



Hate speech on Facebook poses 'acute challenges to human dignity' – UN expert



Unsplash/Solen Feyissa | Facebook's application is displayed on a smartphone.

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An independent UN human rights expert called on Wednesday for Facebook's Oversight Board to give greater consideration to the rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities before making decisions over controversial content, particularly involving hate speech.

"Minorities are the most likely target of online hate speech, and we know that online hate speech against minorities often leads to severe real-world harm, and may even lead to ethnic cleansing and genocide", said Fernand de Varennes, UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues

(<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Minorities/SRMinorities/Pages/FernandDeVarennes.aspx>), welcoming the recent news that Facebook's Oversight Board has accepted its first six cases appealing against decisions to remove content.

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UN expert [@fernanddev](#) calls on Facebook's Oversight Board to take the rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities into account in reaching decisions, particularly on hate speech. Learn more: ow.ly/RJX930rpQfZ

"Hate speech online is one of today's most acute challenges to human dignity and life", he added.

Unite oversight standards

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg compared the Oversight Board to the social media platform's own Supreme Court, as an independent body that reviews Facebook moderation decisions.

Facebook's Community Standards should be brought into line with the understanding of "hate speech" in the recent UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech (<https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/hate-speech-strategy.shtml>), according to Mr. de Varennes, who viewed the platform's omission to protect linguistic minorities as troubling and contrary to international human rights law.

He directed the Board's attention to Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>) and the UN General Assembly's 1992 Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/minorities.aspx>), as well as other legal rulings on the rights of minorities.

Praise for the Board

At the same time, the independent UN expert called the Oversight Board “an innovative and ambitious initiative to regulate online expression, in particular hate speech, which is essential for the effective protection of vulnerable minorities worldwide”.

Moreover, he commended the fact that the Board is made up of prominent experts committed to human rights and freedom of expression, and noted that efforts have been made to ensure impartiality by having an independent trust administer it.

Tackling hate

During 2020, the Special Rapporteur has made “hate speech, Social Media and minorities” his thematic focus.

He convened regional conferences in Europe and Asia, and presided over the UN Forum on Minority Issues (<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Minority/Pages/Session13.aspx>) in November. Together, the three conventions have made more than 100 recommendations for tackling online hate speech against minorities.

“I look forward to continuing to constructively engage with the Oversight Board and hope I can assist in its institutional development and on issues related to minorities,” Mr. de Varennes said.

Special Rapporteurs and independent experts are appointed by the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council (<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/Home.aspx>) to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.

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