

Facebook and Instagram to study racial bias against African Americans, Hispanics on their platforms

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Acknowledging complaints over censorship and harassment, Facebook is creating teams to examine and address racial bias on its platform and on

Instagram.

The teams will focus on the experience of Black, Hispanic and other minority users, the company said Tuesday.

Scrutiny of the company has intensified since nationwide protests over the death of George Floyd brought the issue of racial justice to the forefront.

Hundreds of brands are boycotting Facebook and Instagram this month, giving voice to criticism that these platforms stifle Black users while failing to shield Black users from racially motivated hate speech and threats.

"The racial justice movement is a moment of real significance for our company. Any bias in our systems and policies runs counter to providing a platform for everyone to express themselves," Vishal Shah, Instagram's vice president of product, said in a statement.

An internal civil rights audit of Facebook's policies and practices released earlier this month highlighted the company's failure to rein in racism and toxic speech.

"The prioritization of free expression over all other values, such as equality and non-discrimination, is deeply troubling," civil rights activist Laura Murphy wrote in the audit, which began in 2018 at the urging of civil rights organizations and some members of Congress.

In probing the challenges underrepresented groups face, Instagram said a dedicated team would review how it enforces harassment policies and how it evaluates algorithms for potential bias. The team will also work on new features to promote equity on Instagram, such as supporting minority owned small businesses, the company said.

Facebook will also work on including the perspectives of Black and other marginalized users in its products, the company said.

Facebook said it's consulting with civil rights groups on how to responsibly collect and study sensitive data on the race of its users.

When deciding what speech or behavior to allow on its platforms, Facebook relies on a list of rules called "Community Standards." Facebook defines hate speech as an attack against a "protected characteristic," such as race, gender, sexuality or religion. And each individual or group is treated equally, even if they do not face oppression or marginalization.

Civil rights groups trace these policies to the people in a position to shape them. Despite pledges to close the racial gap, Facebook still struggles to hire, promote and retain Black employees and has few Black executives in the C-suite. About 4% of the company's current workforce is Black and 6.3% is Hispanic while 3.4% of senior leaders are Black and 4.3% are Hispanic.

Black users say they have no choice but to stick with these platforms. Movements on social media have helped put the deaths of Black Americans by police officers on the public agenda, along with racial disparities in employment, health and other key areas, they say.

To elude bans when talking about racism, Black users say they resort to using a white avatar, digital slang such as "wypipo" or "huite" or a cloud emoji as phonetic or visual stand-ins for white people. They operate under aliases and maintain backup accounts to avoid losing content and access to their community. And they've developed a buddy system to alert friends and followers when someone has been sent to Facebook jail, sharing the news of the suspension and the posts that put them there.

Harassment on Facebook and Instagram has gotten worse as nationwide protests following Floyd's death in police custody draw renewed attention to historic racial inequities, Black users say.

Private groups discussing racial justice and police brutality report being swarmed by organized networks of white supremacists, who use racial slurs and tell them to go back to Africa.

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