

CASE STUDY: TOLERANCE ONLINE AND PLATFORM CENSORSHIP¹

Facebook's stated mission is "to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together."² Like most mission statements, Facebook's is supposed to have a vague-yet-aspirational ring to it. One unintentionally revealing feature of its mission statement, however, is the emphasis on building *community*, singular. But people do not live in community, they live in *communities*, and this is no accident. True community requires a degree of commonality. In 2018 Facebook had 2.32 billion active users each month.³ What could these 2.32 billion individuals possibly share in common that might form the foundation for building *a* community? (Other than their shared use of Facebook, of course...)

Something like this thought motivated Benji Vaughan to found Disciple Media in 2015. Vaughan was worried that "the world lives in a monopoly" because "the world connects through Mark Zuckerberg." Believing "that's [not] healthy for societies, communities, democracies or anything,"⁴ This concern motivated Vaughan to build a company, Disciple, which would empower a more pluralistic form of online social connection. The company's first guiding principle reads:

1. **"We believe in Diversity and Independence.** Every community has its own culture, purpose and currency. We believe the Platform that powers them should support this diversity and independence."⁵

To promote this vision, Disciple offers an app-based social media platform that allows clients to create communities that circumvent the major social media gatekeepers (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube). Disciple was designed to give people the power to build *communities*, plural. More specifically, Disciple sells fully customizable interactive apps for anyone who wants to gather an online following into an owned, single community space. The platform gives owners a range of features to connect with their audience and let them connect with each other. In an app, owners can post whatever kind of content they wish (photos, videos, articles, livestreams, etc.) and members can connect and communicate with one another, upload their own content, etc. The suite of features is not markedly different from that of any other social networking platform. What distinguishes Disciple is its app-based interface. Because each community is accessed through a dedicated app, it operates as something like a closed group in Facebook. Only people with the app can participate in the community. Additionally, the community's owner can exercise whatever level of editorial control they wish. This greater level of control and privacy allows Disciple's communities to develop their own cultures and content standards, depending on the needs and tastes of the communities themselves. This allows for a diverse range of potential social media experiences, each suited to its own niche.

¹ Created by Brian Palmiter, 2019.

² <https://investor.fb.com/resources/default.aspx>

³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>

⁴ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/oliversmith/2018/03/28/in-the-wake-of-cambridge-analytica-disciple-is-lighting-the-way-for-social-networks/#3434df6d5348>

⁵ <https://www.disciplemedia.com/about-us/>

At the end of 2018, Vaughan's commitment to providing a pluralistic digital platform was put to the test when the company received a business enquiry from Alex Jones, the alt-right activist and founder of the conspiracy website Infowars. Jones was looking for a platform to build and run a self-contained community for his followers and fans of Infowars. He had been forced to turn to Disciple after Apple, Facebook, Spotify and Twitter banned both him and Infowars from their platforms. All of the platforms cited violation of their content policies as their justification, highlighting the use of hate speech and glorification of violence.

Jones's enquiry presented Vaughan with a dilemma. On the one hand, he did not wish to support Jones by giving him a platform to spread his noxious ideas. There's substantial evidence that no-platforming works, so by rejecting Jones's request Vaughan could play a meaningful role in diminishing Jones's power in the public culture.⁶ At the same time, Disciple was supposed to be committed to "diversity and independence," which means recognizing that "every community has its own culture, purpose and currency." Was the Infowars community not included in the "every community" referenced in the company's first principle? Furthermore, there's a sense in which Jones is *exactly* the type of client Disciple is suited to support. Jones has a niche community that wishes to communicate within itself, in light of its own standards for acceptable content. If Facebook, Twitter, and the other companies don't want to expose their diverse users to alt-right content, that's understandable, but Disciple's app-based platform is different. Each member of each community on Disciple's platform is there because they share the same set of interests, beliefs or values as their fellow community members. With Disciple as a platform, anyone uninterested in Jones's content can ignore him; all they have to do is not install the Infowars app.

