BITS OF FREEDOM

The Public Interest vs. Big Tech

Twenty civil society organisations from four movements, namely women's rights, climate change, anti-racism and migration and undocumented people, came together to discuss the impact of Big Tech on their work. The meetings were facilitated by Bits of Freedom and PILP.

On the basis of the sessions, we wanted to investigate whether and to what extent the freedoms and rights of civil society organizations are structurally limited by large online platforms. During the sessions, we wanted to surface and exchange civil society organization's experiences with (Big Tech) platforms. We also wished to improve organizations' and activists' capacity to navigate the (Big Tech) platforms they use to achieve their goals. The two core questions were:

1. Which (Big Tech) platforms do civil society organizations use and for which purposes?

2. What are the experiences of civil society organizations with (Big Tech) platforms?

Experiences with platforms

Civil society organizations use platforms, including Big Tech platforms, for both internal and external communication. This includes the use of the platforms and services of Google, Meta and Microsoft. We list some common experiences of organizations with large platforms.

1. Dependency on Big Tech

Civil society organizations experience a degree of dependency on Big Tech platforms. They express that it is difficult not to use Big Tech because of that dependence. For example, organizations depend on online platforms to reach their constituencies. Also, switching to alternative platforms is often not an option. Alternative platforms are less well known and complicated to use, according to organizations. Organizations cannot always use alternative platforms because their audience often does not use them, for example, in the case of encrypted mail.

2. Recommendation systems

Recommendation systems are the algorithms that determine on platforms what content and in what order is shown to users. Civil society organizations encounter difficulties with recommendation systems on platforms in several ways:

- Recommendation systems affect the reach of organizations in unpredictable ways, because they determine whether, how often and to whom the content that the organizations post is shown.

- Recommendation systems limit organizations' ability to connect to new partners and people. The content shown to the organization is also subject to the recommendation systems. Civil society organizations shared, for example, that on online platforms, they particularly see organizations in their recommendations that are active in the same field.

- Civil society organizations and the people active for them, are harmed by what seems to

be negative coverage being overrepresented and prioritized in Google search results.

3. Content moderation

Platforms decide what happens to accounts and content that are not in line with their policies. Organizations often feel hindered by these content moderation policies of platforms:

- Civil society organizations experience blocked, suspended, or deleted **accounts**. The reason for such measures often is not clearly given. The online visibility of platforms, and thus their operations, are impaired by a deleted or less visible account. This can hinder the work of the organizations, especially when if such measures are taking during crucial periods.

- Content is **removed** from platforms, supposedly because it violates a platform's terms and conditions. Further justification from platforms is often lacking. For example, some organisations have had posts referring to a recent event or posts in which educational content is shared removed.

- Posts by the organisations are **reported or flagged by third parties**, as content that does not align with a platform's policies. Organizations presume that their content is being reported by people who want to hinder the communication and reach of the organization. When posts are reported in large numbers, platforms seem to move to deletion quicker, although they do not do so in all cases.

- Content or accounts are **suppressed**. Some organization were notified of this, and others weren't. This can hinder the work of organizations, especially if such measures are taken during crucial periods.

- Civil society organizations experience that some **advertisements** that they want to post on platforms are not accepted, due to alleged violations of the platform's terms and conditions. However, no further justification is given by these platforms.

4. Hate

Civil society organizations and activists experience hate on platforms, such as hate reactions, *hate speech* and threats. Organizations are unsure how to deal with this. Some see no other solution than to self-censor in order to protect their employees or themselves. They also become extra careful in the way they express themselves. Others explicitly do not censor themselves.

5. Other

- Employees of civil society organizations act differently on social media. They censor themselves in order to reach the widest possible audience. They adapt to what "works" on a platform.

- Companies who are the focus of civil society action, can limit how third parties engage

with them, making it more difficult for civil society organisations to hold them accountable.

- Civil society organizations experience relatively low engagement with posts that feature educational or political content. Extreme content reaches more people. This makes it more difficult for organizations to reach people without resorting to posting extreme content. As a result, some organizations retreat from public discourse altogether.

Conclusion

The use of platforms by civil society organizations affects their freedom. Organizations depend on large platforms, are subject to recommendation systems and content moderation policies, and suffer from hate.