

Why Governments, Not Markets, Need to Address Platform Harms

Centre for Media, Technology and Democracy

The Facebook ad boycott continues to escalate with hundreds of [major companies](#) like Adidas, Coca-Cola, Ford, Microsoft, Starbucks, and even Canada's [five big banks](#) pulling their ads from the social media platform for the foreseeable future. With many powerful people, including the CEO of the World Federation of Advertisers, calling this a [turning point](#) and asserting that this action is different from those in the past, the real question is what change will come of it.

While the boycott kicked off in June by a group called [#StopHateForProfit](#) in response to Facebook's refusal to act on the racist and hateful content on its platform, including posts made by U.S. President Donald Trump, [the roots of the issue go much deeper](#). The problems that civil rights groups have with Facebook and how it allows racism to grow and disseminate through its platform are longstanding; there were simply a confluence of factors that made the present moment the right time to take more aggressive action to try to force the company, and specifically CEO Mark Zuckerberg, to change its policies. The President of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a leading U.S. civil rights organization, has pinpointed this moment as "a clear and present [danger to our democracy](#)," in part because Facebook leadership is "allowing their platform to be used as a gathering point to meet, recruit and plan out harm against communities."

Journalist Julia Carrie Wong wrote in a recent op-ed in The Guardian about her [experience with hate on Facebook](#) after reporting on white nationalist groups on the platform. After Wong provided them with a list of the groups on Facebook, the platform failed to take action forcing Wong to endure "a vicious, weeks-long campaign of racist and sexist harassment." She challenged the assertion made by [Facebook executive Nick Clegg](#) in response to the boycott that the good outweighs the bad by citing Facebook's role in the Myanmar genocide against the Rohingya and the organizing carried out by far-right extremists in the United States as two examples. She expressed that Facebook will only act on "the real and devastating costs of [its] algorithmic negligence" when its revenues are threatened, but even a boycott of this scale may not make enough of a dent.

With pressure escalating, Facebook is digging in. In a recent employee meeting, Zuckerberg [asserted](#), "We're not gonna change our policies or approach on anything because of a threat to a small percent of our revenue, or to any percent of our revenue." The boycott is expected to have affected less than 5 percent of Facebook's revenue, and its stock price is doing just fine. That's in part because [76 percent of ad spending](#) on Facebook is by small- and medium-sized businesses which are not as likely to pull their ads. After a meeting between Zuckerberg and civil rights groups on July 7, it became even more clear the company wasn't backing down. Free Press Co-CEO Jessica Gonzalez said Facebook's leaders "delivered [the same old talking points](#) to try to placate us without meeting our demands."

The question, then, is where things go from here. On the July 6 episode of the CBC's [Front Burner podcast](#), Director Taylor Owen explains that the effect of the boycott will be limited because Facebook and Google have an effective duopoly on the digital ad market that's almost impossible to break. He believes that the focus of activists shouldn't be on short-term changes to moderation policies, but rather on forcing governments to write and implement regulations to govern social media platforms so they serve the interests of the broader society. An example of

what that might look like are [the laws passed in Germany](#) in 2018 to force platforms to remove hate speech and illegal material, or face \$60 million fines. In response, people all over the world changed their Twitter location to Germany to get white supremacist and fascist content out of their feeds.

These laws won't look the same everywhere though, and that's a challenge when dealing with platforms that effectively span the globe. Owen explained that in some countries social media allows a degree of free speech that citizens don't otherwise have, while in others the platforms have more of a negative impact. He notes that [Facebook's abuses are much easier to ignore](#) when they take place outside the United States. There were no boycotts when Facebook enabled the [Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte](#) to harass journalists, nor when Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro used it to spread dehumanizing speech.

Any new laws or regulations will thus have different outcomes in different parts of the world, and that should be taken into account when they're being drafted. This consideration is one of the ways platform companies continue to assert that they're better left unregulated so they can respond to the unique conditions of the countries in which they operate; but it's clear they're not doing a good enough job.

The price of their unregulated platforms and their inability to properly address the hate that flourishes on them require a regulatory response. Whether the United States can produce one under the current political moment remains to be seen, but that shouldn't stop other countries like Canada from drafting their own. It's time for a firm say in how the platforms operate within Canada's borders.