Ultimately, Vaughan refused to sell Infowars a platform on Disciple. He based his decision partly on his own set of values and partly on the fact that he did not want Disciple's good reputation damaged by an association with Alex Jones' extreme views. But as he admitted in a self-reflective blog post after the fact, the situation raised many questions he struggled to answer, including whether he made the right decision.⁷ In particular, Vaughan was troubled by his inability to articulate a principle that could distinguish what kinds of clients could be tolerated in the name of free speech, diversity, and platform neutrality, and what clients were sufficiently repugnant that it would be wrong to tolerate them. Additionally, Vaughan worried that Disciple lacked an unbiased process for assessing which clients ought to be rejected. Up to now, as Disciple CEO, Vaughan himself was the arbiter of what the company viewed as acceptable communities for their platform—essentially who could and could not use Disciple as a platform to build their community. And so far, he thought he had probably gotten these decisions right. But rather than referring to an approved rubric when guarding the gates to the platform, it always felt like he was basing the decision on his own, unapologetically liberal values.⁸

⁶ <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/12/5/18125507/milo-yiannopoulos-debt-no-platform>

⁷ Most of this account is based on this post, which can be found here:

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/benjaminvaughan/2019/01/29/we-turned-alex-jones-infowars-away-from-our-social-platform-but-were-not-sure-why/#54fe0d386411>

⁸ Everything up to this point in the case really happened to Vaughan and his company. What follows is a possible future in which the company responds to Vaughan's soul-searching by establishing the institutional features described below.

In response to the questions raised by the Infowars dilemma, in 2019 Disciple Media began beta testing a new set of principles (“the Principles”) to guide decision-making about what kinds of clients the company could and could not ethically accept, as well as an internal institution (“the Tolerance Board” or “the Board”) with the job of applying those principles to tough cases. The principles Vaughan settled on begin with a restatement of the diversity and independence principle upon which the company was originally founded:

1. **“We believe in Diversity and Independence.** Every community has its own culture, purpose and currency. We believe the Platform that powers them should support this diversity and independence.”
2. **“We believe in Tolerance.** Tolerance requires us to accept people and permit their viewpoints to be heard even when we strongly disapprove of them. All members of society are equally entitled to be taken into account in defining what our society is and equally entitled to participate in determining what it will become in the future.”
3. **“We practice viewpoint neutrality.** Any just and tolerant society must protect freedom of expression. This does not mean merely that censorship is ruled out, but requires as well that communities have some effective means for bringing their views before the public. We recognize that our Platform provides such a means.”
4. **“We believe disagreement need not be disrespectful.** If toleration is to make sense, we must distinguish between one’s attitude toward what is advocated by one’s opponents and one’s attitude toward those opponents themselves: it is not that their point of view is entitled to be represented but that they (as fellow citizens, not as holders of that point of view) are entitled to be heard.”
5. **“We believe intolerance is intolerable.** Any attempt to deny others’ equal membership in our society and equal right to define our society must not be tolerated. Disciple will not provide a platform to promote intolerance.”

The Principles are intended to be an alternative to Facebook-style content moderation. Disciple’s founding premise is that each client should be able to decide on “community standards” for their own apps, as long as the client itself remains tolerant.⁹ Intolerant clients, however, are to be denied a platform by Disciple. This is an acknowledgement that there are some communities that cannot be allowed to flourish if a tolerant society is to be sustainable. For instance, Disciple cannot treat a terrorist group as just another “community” in need of an independent communication platform. To do so would be self-undermining. All other communities, though,

⁹ “Facebook has a 40-page rule book listing all the things that are disallowed on the platform. They’re called Community Standards, and they were made public in full for the first time in April 2018.” For more, see <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2019/02/men-are-scum-inside-facebook-war-on-hate-speech>

however disagreeable, are entitled as equal citizens to a platform for their views. The Principles provide a rubric for navigating the tensions between free speech and tolerance.

The task of applying the Principles will be handled first by Disciple's newly hired compliance officers. Compliance officers monitor current and prospective clients to ensure they are tolerant of all other citizens. Contested cases are brought before a "Tolerance Board." The Board is composed of nine "judges" drawn from diverse ethical and political backgrounds. Whenever there is a question as to whether a client is tolerant, the Board will meet to hear the case. The client in question will have an opportunity to make a case for itself, while the concerned compliance officer (or other accusing party) can present the case against. A majority of the Board is necessary to find a client to be intolerant and deny them a platform through Disciple.

The Principles and the Tolerance Board system are still in their trial phase, but several current and prospective client communities have already been flagged as potentially intolerant by compliance officers.

