

Editorial: Social media firms put business before free speech

Publisher's note: *This editorial is from the Dec. 25, 2014, New York Times.*

Dissidents in Russia and elsewhere are upset that Facebook has blocked an event page for a demonstration to support a leading opposition figure at the behest of the government of President Vladimir Putin. While their outrage is understandable, Facebook's decision serves as an important reminder that social media companies are under no obligation to support free speech if doing so would harm their business.

Facebook officials have declined to address publicly their decision to remove the page for the Jan. 15 event for Aleksei Navalny, a vocal critic of Putin; the page is still available outside of Russia. But the company says that it will restrict content in countries when a government asks it to do so if it determines that the information violates local laws.

Data from Facebook show that it has increasingly blocked content in response to government requests. For example, in the first six months of 2014, it removed content in Russia 29 times, up from four times in the last six months of 2013. The increase on removals was even more stunning in Pakistan – 1,773 times in the first half of this year, up from just 162 times in the previous six months.

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