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'Big Tech' Censorship of Religion is Real and Deserves an Effective Response, Critics Say

Faith-based leaders should “develop media relationships” and have a list of reporters likely to disseminate news of any de-platforming or service interruption.



A roundtable discussion sponsored by the EPPC discussed online censorship. (photo: NYCStock/Shutterstock)

Kevin J. Jones/CNA | Nation (/section/nation) | August 31, 2021

WASHINGTON — The power of major internet companies like Facebook, Amazon, YouTube, and Twitter over public life is a particular threat to religious groups that focus on controversial issues like abortion, marriage, and sexuality, several commentators said at a roundtable last week. These groups should prepare for the possibility of censorship and organize effective countermeasures, they said.

“You might not know the hour nor the day you will be censored,” Joshua D. Holdenreid, vice president and executive director of the California-based Napa Legal Institute, said at a roundtable on internet censorship.

Holdenreid said those involved in public debates “need to plan ahead and assume that if they are a religious organization or faith-based organization operating in the public square and focused on an issue that’s related to pro-life (topics), marriage, sexuality, Christian anthropology, they should just assume that they will eventually run afoul of these vague and arbitrary terms and conditions that exist with these Big Tech platforms.”

The Ethics and Public Policy Project (EPPC), a D.C. thinktank that aims to apply “the Judeo-Christian tradition to contemporary questions of law, culture, and politics,” hosted the Aug. 26 roundtable “How Big Tech Censors Religious Voices, and How to Fight Back.” The roundtable follows years of

debate and discussion about how major technology and media companies treat some religious voices.

The most likely to suffer, Holdenreid said, aren't necessarily organizations running soup kitchens or homeless shelters, but those who are "weighing in on the most important cultural issues" and "speaking the truth about certain issues that doesn't align with what folks in Silicon Valley think should be appropriate for the digital public square." His organization, the Napa Legal Institute, provides legal and financial education to faith-based non-profits on corporate, tax, and philanthropic issues.

Another roundtable speaker, EPPC president Ryan T. Anderson, saw one of his books delisted from Amazon in February 2021. The book, "When Harry Became Sally," offers a philosophical and moral critique of transgender advocates' claims.

Anderson said his book ranked highly on bestseller lists and was listed for sale on Amazon for three years. In removing his book, he charged, the company did not follow its own procedures, such as contacting the author and publisher first to notify them and attempt to reach a solution.

He also questioned Amazon's claim that the book violated its content policy.

"Well, how did the book not violate the content policy for the first three years?" he asked. "I didn't go back and rewrite anything."

The book's title refers to a popular 1989 movie *When Harry Met Sally*, which dramatized an argument that men and women are so different that they can't just be friends.

"Whereas today the argument is that men and women are interchangeable and that the concept of male and female is on a spectrum," said Anderson, who is also the John Paul II teaching fellow in social thought at the University of Dallas.

Those who have not read the book, Anderson suggested, might see him as "some bomb-throwing bigot who wrote a book making fun of transgender people" which in their view might justify a company like Amazon refusing to sell "hate speech."

Anderson characterized his arguments as measured and careful. He warned that policies that silence the voices of writers like him encourages more radical voices to see moderation as a failure.

"It silences reasonable voices and then it radicalizes more extreme voices, which would have a really, really bad polarizing effect," he said.

Anderson said that while he understands when small bookstores or bookstores with a special focus decide not to carry certain books, Amazon has near-monopoly power. The company controls about 80 to 90% of all e-book sales and advertised itself and built market dominance as an "everything store." It put many small booksellers out of business, then cited "an unarticulated content policy" to remove books retroactively, he charged.

Anderson suspected the removal of his book was related to a congressional vote on the Equality Act. If this becomes law, it would recognize sexual orientation and gender identity as protected classes, akin to race, in anti-discrimination law.

In his view, it is "an abuse of market dominance to try to control public speech, in particular on a matter of huge public import." Companies like Amazon and YouTube have become "so dominant in their spheres that there really aren't alternative options," he said. While the notoriety of the delisting incident gave Anderson's book a sales boost, he warned that this was likely temporary and the removal would affect which books a publisher chooses to publish in the future.

"What publisher is going to want to publish a book, knowing they might miss out on the market controller who has 70% to 80% of market share, right?" he asked. "We won't even know what books never get published, which authors censor themselves, which publishers spike proposals, all out of fear that Amazon won't sell it."

