Social Media Censorship of Palestinians

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THE AMERICAN-ARAB Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) convention on June 18 started with a panel entitled, "Free Speech for Some, Not All: Silencing Voices Through 'Content Moderation.'" Panelists included Matthew Feeney, director of the CATO Institute's Project on Emerging Technologies; Omar Baddar, an independent analyst; and Aisha Jitan, digital communications associate for the U.S. Campaign for Palestinian Rights.

Moderator Abed Ayoub, ADC's legal director, began by utilizing former President Donald Trump's ban from Twitter as an example of how social media companies apply content moderation standards, and turned to Feeney for insight into what this move revealed about Twitter's policies. "My own personal view is that Twitter was in a really tough spot," Feeney said. "It's quite something for a private social media company to say to the president of your country, you shouldn't be allowed."

While the panelists agreed they don't miss Trump's online presence, Baddar noted it is an example of selective censorship. Most disturbing to Baddar is how anti-Palestinian censorship often occurs at the request of the Israeli government. This also extends to Americans advocating for Palestinian rights, especially given the prevalence of anti-BDS laws and the expansion of anti-Semitism's definition to include criticism of the State of Israel.

While Baddar values content moderation, he advocates for a clear approach that safeguards the companies' independence from governments. "One [improvement] would be for the criteria to be transparent and up front and apply consistently to everyone," he said. "A second would be there should be no room for the government to influence those policies. These are private companies at the end of the day, and we should not have the government telling private companies what speech they should and should not allow, like the Israeli government who is using this for political ends."

Jitan emphasized that since news outlets often don't cover Israeli atrocities, social media is Palestinians' only tool to share their narrative. Without it, Israel would have a green light to commit even worse violent infringements, she reasoned.

Tactics like censoring and shadowbanning Palestinian content, for Jitan, "reinforce a culture of fear. It makes allies afraid to speak about it, because there are real consequences to Zionist attacks."

Baddar said, "It's the fact that the Israeli government gets to reject Palestinian content, but the Palestinians cannot reject Israeli content, and a company like Facebook is completely okay with that—that's what ought to be challenged."

Jitan wants the focus to be on the material conditions that create the inequitable internet space. "I think it is an issue of looking at these companies and being like, where can we break these systems down? I think these systems are reflections of how power operates in this country and the world, and also a continuation of how power has operated historically."