

Are Facebook, Apple and Google Censoring Christian Speech?

Social media and smartphones are changing the way people communicate—and consume—information. And there's a clear bias against Christian speech.

That's why the National Religious Broadcasters (NRB) is wading into a unique and volatile communications freedom issue—the collision course between **free speech** on the Internet and the free market power of new media companies like Apple, Google and Facebook to block viewpoints they don't agree with.

"The stakes are continuing to rise on this dilemma: Last week, YouTube, owned by Google, banned a message by orthodox Rabbi Yehuda Levin, labeling it "hate speech" because it criticized the gay rights movement," said Craig Parshall, NRB senior vice president and general counsel, who heads the John Milton Project for Religious Free Speech. "For similar reasons, YouTube also censored a Christian youth ministry, You can Run but you can't Hide International ... This is a problem that cannot be ignored."

Here are some of the disturbing findings from the John Milton Project for Religious Free Speech's new report, "True Liberty in a New Media Age":

Apple has twice removed applications that contained Christian content from its iTunes App Store. In both instances, Apple admitted that these apps were denied access because it considered the orthodox Christian viewpoints expressed in those applications to be "offensive." One app had expressed the traditional, heterosexual view of marriage as set forth in the Bible; the other had stated the view that homosexuality is inappropriate conduct that can be changed through a Christ-

centered spiritual transformation. Of the 425,000 apps available on Apple's iPhone, the only ones censored by Apple for expressing otherwise lawful viewpoints have been apps with Christian content.

Google has committed past practices of **anti-religious censorship**. For content reasons, it refused to accept a pro-life advertisement from a Christian organization, an issue that prompted litigation in England. Google is also alleged to have blocked a website in America that had conservative Christian content. It had blacklisted certain religious terminology on its China-based Internet service, and in the United States it bowed to questionable copyright infringement threats from one religious sect, which had complained when a blog site criticizing it had quoted from the sect's materials.

Google blocked that blog site on alleged copyright violation grounds, disregarding the obvious "fair use" provisions of copyright law. Such a practice could block the ability of Christian "apologetics" ministries to quote from primary source materials when using Google platforms to educate the public on the teachings of certain religious groups. Also, in March of 2011, Google established new guidelines for its "Google for Non-Profits," a special web tool program, but specifically excluded churches and other faith groups, including organizations that take into consideration religion or sexual orientation in hiring practices.

Facebook has partnered with gay rights advocates to halt content on its social networking site deemed to be "anti-homosexual," and it is participating in gay-awareness programs, all of which suggest that Christian content critical of homosexuality, same-sex marriage, or similar practices will be at risk of censorship.

"Commissioner [Robert] McDowell described the current move to solve some censorship issues by creating an international body to supervise and monitor the Internet on a global scale," said

Parshall. "Proposals would vest control in one of two United Nations agencies: either the International Telecommunications Union or the Committee for Internet Related Policies. Commissioner McDowell painted a distressing picture if the web is placed under governmental control, and stated his preference for continued private control of the Internet by private tech companies."