

Following Outrage, Facebook Apologizes to LGBT Community Over Name Policy

Facebook Inc said it would change its policy requiring users to go by their real names on the social network, following outrage over the locking of hundreds of accounts, including a number belonging to drag queens using their stage names.

Facebook's product chief, Christopher Cox, apologized in a post on Wednesday and said the affected users could go back to using their aliases.

The world's largest social-media network had locked scores of accounts in recent weeks, including hundreds belonging to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

"The spirit of our policy is that everyone on Facebook uses the authentic name they use in real life. For Sister Roma, that's Sister Roma. For Lil Miss Hot Mess, that's Lil Miss Hot Mess," Cox wrote, denying that the company's policy required users to go by their legal names.

San Francisco drag queens and a city lawmaker met with Facebook representatives in September to demand that the site change its policy of banning users from going by aliases online.

Drag queen performers, or men who dress in flamboyant female clothing for nightclub shows, usually use stage names that have no relation to their real names.

Performers say using their stage names on social media protects them from possible retribution from other employers, family members and stalkers. Many see their stage name as an integral part of their identity.

Facebook had said earlier that it would give users two weeks to adjust their profiles to display their real name or convert their personal pages into fan pages that allow the use of nicknames.

The debate over the future of online anonymity is roiling tech circles, with the outcome bearing profound implications for Internet use around the world.

Facebook encourages Internet users to log on and carry out their digital lives with their offline identities.

But digital-rights and privacy activists have questioned the company's motives, saying the push to get people to use their real identities online helps Facebook track user behavior and tap personal data so it can send targeted advertisements.

In July, Google removed restrictions on use of aliases on its Google+ social network, bowing to demands from users for privacy.