



Facebook is a marvellous tool. It may even have played an important part in organising the ongoing revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East. The authorities certainly seem to think so, which is why they try to suppress it. Egypt famously blocked Facebook in late January this year in a futile attempt by the Mubarak regime to stop the revolution in its tracks. Others have done the same.

But Facebook has a dark side. In the UK, the Daily Mail - a newspaper that likes to pander to the most ill-informed prejudices of its readership - is going head-to-head with Facebook. The social network has objected to the paper's persistent use of its name in news coverage of paedophile activity. For example, the Mail has a habit of referring to "victims of Facebook sex gangs" in much the same sort of way as it recently illustrated a story about immigrant workers from Eastern Europe in rural England with a picture of a city street scene featuring a significant number of people of Asian origin. You know the tactic. Associate one thing with another and, pretty soon, in the minds of readers the two things become equivalent. Polish immigrants equal British Asians; Facebook equals paedophilia.

The point about Facebook, as Dan Sabbagh observed in the Guardian, is that it has half-a-billion members. "Its membership," wrote Sabbagh, "is a large part of what we like to think is the civilised world". Well, let's forget the "civilised" bit for now - Mahatma Gandhi probably had the right idea when he was asked what he thought of European civilisation and replied "It would be a good idea". But civilised or not, Facebook members represent a reasonable cross-section of the population of the wealthier bits of the world - I'm even on it, so is the [Media Diversity Institute](#) .

The issue then is how Facebook represents the diversity of its international membership, who sign up to the network precisely because of its much-vaunted dedication to openness and unfettered communication. The issue is how Facebook deals with its saints and its sinners, how

it copes with cultural difference and potential conflicts of values and ideologies. To see Facebook - or any large-scale social network - as a monolith is plainly wrong and can be misleading. And for Facebook to behave like a monolith, imposing its own corporate values on its constituency



of users, is equally wrong and equally likely to mislead.

To be honest, Facebook does a reasonable job of managing diversity. But it's not infallible. Have a look at the All Facebook website to get some idea of how the network itself deploys censorship from time to time, particularly when it comes to users who criticise the company. It has also suppressed pages on religious and political grounds and has attracted criticism (some half-baked and some, it must be admitted, barely baked at all) from anti-Islam groups and fundamentalists of all persuasions. It's a difficult job being part of the global media, and - like liberty itself - requires constant vigilance.

Have you had any experience of Facebook's censorship or censorship of Facebook? Share it with us below. And if you've got any ideas how social networks like Facebook should deal with the thorny question of free speech in a diverse global environment, share them too.

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