Social Media and Sexual Health Fact Sheet

This fact sheet is for organizations, advocates, and communicators using social media.

Social media can be a great tool for sharing news, information, and resources. It's also a space where we can mobilize our communities to action. However, there is a history of social media platforms censoring and suppressing sexual health content, and it's only getting worse. This fact sheet is an overview of the current social media landscape, a summary of recent changes making our work more difficult, and what we need to advocate for to have a free, open, and safe internet.

A couple of terms to keep in mind as we work through this fact sheet:

Access to Information

The United Nations and World Health Organization agree that having access to accurate and inclusive information about sex and sexuality is essential for people in making informed decisions about our sexual and reproductive lives. Many young people and 2SLGBTQ+ people use digital platforms for sexual health because traditional sources—like school sex-ed or family conversations—can be uncomfortable or make them feel shameful. Without fact checking and safety mechanisms, these digital spaces expose users to harassment and disinformation, resulting in poorer health outcomes in real life.

Freedom of Expression vs Hate Speech

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, including the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information. This does not mean that hate speech, which incites violence and intolerance, is or should be acceptable online or offline. Canada, like other countries, does make it a criminal offence to willfully promote hatred against an identifiable group, including based on people's sex or sexual orientation —all Charter rights are subject to reasonable limits in a free and democratic society.

Current Landscape and Policies

Social media can be an accessible and affordable way to connect to a wide audience, making it easier to have more people hear about important sexual health information. It lets people share things quickly and directly, sometimes responding in real-time to big issues or changes.

Below are links to policies that are meant to guide user behavior, advertising, and accountability at some of the most popular social media platforms.

Google	Meta	Reddit	TikTok	X/Twitter	YouTube
*Policies are specific to individual Google products.	Community Standards	Reddit Rules	Community Guidelines	The X Rules	Community Guidelines
Advertising Policies	Ad Standards	Ads Policy	Advertising Policies	Ad Policies	Monetization Policies
Transparency Report	Transparency Reports	Transparency Report	Transparency Center	Transparency Center	Transparency Report

Policy Changes Impacting Access to Information and Sexual Health

Social media platforms are making it more difficult to share accurate and rights-based sexual health content, for example:

- Moderation practices frequently delete or ban content or accounts about sex or gender.

- Sometimes sexual health content is age restricted, which limits the ability of young people to learn about puberty, safer sex, or consent.

- Sexual health information about abortion regularly gets flagged as "political content," making it subject to different guidelines than general health information.

- Misinformation and disinformation get a lot of engagement online. For social media companies and content creators, engagement = $$$, since that data is used to sell ads. Sexual health misinformation is really effective at generating engagement, and so it gets prioritized in the algorithm over factual information.

Suppressing access to life-saving sexual health information harms groups who are already marginalized and oppressed, including women, 2SLGBTQ+ people, sex workers, and youth. Without access to accurate, inclusive sexual health information, communities everywhere will face poorer health outcomes.

Most recently, Meta has made updates to their community standards and moderation practices that will specifically harm queer and trans people by allowing discriminatory speech to exist on their platforms. These changes to their Hateful Conduct policy, along with firing fact-checkers in the U.S. (to be replaced with automated moderation software and Community Notes), will encourage hate speech and misinformation to spread on Facebook, Instagram, and Threads.

As noted by the Electronic Frontier Foundation, these changes have more to do with aligning themselves with the new American administration (who is aggressively restricting rights related to sexual and reproductive health and non-discrimination), than encouraging freedom of expression for everyone.

How to Navigate Social Media Restrictions

While we work together with advocacy groups and governments on bigger system changes, here are tips for navigating posting sexual health content on social media:

Interact with reliable and accurate information. Try to like, save, repost, and comment on content from accounts you know and trust. This helps boost them in the algorithm, which leads to more people seeing it.

Use words that don't get flagged. It's common to see many people use alternate spellings or phrases to avoid having their content automatically flagged (e.g., seggs/sex, ab0rti0n, etc.) —just as long as people can read and understand it!

Link to your own website or newsletter. Getting people away from social media and onto your other channels is a great way of connecting your audience directly to your work

Engage with the reporting system. This includes reporting misinformation and hate speech, appealing content that is removed, and trying to talk to moderation staff to clarify any confusion. Take screenshots or track data where you can, and share it with staff at social media companies so they can better understand the impacts of their policies.

Delete Hate and Misinformation when you can. If bad actors are arguing in your comments or DMs, feel free to delete, report, and block their content. Depending on the platform, you can sometimes adjust content moderation settings (e.g., Facebook Comments, Sensitive Content on Instagram).

What We Need

While social media companies can seem very powerful, users and institutions are still able to advocate for policy changes or hold corporations to account on human rights violations. In order to achieve a free, open, and safe internet, we need:

1 A human rights-based approach to regulating social media companies, where our rights to free expression, equality, and full participation in society are not threatened.

2 Corporations who understand proportional limits on expression, to ensure that rights to freedom of expression and equality rights can coexist to protect marginalized communities.

3 Policies and guidelines created in collaboration with community organizations and subject matter experts which prioritize human rights and equality.

4 Clear and accessible complaint and abuse-reporting policies, with consistent application, as well as an appeals process for content that is wrongly suppressed and removed.

5 A greater investment in human staff and less reliance on automated content moderation, and training for staff from around the world on how to uphold human rights.

6 More detailed transparency reports from social media companies that better explain decision-making behind removal or banning of content.

i Check out organizations like OpenMedia, Association of Progressive Communications, Feminist Principles of the Internet, and the Canadian Civil Liberties Association to stay up to date on campaigns that push for a more accessible and informative Internet.

Action Canada
for Sexual Health & Rights

Scan this QR code to learn more about sexual health advocacy