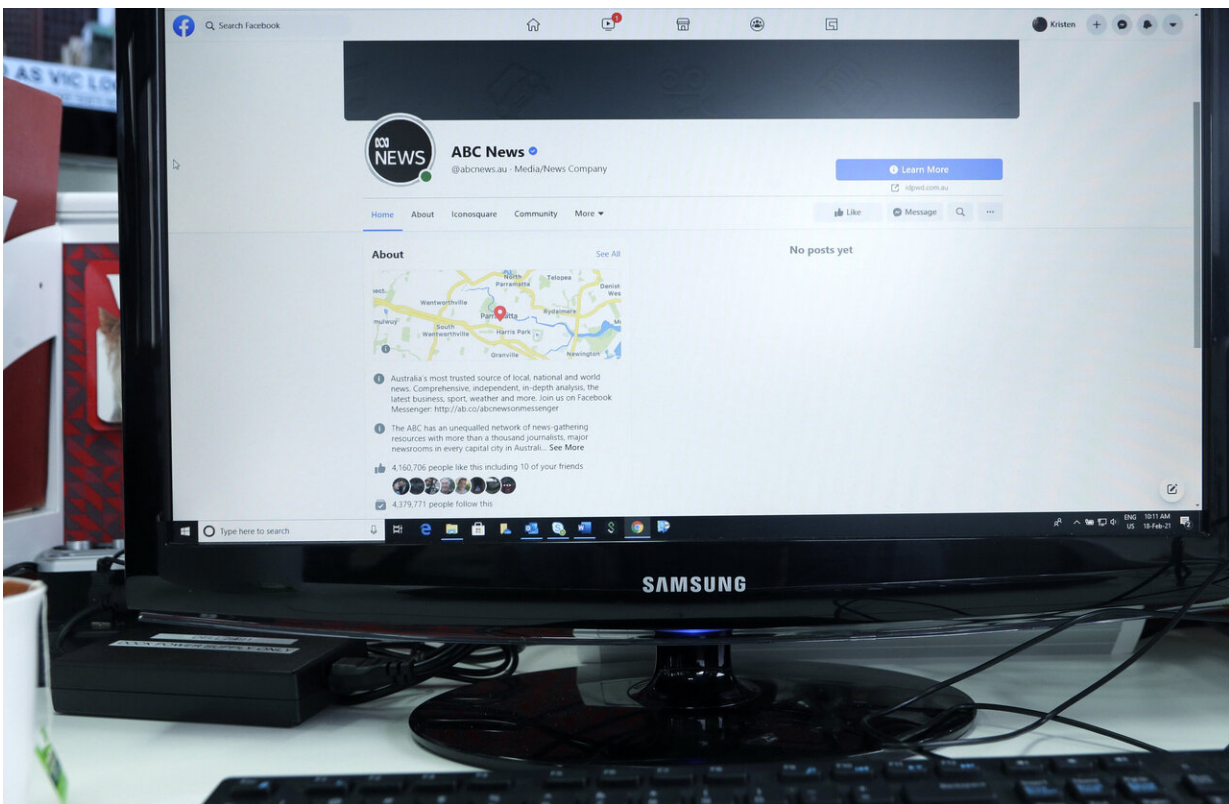


In surprise move, Facebook blocks news access in Australia

February 18 2021, by Rod McGuirk



An Australian Broadcasting Corporation page on Facebook is displayed without posts in Sydney, Thursday, Feb. 18, 2021. Facebook is vowing to restrict news sharing as Australian lawmakers consider forcing digital giants into payment agreements. (AP Photo/Rick Rycroft)

In a surprise retaliatory move Thursday, Facebook blocked Australians

from sharing news stories, escalating a fight with the government over whether powerful tech companies should have to pay news organizations for content.

Australia's government condemned the step, which also blocked some government communications, including messages about emergency services, and some commercial pages.

