content relating to Israeli human rights abuses against Palestinians, including violations such as airstrikes on civilian targets in Gaza which took place earlier this year during Israeli-Palestinian hostilities in May. The Israeli abuses also consisted of brutal suppression of peaceful demonstrators, assaults on places of worship, and efforts to forcibly expel Palestinians from their generational homes. Activists are particularly alarmed with Facebook's behavior since the escalation in violence several months back prompted people to turn to social media as a means of documenting and raising awareness regarding the reprehensible Israeli actions. In this digital age, citizens all over the world often rely on widely-used platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and others to bring attention to important human rights and social justice concerns. While many strive to utilize Facebook and its other affiliated websites for fair and impartial evidence collection, the measures taken by the tech company display questionable manipulation of information in certain instances.

On Instagram especially, which is owned by Facebook, the algorithm for "acceptable" content seemingly targeted posts that showed or expressed concern with Israeli military actions in illegally-occupied Palestinian territory. It appears as though Facebook even targeted mainstream posts such as one New York Times' Instagram upload that showed pro-Palestinian protests with a sign reading "never concede your rights." In another instance, a post was taken down from a Palestinian account that captioned a destroyed home with commentary stating that it was targeted by Israeli missiles in the Gaza Strip. These posts were ridiculously marked as supposed forms of hate speech and were taken down citing "community standards" relating to this type of content, when in fact it is clear that they did not actually violate any such criteria. Despite Facebook's claims that these instances were merely coincidences and errors in the algorithm that led to them being flagged, advocates have expressed doubt about this since there seems to be an obvious pattern of one-sided post removals relating to the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

While Facebook and other social media companies are private corporations, the information that can be relayed to the public via these sites cannot be overstated. Much of the world's news consumption in this day and age comes from platforms like Facebook and Twitter and therefore it is relevant that they ensure the right to information. Of course, there are blatant posts which contain manipulative misinformation on various subjects and need to be taken down, however documentation posts and mere reporting of real-life events – no matter the victim or the perpetrator – should be able to be displayed on these sites to educate and inform the general population.

This week's development relating to Palestinian-Israeli content comes as Facebook has already been under fire for larger scale cultural issues regarding the morality of those making high-level decisions at the company. Recently, a whistleblower came forward with documentation claiming that Facebook knows the site is being used to dread hateful and destructive messaging, but the powers that be have favored financial benefits over this concern. Thus, there are legitimate fears that Facebook has not done all it can to ensure the company plays a responsible role in the global social justice environment. Ultimately, the clear pattern in which selective posts relating to specific subjects are suppressed should be addressed, and investigations like the one carried out by HRW are at least a helpful step in bringing this to light and putting pressure on large corporations like Facebook to abide by fair and consistent standards.