Reproaction

Reproductive Rights and Justice Movement Leaders Respond to 'Big Tech' Suppression of Accurate Abortion Information

October. 26. 2023

Summary

Content suppression was, and remains, a deeply problematic issue in a world increasingly hostile to abortion, and big tech is part of the problem. While organizations and individuals in the abortion rights space are finding ways around the confusing maze of suppression to make sure their content is seen – like spelling it "aborti0n" – this raises questions as to how many are actually getting the information they need and how many are missing vital information to make decisions when posts are incorrectly removed and reinstated. Because abortion is a time-sensitive medical procedure, there is no time to waste, and tech companies should have had a plan for the post-Roe world long ago. We demand they catch up.

Our report details the data collected on online anti-abortion disinformation, digital suppression and removal of accurate abortion content, and demands of the reproductive health, rights, and justice community to improve the online space for abortion seekers and health care communicators.

Key Findings

● There was a significant increase in concern about suppression of accurate abortion content online following the Dobbs decision in 2022.

● The platforms that groups reported the most trouble with were Facebook, Google, and TikTok (Note: this survey was conducted between Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter and subsequent changes he implemented.)

● Of groups that used paid advertising, nearly half reported issues with ad placement, success of ad campaigns, and barriers to boosting content.

● What kind of content that was suppressed varied greatly with reports on everything from how/where to source abortion pills to simple statements of affirmation about abortion being removed.

● Disinformation and content biased against abortion is often allowed to flourish on social media platforms, even after being reported and flagged.

Please find below a more detailed data breakdown and analysis from the survey, and a breakdown of our top four demands for Big Tech can be found in the Appendix.

Key Findings

Initial Findings and Concerns:

While our findings discovered that there was less experience with information suppression before Dobbs, 42.9% of respondents said

9. Before the Dobbs decision in June 2022, how concerned would you say you were with information suppression and the state of accurate abortion information on social media platforms?
21 responses

- Not at all concerned
- Somewhat concerned
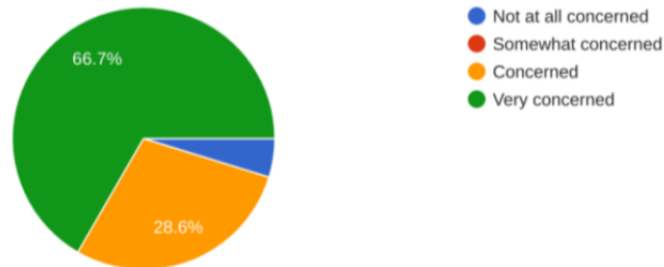- Concerned
- Very concerned

28.6% 19% 9.5% 42.9%
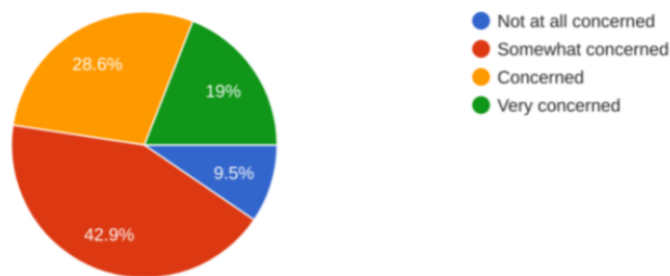
However, when asked how concerned respondents were with information suppression post-*Dobbs*, 66.7% said they were very concerned - **an increase of 47.7%.**

This increase is most likely due to the immediate response of tech companies to begin censoring posts, as was anecdotally reported by several organizations. This censorship included removing posts without explanation, hiding posts, and labeling posts as sensitive content.

10. Post-Dobbs, how would you rate your concern over information suppression and the state of accurate abortion information on social media platforms?

21 responses

- ● Not at all concerned
- ● Somewhat concerned
- ● Concerned
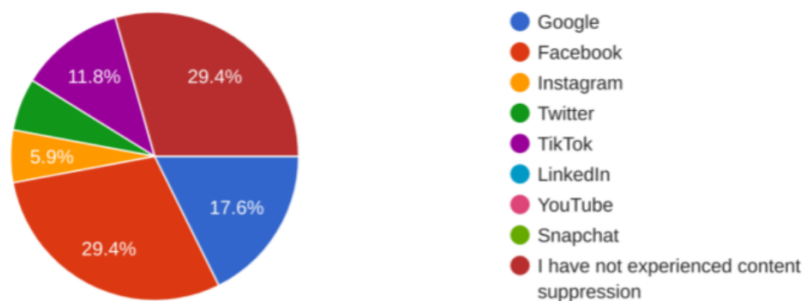- ● Very concerned

66.7%

28.6%

This shows a clear and immediate uptick in increased concern over information suppression and the state of accurate abortion information on social media platforms just six months after the Dobbs decision.