The digital platforms fear that what's happening in Australia will become an expensive precedent for other countries as governments revamp laws to catch up with the fast changing digital world.

Facebook acted after the House of Representatives passed legislation that would make it and Google pay for Australian journalism, said Treasurer Josh Frydenberg. He said he was given no warning before Facebook acted. The legislation must be passed by the Senate to become law.

Australian news organizations could not post stories and people who tried to share existing news stories got notifications saying they were blocked from doing so .

"This post can't be shared," the website said. "In response to Australian government legislation, Facebook restricts the posting of news links and all posts from news Pages in Australia. Globally, the posting and sharing of news links from Australian publications is restricted."

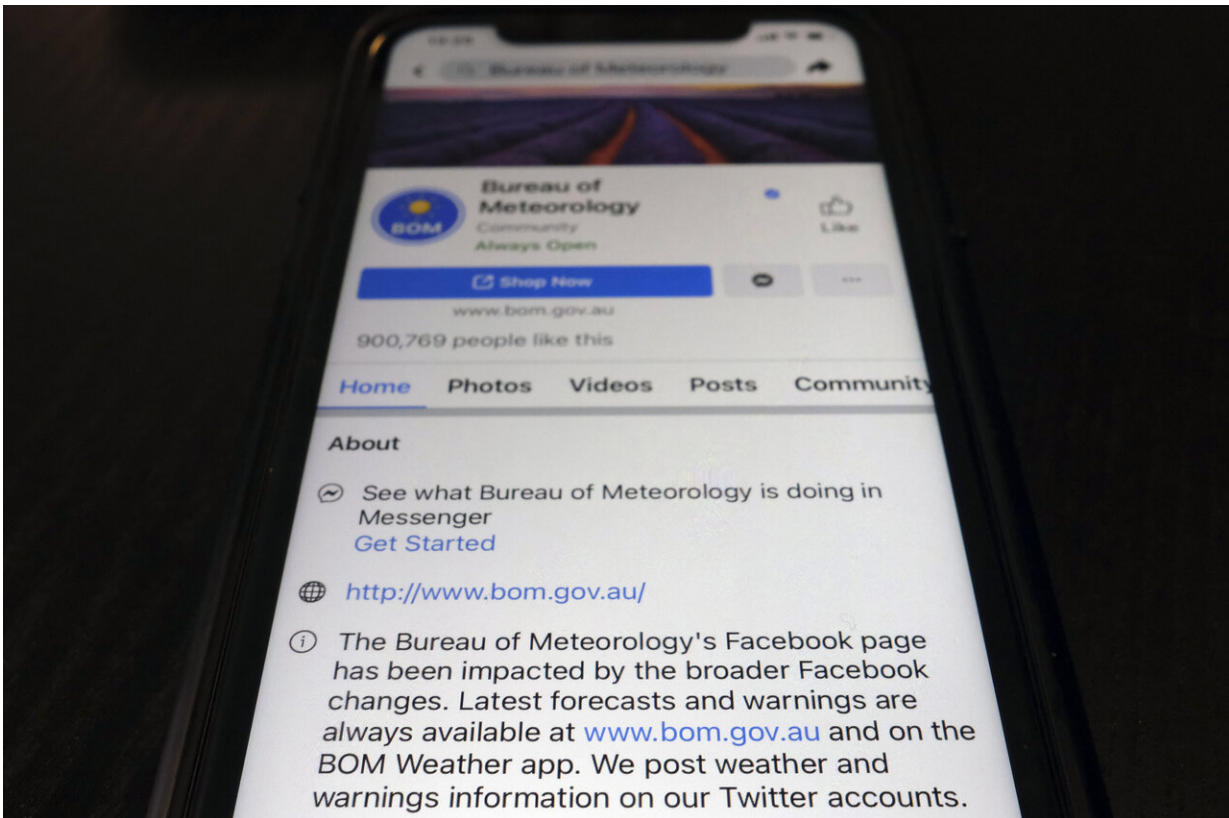
The legislation mentioned by the notice has not yet been enacted.

