Tomorrow's Affairs

Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Is the withdrawal of major advertisers the beginning of eradicating anti-Semitism on social media?

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Large companies have taken breaks from social media advertising before, when their ads ran alongside posts with inappropriate content. However, the advertiser pullback now hitting X (formerly Twitter) is cause for alarm for all major social media outlets.

A year ago, Apple pulled its ads from Twitter for 2 weeks after the murder of 5 people in an LGBTQ club in Colorado. The company protected its reputation so its ads would not appear alongside posts about a hate-fuelled mass murder.

Apple is currently pulling its ads from X, but the reason for suspension will not disappear in 2 weeks. This is about widespread anti-Semitism, which, after the terrorist attacks of Hamas on Israel, has been experiencing an explosion on social media.

In addition to Apple, IBM, Disney, Lionsgate, and the European Commission suspended advertisements on X for the same reason.

The list of major advertisers leaving will undoubtedly increase in the coming days, just as the advertisement suspension will not end at X.

Advertisement money has been leaving X because its owner, Elon Musk, endorsed an anti-Semitic post. Though the company has been working hard to stop it, TikTok is well on its way to experiencing X's fate.

"What is happening at TikTok is it is creating the biggest antisemitic movement since the Nazis. Shame on you", said Sacha Baron Cohen, who spoke to TikTok executives with a group of celebrities of Jewish descent.

Panic fire extinguishing

As they try to amortise the Jewish community's anger over an explosion of anti-Semitism on their network, TikTok has been frantically trying to contain the epidemic of support for the late Osama bin Laden and his "Letter to America."

They defend themselves by blocking the hashtag #LettertoAmerica and have been aggressively removing video messages supporting the 9/11 mastermind. However, they found an excuse - the same content appears on other social media.

None of the giant social media is immune to anti-Semitism and other forms of inflammatory hate speech, regardless of how desperate TikTok is to share that responsibility with others.

The explosion of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia on social media after October 7 has been tectonic. Organisations researching hate speech in political communication reported a 919% increase in anti-Semitic content and a 422% increase in Islamophobia on X alone in the past month and a half. There are similar trends on other social media, on Facebook, for example, or Telegram, despite the efforts of companies to suppress them.

Anti-Semitism did not appear out of nowhere

However, all that hate speech, particularly anti-Semitism, did not appear out of nowhere on October 7. Long before Hamas attacked Israel, social media was a fertile ground for what was to come.

The way platforms fight hate speech is, quite simply, ineffective and outdated. Millions of users simply ignore the Terms of Use, which serve only as a basis for removing, but not preventing, offensive content.

Content moderation is a more effective repressive measure. However, it does not come close to suppressing the flood of digital violence, particularly after the escalation in the Middle East on October 7.

Companies mostly rely on AI to moderate inappropriate content, so on some platforms, even 90% of inappropriate content is removed by the algorithm.

Human work is slow, not efficient enough and subject to improvisation. A moderator on Facebook, for example, can review a maximum of 2,000 posts per day.

Due to constant pressure to strengthen content control and erase violent messages and hate speech, companies primarily outsource monitoring and moderation tasks. This is becoming a growing branch, so estimates show that the digital content moderation industry will grow to about $13 billion in the next 5 years.

This assessment, however, is from a period before the outbreak of Israel's war against Hamas and before the massive explosion of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia on social media.

The end of the golden age

The pressure companies now face to eradicate digital violence from their platforms will undoubtedly determine their business future. We may be witnessing the first real change in content regulation on social media due to the pressure of large advertisers regarding reputational risks for wealthy social media owners.

In the last month and a half, social media have proven to be the principal channels for the spread of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia and, thus, the most influential instigators of violence in real life.

They also showed that the existing mechanisms for controlling and removing hate speech have proven ineffective despite the large amount of money that companies have invested in them.

State regulation projects are even slower, less effective, and traditionally scrupulous about restrictions that could violate guaranteed freedom of expression.

The wave of departure of large advertisers from social media, followed by the discontent of influential celebrities towards the platform's inability to provide them with protection from violence in the digital space, hints at the first severe shift in the attitude of giant digital companies towards hate speech on the media they own.

This time, the threat directly regards their business. The time of appeals for tolerance and respect for diversity when communicating on social media is behind us, and it did not produce results.

Big tech will not be compelled to develop an effective solution to remove all forms of digital violence from their media until they face the weight of financial losses and a damaged reputation.

It will be expensive, much more than before, but the golden age of huge profits and lack of responsibility for spreading inflammatory messages has reached its end.