Top Troubling Platforms:

The top three platforms where users had the most issues with content suppression were: Facebook (29.4%), Google (17.6%) and TikTok (11.8). 29.4% of respondents had not experienced content suppression.

18. If you have experienced content suppression, which platform would you say you have seen the most issues with?
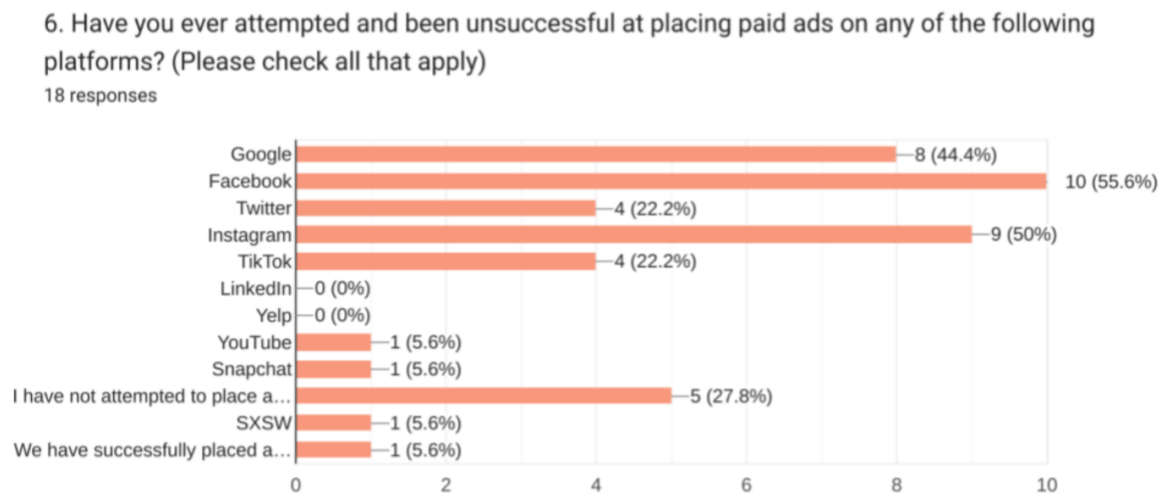
17 responses

- ● Google
- ● Facebook
- ● Instagram
- ● Twitter
- ● TikTok
- ● LinkedIn
- ● YouTube
- ● Snapchat
- ● I have not experienced content suppression

11.8% 29.4%

5.9%

17.6%

29.4%

Paid Advertising and Unsuccessful Placement:

76% of respondents said they had placed a paid ad on Facebook; 62% had placed a paid ad on Instagram.

From these respondents, it was shown that Facebook had the highest rate of unsuccessful paid ads with approximately 55% responding that they had been unsuccessful. Similar numbers occurred on other social media platforms with 50% of respondents stating they had attempted and been unsuccessful at placing an ad with Instagram and 44.4% of respondents stated they had attempted and been unsuccessful at placing a paid ads with Google.

6. Have you ever attempted and been unsuccessful at placing paid ads on any of the following platforms? (Please check all that apply)

18 responses

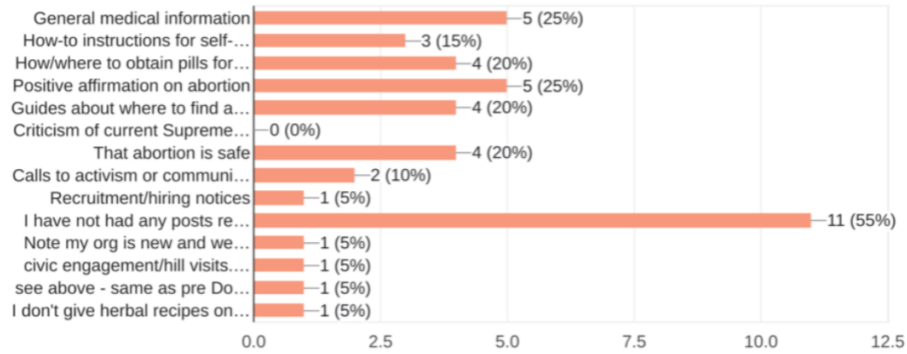| Platform	Responses
Google	8 (44.4%)
Facebook	10 (55.6%)
Twitter	4 (22.2%)
Instagram	9 (50%)
TikTok	4 (22.2%)
LinkedIn	0 (0%)
Yelp	0 (0%)
YouTube	1 (5.6%)
Snapchat	1 (5.6%)
I have not attempted to place a…	5 (27.8%)
SXSW	1 (5.6%)
We have successfully placed a…	1 (5.6%)