"Facebook's actions were unnecessary, they were heavy-handed and they will damage its reputation here in Australia," Frydenberg said.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison lashed out on his own Facebook page.

"Facebook's actions to unfriend Australia today, cutting off essential information services on health and emergency services, were as arrogant as they were disappointing," Morrison posted.

"These actions will only confirm the concerns that an increasing number of countries are expressing about the behavior of BigTech companies who think they are bigger than governments and that the rules should not apply to them. They may be changing the world, but that doesn't mean they run it," he added. "We will not be intimidated by BigTech seeking to pressure our Parliament."



A disclaimer is shown on the bottom of Australia's Bureau of Meteorology page on the Facebook app Thursday, Feb. 18, 2021, in Tokyo. Australia's government has condemned Facebook over its shock move to prevent Australians sharing news that had also blocked some government communications. The Bureau of

Meteorology's weather warnings, a Hobart women's shelter and the Betoota Advocate, a satirical website named after an Australian ghost town, were among those surprised to find their content blocked at least temporarily. (AP Photo/Kiichiro Sato)

Facebook said the proposed Australian law "fundamentally misunderstands the relationship between our platform and publishers who use it."

"This is an assault on a sovereign nation," Health Minister Greg Hunt told Parliament. "It is an assault on people's freedom and, in particular, it's an utter abuse of big technologies' market power and control over technology."

The government contends the proposed News Media Bargaining Code will ensure media businesses will be paid fairly for journalism linked online. Both Google and Facebook had threatened to retaliate.

Australia's proposal requires a negotiation safety net through an arbitration panel. The digital giants would not be able to abuse their dominant negotiating positions by making take-it-or-leave-it payment offers to news businesses for their journalism. In case of a standoff, the panel would make a binding decision on a winning offer.

Google had threatened to remove its search functions from Australia because it said the proposed law was unworkable. But that threat has faded as Google has worked out licensing content deals with Australian media companies under its own News Showcase model.

Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. announced a wide-ranging deal with Google on Wednesday. Major Australian media organization Seven

West Media reached a deal earlier in the week. Their rival Nine Entertainment is reportedly close to its own pact, and state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corp. is in negotiations.

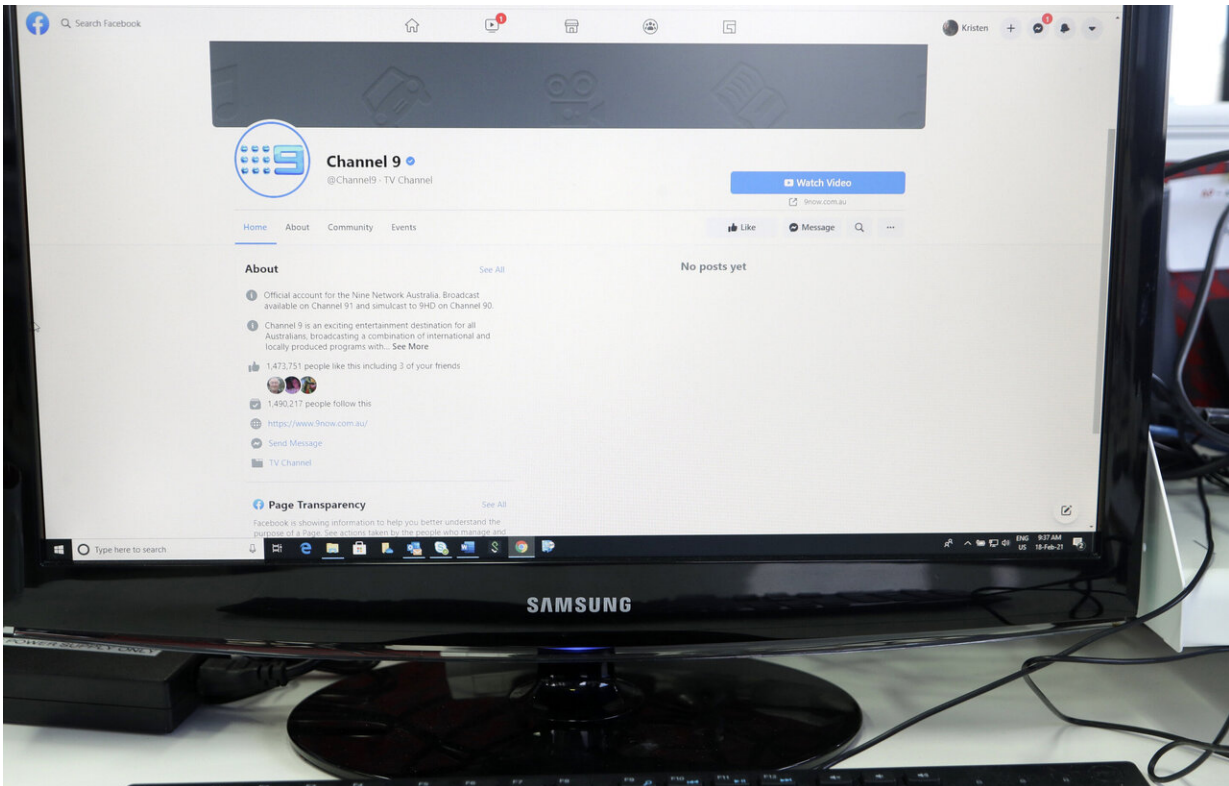
The government accused Facebook of endangering public safety by temporarily blocking state emergency services messaging on a day when there were severe fire and flood warnings in various parts of Australia.

