Social Media Hate Speech: Opinion
10 July 2020

Here in New Zealand we have all had to face up to the consequences of Facebook and it's global reach, particularly during the Mosque attack, and the live streaming of the attack that took place in Christchurch, March 2019, on the platform of Facebook. But the whole world is now waking up to the issues of hate speech on social media, and realising the impact that this is having on a large proportion of our global population. While social media platforms can be a means to spread helpful information, they can also be used as powerful magnifiers of hate-based or damaging misinformation.

Governments have been trying to curb such uses by proposing new laws, and Facebook and other social media companies have been making attempts to modify their policies, or software, to increase their capacity at spotting what they consider to be dangerous content unsuitable for further distribution. Because these forums are live, and the content can be added instantly, the problem appears to be both a huge technical and moral challenge.

However, Facebook may be missing a simple change to the way their forum operates, which could rectify the whole issue.

Why are Facebook suffering such a large public and advertiser backlash? Because they are taking ownership of the content on their forum. Effectively they are allowing anyone to retain their own public comments on their forum, unless Facebook themselves decide otherwise. It is in opting to make that judgment call, and thereby taking ownership of the content, which leads to a raft of internal policy requirements, and the need for a large filtering team and filtering software, which can never meet everyone's criteria for what constitutes a 'safe' message. Consequently, many people get annoyed or feel abused when something bad is posted by another person; particularly so when Facebook will not agree to remove it. Facebook becomes a publisher when they take ownership of the content, or start making judgment calls over the content itself.

If, instead, they allowed any person on the site to remove any other person's comments, which is a practical step, would it not allow for a much safer forum? Facebook's mantra of 'free speech' may not be entirely met. The platform itself would not have 'ownership' of those comments, and any author who makes public comments would need to be prepared for their comment to be removed by anyone else at any time, which forces the author to publish a balanced comment and make their argument sound. In this structure, nobody can blame the moderator (Facebook), as such, because every other author is a potential moderator and has that power. If the original comment is unbalanced or dangerous, it will disappear pretty quickly at the hands of the readership. Overall, it would lead to the retention of softer conversations and more trustworthy information on the social platforms.

This approach may lead to the potential for particular, none-the-less important, messages being stamped out altogether, for example in politically-charged discussion topics. If this is the case, whoever is trying to get that message out may need to choose a different topic-based forum on one of the public services, start their own forum with different characteristics using one of the open software tools available, or perhaps choose a different medium altogether.

At AtomJump, which is a non-profit, alternative platform to Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter, we are testing the 'anyone can delete' reasoning out on our public forums at https://atomjump.com. Additionally, being New Zealand-based and self-hosted, we can try this approach in smaller numbers, here in New Zealand, first, and confirm the approach works, before spreading it internationally. The AtomJump Foundation would really appreciate any feedback on this approach from local users.