



End violence: Women's rights and safety online

Internet intermediaries and violence against women online

Executive summary and findings

Carly Nyst

Association for Progressive Communications (APC)

July 2014



Ministry of Foreign Affairs

This research is part of the APC "End violence: Women's rights and online safety" project funded by the [Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs \(DGIS\)](#) and is based on a strong alliance with partners in seven countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Mexico, Pakistan and the Philippines. For more information visit [GenderIT.org](#) and [Take Back the Tech!](#)

Table of contents

1.Introduction to the research.....3
2.Overarching themes and trends3
3.Positive steps and developments.....4
4.Opportunities for advocacy.....5

1. Introduction to the research

This study focuses on the policies of three major internet intermediaries, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, with respect to violence against women online. The study aims to map the corporate policies of these intermediaries that allow for the identification, reporting and rectification of incidents of harassment or violence against women via the service that the intermediary provides. In addition to providing a detailed summary of the user policies relevant to this issue, the study also compares the impact and effectiveness of those policies against the framework of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. It is designed to provide advocates and activists with detailed information about policies related to violence against women in order that they may utilise, and criticise, such mechanisms, and engage with internet intermediaries about improving avenues for redress against technology-related violence.

2. Overarching themes and trends

The attached case studies provide a detailed analysis of the user policies and redress frameworks of Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. It is clear from the case studies that, while approaches to violence against women differ between the companies, there are a number of overarching themes and trends that can be distilled from the research. These include:

1. Reluctance to engage directly with technology-related violence against women, until it becomes a public relations issue

In the case of both Twitter and Facebook, no concrete or genuine steps were taken to promote women's rights and specifically address violence against women until public scandals and resulting high-profile campaigns emerged in respect of the intermediary. YouTube has yet to take any public stance engaging with these issues directly. These failings suggest a lack of appreciation of the seriousness of violence against women online, and a lack of recognition of the responsibility of the intermediary to take measures to mitigate the frequency and seriousness of instances of violence, and to provide redress.

2. Lack of transparency around reporting and redress processes

The primary challenge encountered by the researchers when conducting this study was the lack of available information about the reporting and redress processes available to victims of technology-related violence. Facebook provides the most information online about its reporting processes, but there remain serious gaps in information about the way complaints are dealt with, and the tests/thresholds applied. Twitter provides very little information about reporting processes but significant information about the circumstances under which it will cooperate with law enforcement; this should be contrasted with YouTube, which provides no information about law enforcement cooperation. YouTube was the most willing to publicly engage with the research, being the only company out of the three to agree to an interview with the researchers. Across the board, however, YouTube

does not provide significant information about its reporting processes, the training or support provided to staff dealing with complaints, and the tests/thresholds applied to complaints.

In general, the researchers encountered difficulties in finding out about how reporting processes work, how complaints are dealt with, who processes complaints and what training/support they receive, the expected time limits for the reporting process, and whether complaints are escalated to law enforcement and under what circumstances. None of the companies provide data, disaggregated or otherwise, on the types or numbers of complaints received relevant to violence against women.

3. Failure to engage with the perspectives of non-North American/European women

Across the three companies, there is overall a general concern that processes relating to reporting of violence against women do not necessarily take into account the experiences of non-North American/European women. Facebook and Twitter both claim to interact with women's rights groups, but do not appear to have any formal relations with women's rights groups outside of Europe and North-America. Broad definitions of "hate speech", "offensive behaviour", "vulnerable individual" and "harassment" are employed in user policies without any attempt to further elucidate their meaning in certain social or cultural contexts.

Without being able to access any information on the demographics of complaints handlers or the training they receive it is difficult to know whether they have an appreciation for international human rights and national legal frameworks regarding violence against women.

4. No public commitment to human rights standards

None of the companies makes a public commitment to human rights standards or to the promotion of rights, other than the encouragement of free speech. None of the available policies explicitly address gender-related violence or harassment nor take a strong stance on respect for diversity or for women's rights. All of the companies could more explicitly commit to a more holistic embrace of human rights standards and a recognition of the range of human rights engaged by the services it provides, beyond solely freedom of expression.

3. Positive steps and developments

Nevertheless, internet intermediaries have taken some positive steps in recent years to improve their approach and reaction to issues of violence against women online. These include:

1. Engagement with stakeholder groups

Both Twitter and Facebook have shown a willingness to opening a dialogue with the women's rights community to receive input into the design of policies and processes related to violence against women online.

2. Simplified and easily accessible reporting mechanisms

All three companies have progressively simplified their reporting mechanisms, ensuring that content can be reported at its source (i.e. through the use of a "Report" or "Flag" button directly beside all content).

3. Proactive steps to eradicate violence against women

YouTube has been trialling a new system called the YouTube Deputy Program, in which certain users, with a history of accurate reporting of offensive or otherwise inappropriate content, are invited to have more robust flagging tools, allowing them to flag content in bulk. YouTube has started to invite some organisations to trial the system, with the thinking that some groups may have specialised knowledge or expertise that may help them flag. There is a possibility that this system could be opened up to local women's organisations or the like. This would allow stakeholder groups to take proactive steps to eradicate technology-related violence against women.

4. Opportunities for advocacy

Across the board, the internet intermediaries analysed in this study have many failings when it comes to recognition of the role that their services play in facilitating violence against women, and their responsibility to provide avenues for redress against such behaviour. Nevertheless, it is clear that many of these failings stem not from a malicious disregard for women's rights, but from a lack of awareness about the issue and of what steps can be taken to better promote women's rights online. Women's rights activists and groups can thus play a critical role in engaging with and educating internet intermediaries about the role they can play in promoting women's rights and the small steps they can take to improve reporting and redress processes. Further information about steps that can be recommended by advocates is provided in the case studies.

Finally, the companies analysed all have a prominent stand on the right to free speech and, when confronted with difficult questions like how to promote women's access to information and expression as well as their other human rights – such as that to be free from discrimination and violence – they have erred on the side of unrestrained expression, often to women's detriment. It is important that women's advocates engage with internet intermediaries on these terms – recognising that free expression is a fundamental pillar of an open, free society that encourages the realisation of all human rights, but that it must be balanced with other rights and freedoms.

ISBN: 978-92-95102-17-0

APC-201407-WRP-R-EN-DIGITAL-208

Creative Commons Licence: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0>