

*Monika Bickert - Abstract: "Challenges in the increasing pressure to limit online speech and some ideas for how to solve them"*

As billions of people have come online in the past decade, gaining unprecedented access to information and the ability to share their ideas and opinions with a wide audience, pressure on technology companies to limit this expression and exchange of ideas has increased at a similar pace. Government demands for content removal are on the rise, including requests to remove lawful content. Proposed laws and regulations around the world undermine free expression and people's human rights - particularly troubling in places where there isn't democracy or freedom of the press. In many parts of the world we're also seeing an impulse to restrict more speech and enforce new norms around what people can say, and to try and define more speech as dangerous - even where there is no apparent safety risk from the speech or speaker. Underlying intentions aside, the reality of these pressures is that they will narrow the field within which we can express ourselves. Because when companies serve billions of people, operational challenges make nuanced speech assessments difficult, and pressures that are not applied with these unique conditions in mind will inevitably incentivize companies to err on the side of removing more content.

At the same time, technology has advanced in ways that make it easier for companies to limit speech in ways both obvious, such as placing a warning screen over graphic content, and non-obvious, such as reducing the distribution or visibility of a particular person's content. With these new advances comes a new need for agreement on principles of fairness, non-bias and transparency to avoid additional pressure on free expression.

To ensure protection of expression and other essential human rights, democratic governments, technology companies, and civil society must work together. We already have more than a decade of experience and knowledge of how this can be done at scale. It must be a priority that policies and regulations can pave the way forward by crafting them with an understanding of the challenges companies face in enforcing increasingly nuanced policy lines and the societal costs that come from blunt restrictions on speech.