Facebook moderation in Taiwan

Written by Chiang Ya-chi 江雅綺
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Early last month, YouTuber Chen Yen-chang (陳彥璋) posted a message on the Taiwan New Constitution Foundation's Facebook page, saying: "Dear all, I support Taiwanese independence. Taiwan already is an independent country. I am a Taiwanese. I am not Chinese."

He later said that his Facebook access had been restricted for 30 days.

The revelation prompted numerous complaints from commenters describing how they had been blocked or had their accounts deleted with no reason provided.

I wrote an article asking whether Chen — who runs the Mr 486 (486先生) online shopping YouTube channel — was sanctioned because of a Facebook error, exploring the possibility that the platform's content moderation system was underfunded and lacked transparency, and explaining how the error rate might be as high as 10 percent.

Taiwan AI Labs founder Ethan Tu (杜奕瑾) shared my article and commented: "Welcome to Project Lutein," referring to Taiwan AI Labs' open-source analysis of social media neutrality.

He was also given 30 days of restricted access to Facebook.

Even though I was not banned from the platform, I was unable to sign in to Facebook for several hours.

Moreover, posts by others on the issue were mysteriously removed.

The transparency of Facebook's moderation process is an important factor. If a person has their Facebook account locked, their access is temporarily suspended or they are barred from posting, at least they are informed that they have been censored — whether they agree with

the decision or not.

However, if the reach of their posts is limited, or if content is deleted, then it is difficult to determine whether the lack of engagement from others on the platform is because the content was uninteresting or because it fell victim to Facebook's algorithms.

Facebook's community guidelines governing appropriate content are vague. Although they outline prohibitions on violence, criminal activity, online security, objectionable content, fake news and intellectual property rights — a list that seems comprehensive — it is impossible to maintain any degree of consistency when the standards are applied due to language constraints and the location of content moderators. This leads to subjective moderation standards that depend on region and language.

Facebook's Chinese-language content moderators are mostly Chinese nationals, so it is difficult to prevent their influence on political content, and their tendency to seek control over the speech of Taiwanese and to infiltrate their lives.

Statistics released in late January showed that there were 18 million Facebook users in Taiwan, with 15 million in the six special municipalities — 2.8 million in Taipei, 3.6 million in New Taipei City, 2.2 million in Taoyuan, 2.6 million in Taichung, 2.2 million in Kaohsiung and 1.6 million Tainan — showing how influential Facebook is in the densely populated areas where political and economic power accumulates.

With its prodigious number of users, people think twice about abandoning the platform, as all of their friends are on it. They fear losing relevance if they walk away from it. This is especially true for political figures, who cannot breathe without the oxygen that attention and popularity provides. Important information is often disseminated via Facebook.

The platform has become the main channel through which public information is distributed, meaning that in some ways, Facebook has taken the government's place.

However, Facebook is essentially banned in China.

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The local digital advertising market last year was worth NT$48.26 billion (US$1.73 billion), with social media platforms accounting for NT$18.2 billion. Given Facebook's user base and market share in Taiwan, the nation is one of its most loyal user bases.

If Taiwanese were to demand that its content moderation system be made transparent and its platform be customized to fit the environment here, surely Facebook would be forced to provide an official response.

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Translated by Paul Cooper

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