

Free speech and community standards

By Julie L. Kessler



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I was one of the last social media holdouts — or, to quote one of my teenagers, “one of the relics from when T-Rexes freely roamed the planet.” I held out as long as I could, namely because I didn’t want another black hole swallowing my time or the pittance of unused real estate that remained in my often-crowded brain. However, as is often the case, life just decided otherwise for me. When my first book was released at the end of 2012, my publisher, like all publishers, was adamant about formulating and cultivating my social media presence: websites, Facebook, Twitter, Google accounts, etc. It was for me, a fairly unwelcome brave new world.

Cultural Commentary

Slowly though, I got the hang of things, and sometimes I was even amused. Also, the ability to communicate with readers all over the world without checking the time zone was, admittedly, pretty cool. But still, I kept my distance doing only the mandatory minimum, chiefly because I could see that one could lose hours, and perhaps days, of one’s life in the vortex.

The other day a Facebook friend posted a link on my Facebook page that was so utterly mind-boggling and so thoroughly outrageous that I may never recover from seeing it. Perhaps she shared the link with me because she knew I would be compelled to write about it. The link was to a magazine article that showed a copy of a Photoshopped image of Adolf Hitler in bed with Anne Frank, in what appeared to be a post-coital embrace. This may be one of those moments in life when a picture is indeed worth a thousand words. But you get the idea, even without the nauseatingly offensive image.

This Photoshopped image originally appeared on a different Facebook user’s home page as his background image. Another Facebook user reported the offensive photo to Facebook administrators and received the following response: “Thank you for taking the time to report something that you feel may violate our Community Standards. Reports like yours are an important part of making Facebook a safe and welcoming environment. We reviewed the photo you reported for containing hate speech or symbols and found it doesn’t violate our Community Standards. We have marked this content as insensitive and reached out to [the poster] and asked him to remove it.”

Really?

If allowing the hosting and publication of a doctored image of a very famous Shoah victim in bed with one of the world’s all-time greatest architects of ethnic cleansing — the man who was responsible for untold horrors and misery, unconscionable medical experiments, and the mass murder of 6 million Jews, Roma, homosexuals, and other human beings deemed degenerates (including the pictured victim and her family) — does not constitute hate speech or symbols, I certainly will never, ever know what does.

So what constitutes Facebook’s “Community Standards”? Both hate speech and unacceptable graphic content are clearly defined on the Facebook Community Standards page, which states that it “does not permit hate speech, but distinguishes between serious and humorous speech. While we encourage you to challenge ideas, institutions, events, and practices, we do not permit individuals or groups to attack others based on their race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sex, gender, sexual orientation, disability or medical condition.”

So since the Photoshopped image isn’t hate speech, and it is not factually serious, are we supposed to think that the image is humorous speech and not a racial, ethnic or religious attack? Who on planet earth other than perhaps fringe neo-Nazi groups

or outlier white supremacist groups, would find this funny?

As to what constitutes graphic content, Facebook administrators have this to say: “Facebook has long been a place where people turn to share their experiences and raise awareness about issues important to them. Sometimes, those experiences and

any content, we expect that they will share in a responsible manner. That includes choosing carefully the audience for the content.”

Undeniably, the “audience” is, by definition, the human race. Personally, I can think of no image more sadistic, or more celebratory of a level of violence previously unheard

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issues involve graphic content that is of public interest or concern, such as human rights abuses or acts of terrorism. In many instances, when people share this type of content, it is to condemn it. However, graphic images shared for sadistic effect or to celebrate or glorify violence have no place on our site. When people share

of in human history, than one that defiles a well-known and historically significant victim by putting her in bed with the very man responsible for engineering the Final Solution and that included her own demise.

For about as long as I have been able to talk, and certainly as long as I have been able to type, I have been

a fierce free speech advocate. In this very column back in January, I wrote about the upcoming expiration of the German copyright of "Mein Kampf," one of the most racist, bigoted and morally offensive books to appear since humans put ink to paper. Although it outlines obnoxious views on Aryan purity, expresses contempt for Jews and Communists, and lays out the blueprint for the Final Solution, I ardently argued its republication in German for the first time since World War II should *not* be enjoined, despite the madman author's offensive words. Instead, I stated then and still contend, that we should promote anti-racist teachings vigorously and widely to give those distasteful works context, both historical and present. Most important, people must understand not how just racism and bigotry end, but how they begin and spread like a cancer through otherwise just societies. I believe this despite the fact that my paternal grandfather bore numbered tattoos on his forearm and escaped Nazi-occupied Austria in the middle of the night with his wife, three children and nothing else, just five weeks before Kristallnacht. The rest of his large family — both parents, six siblings, and over a dozen cousins, all perished, courtesy of the Third Reich.

Despite my own family of origin's history, my argument here is not in

any way a religious or ethnic one, but quite simply a human one. Making light of mass murder in the sadistic way this image does stretches any boundaries of human decency.

Likewise, in February in this column I wrote about the dangers of book banning in India reporting on how Penguin Books India agreed, as part of a legal settlement, to recall and destroy all copies of "The Hindus: An Alternative History," by University of Chicago religious historian Wendy Doniger. In the same vein as my discussion of the republication of "Mein Kampf," I said then that if there are factual or other issues with Doniger's book, they should be discussed among its readers. However, banning the book wholesale, and all that represents, only serves to make it a type of contraband, which leads to a host of other undesirable outcomes.

Back to Facebook. The Photoshopped image of Anne Frank and Adolf Hitler in bed does not, of course, serve in any way to instigate a rational discussion about facts or history. Nor, of course, does it portray any historical context. Instead, it seems to me that it fits clearly within Facebook's own stated definition of unacceptable content and that it is a "graphic image shared for sadistic effect or to celebrate or glorify violence." If this kind of "free speech" fits squarely within Facebook's definition of its Community Standards, and is not an attack, then heaven help us all as there is something very seriously wrong with the community.

We may get some guidance soon however as the U.S. Supreme Court just agreed to hear a case that examines what constitutes threatening language in this age of the almighty Internet. Will it be a reasonable person test? Stay tuned.

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