Content Suppression and Removal:

Of the respondents that had experienced their information being removed from social media, that information included: Positive affirmation on abortion and General Medical Information (25% each), How/Where to obtain pills for abortion and Guides about where to obtain abortion services and that abortion is safe (20% each).

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11. Post-Dobbs have you experienced any of the following information being removed from your social media? (Please check all that apply)
20 responses

Category	Value
General medical information	5 (25%)
How-to instructions for self-...	3 (15%)
How/where to obtain pills for...	4 (20%)
Positive affirmation on abortion	5 (25%)
Guides about where to find a...	4 (20%)
Criticism of current Supreme...	0 (0%)
That abortion is safe	4 (20%)
Calls to activism or communi...	2 (10%)
Recruitment/hiring notices	1 (5%)
I have not had any posts re...	11 (55%)
Note my org is new and we...	1 (5%)
civic engagement/hill visits....	1 (5%)
see above - same as pre Do...	1 (5%)
I don't give herbal recipes on...	1 (5%)

Further troubling, some of those that had experienced suppression found that their content was flagged automatically by keyword or AI (notoriously difficult to stay on top of due to an ever changing algorithm) or, worse, did not know why it was suppressed or were not told.

And while incorrect algorithm flagging is certainly an issue, it is also emerging as an excuse for Big Tech to point to; a way to excuse themselves for these supposed "mistakes." We want to be clear, there are people behind these decisions and they must be held to higher standards; we demand better.

16. If you have experienced suppression, have you been told it is being flagged automatically by the platform, reported by another user, or you don't know?
18 responses

- 27.8% Flagged automatically by the platform (keyword or other AI system)
- 22.2% I don't know
- 27.8% I have not experienced suppression

Legend:
- Flagged automatically by the platform (keyword or other AI system)
- Reported by user
- I don't know
- I have not experienced suppression
- both
- Sometimes we are not told. In some instances, it is due to report by a user....
- I was told both
- Again, our accounts weren't approved,...

Of those that were told a reason, the top two were: "Content was inaccurately flagged as political" and "the site bans sale or use of unsafe substances" both with 38.9% -- a distressing trend considering the necessary uptick in promotion of abortion pills and their necessity as an option especially in states with limited clinical access. Abortion pills have a twenty-year record of safety and the flagging of them as unsafe is particularly disturbing, playing into anti-abortion talking points.

Beyond this, telemedicine providers who have gone through the LegitScipt process (Facebook's third-party verification system for identifying and certifying those who can prescribe medication through their platform) are still finding their content flagged and removed leading to a finger pointing game between Facebook and LegitScript as to who is to blame for the error.

Big Takeaways: Disinformation

Initial Findings and Concerns:

Over half of respondents had reported anti-abortion disinformation on social media platforms, with more likely experiencing it. Of those that had reported, the majority stated that they never heard a response back from social media platforms about their reports on anti-abortion disinformation.

33. Have you ever reported anti-abortion disinformation to social media platforms?
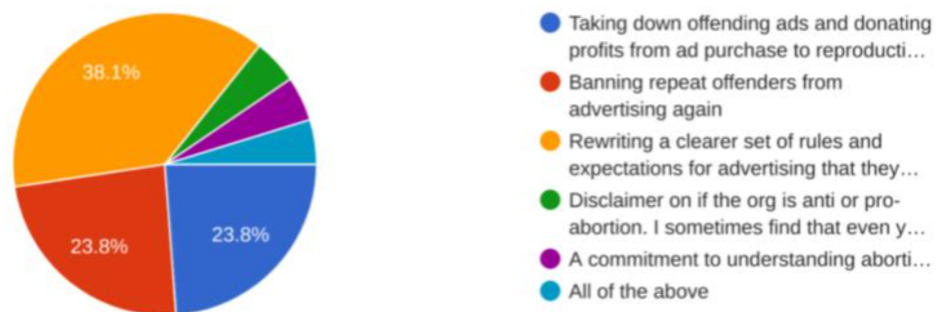21 responses