- A. *Get the L Out* is, in its organizers words, "a group of lesbian and feminist individuals and organizations, opposing the increasingly anti-lesbian and misogynistic LGBT movement and the erasure of lesbians." The group made waves in July 2018 when it interrupted the Pride parade in London to protest the inclusion of transgender individuals in the LGBT community. The group denies that trans women are women and shared a flyer that accused "the trans movement [of] ... coercing lesbians to have sex with men. We firmly condemn this vicious form of anti-lesbianism disguised as progress."¹⁰ Now the group would like to create a community on Disciple to facilitate future coordinate and advocacy efforts.
- B. *Beyond the Bell Curve* is a community dedicated to race-and-IQ research. It is owned by a research academic who studied under controversial psychologist and sociologist Richard Herrnstein, a leading figure in the race-and-IQ controversies of the 1980s and 1990s.¹¹ The group's membership includes both academic researchers and interested non-experts. The researchers use the community to discuss research design, share results, etc. The non-expert members have a wide range of reasons for belonging to the group, though unsurprisingly a significant number of non-academic group members have white-supremacist affiliations. The community is not explicitly dedicated to any particular position in the race-and-IQ debates, except insofar as it believes the topic is deserving of further study, "P.C. naysayers" be damned.
- C. *The Truth Will Out* is an anti-vaccine "consciousness raising" group dedicated to collecting and disseminating the "best in anti-vaccine advocacy and research." Still a prospective client, the organization finds itself in need of a new platform after Amazon Prime quietly began pulling anti-vaxxer documentaries from Prime Video. Anti-vaccine movies that were previously available free for Prime subscribers, like "We Don't Vaccinate!," "Shoot 'Em Up:

¹⁰ <https://getthelout.wordpress.com/2018/07/05/the-journey-begins/>

¹¹ Herrnstein co-authored *The Bell Curve* (1994) with Charles Murray.

The Truth About Vaccines,” and “Vaxxed: From Cover-Up to Catastrophe,” are now “currently unavailable.”¹² The group wishes to contract with Disciple to provide a new platform to host their documentaries, anti-vaccine research results, etc.

- D. *Data4theWall* is a prospective client looking for a platform to host their crowdsourced crime data collection efforts. The group wishes to build a crowdsourced database of crimes committed by immigrants, both legal and illegal. The group’s methodology is inspired by the Washington Post’s national police shootings database.¹³ Data4theWall approached several traditional news media outlets with this project, but all refused, so the group has turned to Disciple to help them with their plans.
- E. *Campus Faith and Action* is a Christian fellowship organization with branches at universities around the country. CFA is looking to create an online social media site for CFA members only. The organization was flagged by a compliance officer for two reasons. First, the group wants to make membership in the online community contingent on signing a creedal pledge, which includes a commitment to “live a personal life of moral purity.” Prohibited behavior includes “heterosexual activity outside of marriage (e.g., premarital sex, cohabitation, extramarital sex), homosexual or lesbian sexual activity, polygamy, transgender identity, any other violation of the unique roles of male and female, sexual harassment, use or viewing of pornographic material or websites, and sexual abuse or improprieties toward minors as defined by Scripture and federal or state law.”¹⁴ The other area of concern the compliance officer identified was the group’s acceptable content policy, which bans members of the group from sharing “content that might undermine the faith” of other members of the group.

¹² <https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/01/tech/amazon-anti-vaccine-movies-schiff/index.html>

¹³ https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/national/police-shootings-2018/?utm_term=.b7310238d314

¹⁴ Pledge content inspired by contract required of employees by Immanuel Christian School in Springfield, Virginia, where Karen Pence now teaches. See <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/mike-pence-calls-criticism-wife-s-job-anti-lgbtq-school-n960091>.

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Discussion Questions

1. How should the Board decide each of the hard cases identified above, assuming they apply the company's new policies faithfully?
2. Which of the "hard cases" was hardest to assess? Why?
3. Are any of the predicted decisions different from what you think tolerance actually demands in the situation?
4. Do the Principles, as described in this case, accurately reflect Scanlon's conception of tolerance? Is Vaughan right to employ Scanlonian principles to his company's decision-making?
5. What role, if any, does Disciple's status as a private company play in our assessment of what a proper commitment of tolerance should mean for the company?
6. Was Vaughan right to create something like the "Tolerance Board"? What should the Board look like (compositionally, structurally, etc.) to best meet the demands of tolerance?

Other possibilities:

1. Group seeking to constitutionally recognize the United States as a Christian nation, without repealing other faiths' First Amendment protections. The privileging is acknowledged to be purely symbolic.
2. Holocaust denial
3. Anti-separation of church and state group
4. NRA-type group
5. Milo—i.e. a redux of the Alex Jones case. An opportunity to see whether the court agrees with Vaughan's original decision.
6. Rape jokes site
7. "Revenge porn" site—not actually revenge porn, but allegedly so. Worry is that it actually promotes revenge porn, denigration of women, etc. Disciple allows several other clients with pornographic focuses, including BDSM oriented content.
8. Antifa
9. Catholic Church sex scandal, stance on women, reproductive rights, etc.
10. #MeToo "bad men" list
11. Westborough Baptist Church?
12. In group love necessarily out group hate?