



Matters of Facebook Live or Death: The Ethical Challenges of Live Internet Broadcasting



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On March 15, 2019, a mass shooter entered two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing 51 people and injuring 49 others. The shooter publicized his murderous actions by streaming parts of the mass shooting on Facebook Live, a feature on the social media app that records and

posts live video. The feature allows the user's Facebook friends to observe and interact with them in real time, as well as like and comment on the live video. As with all content on Facebook, a viewer can report the video if it violates community standards, but this process often takes time. In the case of the Christchurch mosque massacre, the video was up long enough to go viral, coming across possibly thousands of users' feeds. Facebook has since removed the original video, but because users have screen recorded or downloaded the video, parts of it are still floating around the internet today. Facebook Newsroom, the official Twitter account for Facebook Communications, confirmed in a tweet that within 24 hours of the video ending, over 1.5 million uploaded videos containing parts of the violent livestream were removed from the site, with 1.2 million being stopped at the uploading stage.

Within three weeks of the mass shooting, the Australian Parliament passed legislation penalizing Facebook if it does not remove violent content in a timely manner. Failure to do so could see executives facing up to three years in jail, or fines of up to 10% of the platform's annual turnover (Griffiths, 2019). Some have proposed time delays, effectively limiting the "live" nature of immediate broadcasting promised by Facebook Live. In an op-ed for *The Conversation*, Jennifer Grygiel argues that installing a time delay can help decrease the spread of violent content or content that does not abide by Facebook's standards. Time delays are normal in televised news content now, but there are important differences between cable and broadcast content and internet content. On Facebook, there are many live videos being posted, and too few moderators to scan all of them before they are viewed and shared by others. Facebook has challenges controlling regularly posted content, so some might wonder what difference a slight delay in Live broadcasts would make.

Why should anyone want Facebook Live to retain the immediacy of its current broadcast model? For some Facebook users, it's a way to broadcast messages that are liable to be unreasonably censored by others. In a June 2016 sit-in on the floor of Congress focused on the lack of gun-control reform after the Pulse nightclub shooting, Democrats used Facebook Live and Periscope as ways around the C-SPAN cameras being turned off by Republicans during the protest (Newton, 2019). For others, it's a way to immediately connect to a mass audience watching from afar. For almost two years, Congressman Beto O'Rourke used Facebook Live almost daily to talk about issues to fellow constituents in Texas who could not make it out to his rallies in every county in Texas (Guynn, 2018). Aside from politics, Facebook Live has been used by educators to help ensure success for their students. Principal



Belinda George at Homer Drive Elementary uses Facebook Live for “Tucked in Tuesdays,” where she reads bedtime stories to her students. In a school that is 94% economically disadvantaged, she stated the goal of going on Facebook Live and reading to her students was “to bridge the gap between home and school... to form relationships with my scholars and their families” (Brown, 2019). While George can just record her reading a book and upload later, she couldn’t interact with them the way she can in the Facebook Live connection.

While the exposure to violence on one of the biggest social media platforms has its negative effects, some say it also has the power to bring justice to its victims. Danny Cevallo, CNN’s legal analyst, discussed how because of the sharing nature that Facebook has, it is often the first place detectives look for evidence of criminal behavior: “Sometimes, these cases would be completely unwinnable for the state if not for the defendant providing all the incriminating evidence against himself on social media” (Cevallo, 2017). This op-ed was released in response to the four Chicago teens brutally beating a disabled student while broadcasting this atrocity on Facebook Live. Because they broadcast the event on Facebook Live, they were quickly identified, arrested, and convicted for this crime. While justice was served, however, the disabled student victim was still humiliated in front of the many Facebook users who watched this video before it was removed by Facebook.

Facebook Live’s immediacy and speed, both in broadcasting a message and in others sharing it, has brought people together and has incited or revealed in violence against others. Its availability to everyone—from ordinary citizens to politicians to mass murderers—shows a democratizing force inherent in the technology. But what is the price paid for putting this ability to quickly “go live” in the hands of so many communicators? What ethical problems arise when content can be shared and used in ways that the original poster did not imagine?

Discussion Questions:

1. What values are in conflict in the controversy over Facebook Live?
2. How do the worries over Facebook Live relate to debates over free speech? Would eliminating one’s ability to immediately “go live” with content curtail their freedom of expression?
3. What are the best arguments for eliminating Facebook Live? What compelling reasons are there to keep this technology?
4. How might you navigate the ethical conflicts brought about by Facebook Live? How would you mitigate or reduce any side-effects to your proposed solutions or changes?



Further Information:

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May 4, 2019