

Social Media—Lobby of the Powerful

By Abdullah Rehman Butt

In this age of globalization, social media have emerged critical tools for states to attain political objectives in any conflict through information control and manipulation. Recent events around the globe have put into question the credibility of social media platforms and tech companies because of their bias towards powerful actors, regardless of their aims and objectives (good or evil). Several social media platforms are now complicit in helping oppressors and rendering them full support to achieve their political as well as strategic objectives.

The latest escalation of violence between Israel and Palestine has once again brought to the fore the issue of discriminatory policies of social media giants. The voices of Pro-Palestine activists were, and continue to be, suppressed, blue-penciled, and removed from social media platforms. This appears to be a systemic attempt to silence the Palestinian narrative and shaping general perception in favor of the oppressor 'Israel' inconsistent with the reality.

The meeting of [Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz with top social media lobbyists, including Facebook and Tik Tok executives](#), and their kowtowing approach to Israeli demands reflects their double standards and disregard for the core principle of freedom of expression, on which these platforms were to operate. In the current online war of narratives between Israel and Palestine, social media, instead of providing digital room to the Palestinians and disparaging human rights violations by Israel, is committing the crime of supporting digital repression and acting as the lobby of the powerful.

The chronology of this conflict also provides enough evidence about the discriminatory policies of these social media platforms. In 2016, [Facebook blocked the accounts of several Palestinian press editors](#) without prior information and giving any valid justification. In 2019, [Twitter barred account handle of Quds News Network](#), a Palestinian local news agency. In May 2020, [Facebook again deactivated the accounts of more than 50 Palestinian journalists](#) and activists without providing any explanation. In the past two weeks alone,

[Zamleh documented the deletion of nearly 500 Facebook and Instagram posts](#) that condemned the recent expulsion of Palestinians.

In this whole scenario, Palestine has been at the receiving end in an environment where perceptions are being shaped by the controlled flow of information, while Israel enjoys far more leverage because of its technological superiority and information dominance. Palestine is reliant on networks managed and controlled by Israeli firms, even its [internet infrastructure is controlled and managed](#) by these firms. On the other hand, the Israeli government and private sector maintain friendly connections with social networking companies and tech giants, and are in a better position to control the information flow and mold public opinion worldwide as per its own interests. This clearly indicates that the extent to which a state can control the flow of information is one of the most critical determinants of its capability to influence the political environment around any conflict.

Social networking companies have also been removing posts criticizing Israel for its crimes against humanity under the guise of their so-called 'community guidelines.' Whereas, voices of the Muslims of Palestine are being repressed under the pretense of violence and extremism. For instance, the [hashtag](#) Al-Aqsa, one of the sacred and holy sites of Muslims, has been associated with violence and removed from Instagram (owned by Facebook).

The accepted notion, that social media ensures freedom of expression and serves as a platform for marginalized communities to share their plight with the world, is no longer credible.

Silencing the voices of Kashmiris by these same social media companies (with their regional offices based in India) is yet another manifestation of the same oppression. On 5 August 2019, abrogation of Article 370 was followed by a strong wave of digital repression of Kashmiris by the Indian government. Facebook and Twitter immediately removed content deemed against Indian policies and brutalities in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu & Kashmir. [African Americans in the United States have faced similar discriminatory conduct.](#)

Such practices demonstrate that the mechanisms used for content moderation are deeply flawed in nature and oblivious to basic human rights, and the policies are biased and favor

the powerful (in most cases the oppressor). Rapid technological innovation and the emergence of new tech platforms, [like TikTok, have further complicated the environment](#). According to a media expert, [Martin Moore](#), “big tech companies can use their power to command attention to promote their own views and services takes large information intermediaries beyond neutral platforms and can give them a political power comparable to that of a broadcaster.”

Powerful states, therefore, are more inclined towards enhancing their structural power i.e. the power to shape perceptions within which they relate to each other, relate to people, or relate to corporate enterprises. For this, they are investing heavily in new technologies, framing new data protection and privacy policies, and enhancing relations with emerging tech giants and social media companies.

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