Also joining the roundtable was Carl R. Trueman, a fellow at the EPPC Evangelicals and Civic Life Program, a professor at Pennsylvania's Grove City College, and the author of several books. He worried he was censored for his Aug. 7 lecture livestreamed on the YouTube channel of the Sacramento, Calif.-based Immanuel Baptist Church. The livestream was repeatedly flagged for violating terms of service. It was first halted for alleged copyright violation, due to background music, then halted again for alleged content violation, "apparently relative to something I had said." He believes the actions stemmed from a complaint from an online viewer, rather than an algorithm.

"The lectures are now up in an unedited form, which would seem to indicate that nothing I actually said violated content," he said. In his view, YouTube automatically assumes the guilt of many subject to complaints and does not give them opportunities to respond.

Trueman said a similar incident took place in May when he was giving the same set of lectures to a Christian high school faculty in the U.S. South. The lecture was advertised on Instagram accounts but the accounts were suspended, reportedly until all references to Trueman and his lecture were removed.

"It's also very interesting that these big tech groups have such power to disrupt what are really fairly bland and what I would regard as run-of-the-mill presentations on topics of pressing public interest," he said. He speculated that he faced these difficulties because of the content of his speech and of his 2020 book, "The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self."

"I historicize and relativize the kind of debates we're having about gender in the public square. That doesn't fit with the dominant narrative that wants to see these things as fixed and as historically transcendent and wants to demonize anybody who doesn't hold to that emerging dominant narrative as somehow bigoted and problematic."

Trueman said his work "challenges some of the myths by which the political progressives in the U.S. want to reorganize our society."

Organizations that are de-platformed could lose important work, data, and social contacts.

Holdenreid said it's surprising how few people back up their contacts list and videos. People and organizations dependent on YouTube could lose "hundreds or thousands of hours of content" if they are locked out for alleged content violations.

Holdenreid said his Napa Legal Institute has produced white papers examining the risk of de-platforming. Terms and conditions of major services can be easily abused to remove many groups. One Napa Legal Institute report said that faith-based organizations or faith-based voices were being silenced, de-platformed, or censored "at a rate of at least once a week."

He also offered some advice for organizations at risk. They should identify core services that are dependent upon 'Big Tech,' develop a short-term plan to respond if there are service interruptions, and develop a long-term plan to reduce dependence on platforms that have been, in his words, "particularly egregious against faith-based voices."

Faith-based leaders should "develop media relationships" and have a list of reporters likely to disseminate news of any de-platforming or service interruption.

Organizations should also evaluate possible threats to their financial services that hold bank accounts or process donations. For some individuals and groups, access to financial infrastructure, donor infrastructure, and communications structure is at risk.

Roundtable speakers reflected on the cultural and political context of these controversies.

Trueman suggested that Big Tech functions as "a kind of giant therapist" that aims to help make people happy and comfortable, while a religion like Christianity "challenges people where they are" and that is something that "makes people uncomfortable."

He said Christians should still “speak with grace, speak in calm ways, be very careful to present those whom they’re criticizing in a way that those criticizing would recognize themselves.” Following these habits, he said, meant he had a “clear conscience” and knew that he’d not spoken disrespectfully or used inappropriate language that might have brought on any interference in the broadcasts.

If Christians face any difficulties, he advised, “let’s just make sure that it comes our way because it’s nasty people out to get us, and not because we have provided them with enough evidence to convict us.”

Anderson noted that non-religious authors like Abigail Shrier have also faced difficulty. Her work has made secular arguments saying there is a lack of scientific and medical authority to justify transgender claims. She also recounts the stories of regret of those who undergo reputed gender transitions. Target stores have refused to carry her book “Irreversible Damage” and Amazon employees petitioned Amazon to de-list it.

He worried that this was an effort to “discredit the opposition.”

“They’re afraid that if people actually read the book and they learn the arguments, they might have second thoughts about transgender ideology as well,” he said.

He sees a place for positive government intervention in disputes about the power of major companies in public life.

“Prudent public policies can serve the common good, and we have a variety of economic and other kinds of government regulations,” said Anderson. He noted the presence of anti-trust rules and regulations and the common carrier public accommodations discrimination paradigm, as well as “section 230 reform,” a communications law that governs internet sites’ legal liabilities for decisions related to their users’ content.

He suggested Amazon might be comparable to a “company town” situation where excessive speech regulations have drawn legal scrutiny. Supreme Court decisions like the 1946 *Marsh v. Alabama* ruling sided with a religious pamphleteer arrested for trespassing on company-owned streets.

Clare Morell, an EPPC policy analyst and host of the roundtable, said the common carrier approach to major internet companies would argue that a company that provides a vital public good must serve all comers and cannot discriminate based on religion, religious viewpoint, or political viewpoint.

State legislation could address some concerns of “Big Tech” critics, Morell said.

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