- Yes
- No

42.9%

57.1%
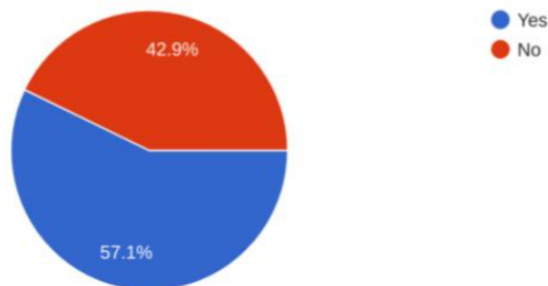
What We Want:

Respondents were asked what action they would most like big tech companies to take to remedy the situation of anti-abortion disinformation. **"Rewriting a clearer set of rules and expectations for advertising that they commit to on a continued basis"** was the top answer with 38.1% followed by "Taking down offending ads and donating profits from ad purchase to reproductive rights groups" and "Banning repeat offenders from advertising again" with 23.8% each.

34. What action would you most like to see from tech companies to remedy this situation of allowing anti-abortion disinformation to flourish?
21 responses

- Taking down offending ads and donating profits from ad purchase to reproducti…
- Banning repeat offenders from advertising again
- Rewriting a clearer set of rules and expectations for advertising that they…
- Disclaimer on if the org is anti or pro-abortion. I sometimes find that even y…
- A commitment to understanding aborti…
- All of the above

Methodology:

A Google form survey was sent to reproductive health, rights, and justice stakeholders over the last weeks of 2022.

● The survey was sent to 65 prospective participants and 21 responses were received.

● Respondents came from a variety of movement work categories but the top three were: Advocacy (66.7%), Information Sharing and Support (52.4%) and Telehealth and Direct Care Provider (19% each).

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● As the survey dealt with online misinformation and suppression, respondents were asked which platforms they or their organizations used most. The top three were Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, so findings and analysis apply largely to those platforms, though others were mentioned.

● A convening followed in spring of 2023, and analysis and asks from the reproductive health, rights, and justice community encompass survey responses and output of discussions during the day-long convening.

● As mentioned above, this survey was conducted between Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter/X and subsequent changes implemented.

Conclusion

Content suppression is an increasingly burdensome resource issue for already-strapped organizations in the reproductive health, rights, and justice field: time by staff spent trying to get content approved/reinstated takes away from other work organizations are trying to do. The onus must be on the tech companies to build and maintain products that work for their users, including producers of accurate, fact-based information about abortion. They must create and then stick to clear protocols, and to enforce them when rules are broken. If they want to claim to be pro-abortion, they must take responsibility for their products to perform in a pro-abortion way.

Anti-abortion disinformation has also had a detrimental effect on the field. Organizations report that they spend a lot of time countering disinformation and educating abortion seekers on the safety of abortions as well as what actually occurs during an abortion. Our jobs should not be policing content on social media when these platforms are generating positive press for themselves claiming to promote accuracy and quality information.

This is also a safety concern for abortion seekers who may not know what is or is not valid health information and creates fear in those who are seeking abortions. Anti-abortion fake clinics

are often the driving force of disinformation regarding abortions, increasingly moving their deception beyond the walls of a fake clinic and into the online sphere.

We must demand more and better of online spaces and the companies that run them.

Appendix

Our Demands of Big Tech:

In partnership with Women on Web and Women First Digital, Reproaction has introduced four demands to Big Tech for abortion rights.

1. Reform Google's screening criteria for health content to promote medically accurate information about abortion and digital abortion providers. This reform will also clamp down on fake clinics and anti-abortion websites.

2. Push for more nuanced Google ads policies that certify digital abortion providers worldwide and recognize that safe and high-quality abortion care does not exclusively take place in a hospital, clinic, or physician's office.

3. Hold social media platforms accountable for flagging misinformation/disinformation about abortion care, much like they were pushed to do in response to Covid-19 and U.S. election fraud disinformation.

4. Provide increased transparency around social media content moderation policies (Eg: Why some posts get taken down and not others.)