

Dear Members of the Committee,

My name is Katerina Klawes. I am a Michigan resident and have lived in Michigan almost my entire life. Like many if not most of my fellow Michigan citizens, I use social media to communicate with friends and family on a daily basis. I offer this testimony of my own experience with censorship on social media.

Virtually everyone that uses social media has some familiarity with the censorship policies, because they or someone they know has experienced censorship online in one form or another. Social networks are seen as hyper-sensitive and intolerant of the slightest infraction.

I can provide two specific instances where my own statements were censored on social media – and not because they were obscene, violent, or inappropriate in the slightest.

I was a student at Northern Michigan University in the summer of 2014 when I was sexually assaulted for the second time in my life. Shortly after the assault, I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Despite this diagnosis, I went on to serve as the student government President, kept my grades up, and began speaking about my experiences as a sexual assault survivor.

In March 2015, I received an email from the Assistant Dean of Students stating that I would be disciplined under University policy if I shared any thoughts of suicide or self-harm with other students.

The wording of the policy was ambiguous; I felt that I was being told to stop talking to others about my assault and the effect it had on me, as well as any other subject the administration felt might cast the university in a negative light. My university was imposing a gag order on many different students, including sexual assault survivors like me.

This gag order imposed by my university made me feel alone at a time when I most needed my friends. I closed myself off from speaking to anyone for fear of retaliation. My grades suffered.

In this difficult time, I reached out online to my friends and family through Facebook. I made a post discussing my sexual assault and my efforts to change NMU's policy. This post described my struggles as a sexual assault victim and a story about NMU's policy. All of this information was newsworthy and indeed outlets such as NY Magazine and Huffington Post covered my story. This eventually led to a U.S. Department of Justice investigation that resulted in NMU paying a fine and changing their policy as part of a settlement.

In the meantime, I received a message from Facebook less than 24 hours after I made my post. Facebook informed me that my post had been removed removed for violating their community standards for "harassment."

Because Facebook would not provide any further explanation, I can only speculate whether university officials had my post “flagged” for harassment or if it was some innocent mistake on Facebook’s part. I do know the information I shared was well within Facebook’s stated community guidelines. I violated no policy.

Nonetheless, it took nearly 3 weeks for the post to be reinstated. During the very time when my name was in the news, I was unable to speak out about the conduct of my university.

Facebook never offered an explanation as to why my post was censored in the first place.

After being silenced by my university I was also silenced by Facebook.

The second instance of censorship was very different, but just as bizarre. In 2018, I taught students at Bothwell Middle School in Marquette, Michigan as a part of my teaching training program. I had planned lessons teaching 8th grade students about the Holocaust. I had carefully selected materials and videos to supplement my lessons.

While reading “Night,” a novel on the Holocaust, I had planned to show a video showing students what concentration camps looked like. Many of the students had told me that they could not picture what they looked like. (Many of the students had not even heard of the Holocaust.)

I had researched the video materials and chosen the videos weeks ahead of time. Yet when it was time to play the YouTube videos in the classroom, they had been removed.

I tried finding other videos, but many others had also been removed. It threw off the lesson plan. The message displayed on the videos was “This account has been terminated due to multiple or severe violations of YouTube’s policy prohibiting hate speech.”

I was left having to explain what this meant. I struggled to explain to my students why the videos were gone. Instead of a learning experience for students based on the content of the videos, we had an impromptu discussion on what was happening before us. Many students were upset by YouTube’s decision because they felt it meant that the Holocaust would be more likely to be forgotten.

To be clear, the videos that I hoped to show included general information on the Holocaust, WWII Nazi propaganda, and relevant modern videos on racism. They were not “hate speech”; they were educational videos.

This experience has left me wondering how much history will be erased in the quest to eliminate hatred. Hatred can’t be eliminated by censorship, but only by dialogue and discourse that needs to be allowed to continue.

I would later find out that at least one creator of a similarly-censored video, Marc Schulman, described YouTube’s censorship from his perspective:

[begin quote]

"YouTube Wants to Fight Hate Speech. So It Censored My Educational Video About the Holocaust"
<https://www.newsweek.com/youtube-holocaust-censorship-hate-speech-google-facebook-1444090>

This isn't about money. The video is not monetized, nothing is earned from it. My website, HistoryCentral.Com is explicitly designed to help middle and high school students learn about history. I have taught students in both age groups, including teaching 8th graders about the Holocaust. The video in question is indeed a bit graphic. It contains a clip from captured German archival films of the actual mass killings of Jews by the Einsatzgruppen death squads. Despite the horror, this historic footage is not something high school students should be barred from viewing. I appealed the verdict using the 100 character form YouTube provides.

Within three hours, YouTube sent a response that their initial decision held. This episode raises a larger question about the dilemmas created by having two monopolies, i.e., Google and Facebook, control the flow of information throughout the globe (except for China.) They are far from the only problematic monopolies created during the last decades (just take Amazon). But Google and Facebook are unique. They don't control commodities, they control information, and their founders still control their companies—thanks to special voting rights their stocks provide.

The power of Google and Facebook creates three sets of problems and addressing one challenge often exacerbates the others. The first problem has now become the most well-known—i.e., the ability by some users to utilize these platforms to manipulate information, spread fake news, and influence elections. Russian use of digital social networks throughout the 2016 US Presidential election is well-documented, and by all accounts, successful. In that same vein, the algorithms of both YouTube and Facebook, designed to keep users engaged on their platform by showing more of whatever appears to be of interest, has contributed to the radicalization of political views worldwide. (No better examination of this phenomenon exists than in the excellent New York Times feature by Kevin Roose, *The Making of a YouTube Radical.*)

The second problem is in trying to fix these and other issues, both Google and Facebook have taken on the role of "Censors-in-Chief." They have taken it upon themselves to regulate societal norms—e.g., that high schoolers should not be subjected to graphic images, including those of the Holocaust. They also act as gatekeepers, to ensure that—as YouTube describes it —members of "Protected Classes" are not defamed or attacked by any of their videos. And alongside societal judgment calls, YouTube works hard to remove truly dangerous videos, like those produced by terrorists calling for attacks against potential targets.

During one-quarter of 2018 alone, YouTube removed 58 million videos. But how does a private, for-profit company make such decisions? Beyond relying on AI, which has its own sets of issues, Google has not retained a team of Harvard trained social scientists to review the videos they host. These decisions are often made by subcontracted, overworked, underpaid employees in who are given a set of guidelines and must do their best to reach quick determinations. Who sets the overarching guidelines? Did YouTube recruit a blue ribbon commission of the best and brightest philosophers and educators for this important tasks? No, these guidelines have been set internally.

[end quote]

In conclusion, Internet censorship isn't just about political opinions, or picking winners and losers in advertising and marketing. It affects ordinary people too –people that make videos to teach children, people that use the Internet for personal enjoyment, and people that need to speak out about harm done to them. And a censored Internet also has less to offer their audiences.

I support House Bill 4801 because it would require that social networks either honor the standard they claim to uphold, to be neutral and not be censoring, or admit to their users that their platforms restrict speech. They should be required to honor their commitments to their users.