The Bureau of Meteorology's weather warnings, a Hobart women's shelter and the Betoota Advocate, a satirical website named after an Australian ghost town, were among those surprised to find their content blocked at least temporarily.

Communications Minister Paul Fletcher said he told Facebook the government expects access to its pages to be restored.

"The fact that there are organizations like state health departments, fire and emergency services . . . who have had their Facebook pages blocked, that's a public safety issue," Fletcher said.

Facebook said in a statement: "Any pages that are inadvertently impacted, we'll look to reverse."



A Nine Entertainment Co. page on Facebook is displayed without posts in Sydney, Thursday, Feb. 18, 2021. Facebook is vowing to restrict news sharing as Australian lawmakers consider forcing digital giants into payment agreements. (AP Photo/Rick Rycroft)

Health Minister Greg Hunt said the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne still didn't have its feed fixed after more than eight hours.

Some non-Australian outlets also appeared affected, with posts disappearing from Facebook pages belonging to Britain's Daily Telegraph and Sky News. Both share names with news outlets in Australia. Facebook's U.K. PR firm didn't reply to a request for comment.

Frydenberg said he had "constructive" discussions with Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg after the content blocking began.

"He did explain to me that they had concerns with aspects of the code, and it goes to the interpretation of some of its elements. And he will come back to me with some more considered views," Frydenberg said.

He said the government remains committed to the code that is yielding generous payment deals with Google for Australian media.

"Other countries are watching, but also Google and Facebook and other digital giants are very focused on what it means, as far as a precedent goes, for other countries," Frydenberg said.

News Corp. said it would receive "significant payments" from Google under the three-year agreement, which includes heavyweight news organizations throughout the English-speaking world such as The Wall Street Journal and New York Post in the U.S., the Times and the Sun in the U.K., and The Australian and Sky News in Australia. The deal spans audio and video and News Corp. also will get an ad revenue share from Google.

Frydenberg said after weekend talks with Zuckerberg and Sundar Pichai, chief executive of Alphabet Inc. and its subsidiary Google, that he was convinced the platforms "do want to enter into these commercial arrangements."

"It's a massive step forward we have seen this week," Frydenberg said of the Google deals.

"But if this was easy, every other country in the world would have done it already. But they haven't," he said.

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