

TELEGRAM CENSORS BLM-AFFILIATED CHANNELS AFTER FAR-RIGHT DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE, 18 January 2021



In the weeks following the January 6th assault on the U.S. Capitol, various right-wing extremist Telegram channels coordinated a campaign to remove BLM-affiliated and anti-fascist groups from the platform by submitting false reports to Telegram’s moderators. On the morning of Martin Luther King Jr. Day in the United States, owners of the targeted groups woke up to find that a number of their communities had been shut down overnight without warning or explanation. These groups were used to share information, resources and community in times of unrest and uncertainty. These groups date back to the George Floyd protests or mutual aid initiatives in the early days of the Coronavirus pandemic. Their censorship and removal are the result of a deliberate effort by white nationalist groups to silence opposition during a moment of political turmoil.

Telegram did not provide detailed notices of any kind to channel owners, instead replacing all content with a generic message alleging a Terms of Service violation. While BLM-affiliated channels were taken down, many of the extremist groups coordinating the campaign were left in place, including “Proud Boys: Uncensored” (where the Proud Boys retreated after being removed from other platforms for violent activity) and “GypsyCrusader News Network” (a non-stop deluge of racial slurs, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, and a man dressed as the Joker giving Nazi salutes) as well as the group "archived1488" which gloated over the TOS announcement on one of these channels.

After several hours most of the targeted channels were brought back online. Telegram has offered no explanation for the initial shutdowns or the reinstatement of these channels. One possibility is that the spurious mass-reporting by right-wing spam accounts triggered an automatic removal violation, but no actual Terms of Service violation was found upon review by content moderators.

Attacks like these targeting non-violent groups on the left exemplify the double-standard used to silence marginalized people and their allies. Activists use Telegram to provide and receive real-time information related to protest actions, to communicate with allies across regional and national boundaries, and to share resources ranging from recipes to first-aid training. Topics of conversation range from heartbreak over news of Black deaths at the hands of police, to coordinating support for unhoused people in their communities, to organizing mutual aid efforts for those affected by the pandemic. These community resources were taken down while multiple channels openly affiliated with far-right hate groups remained online and functional.

As fallout from the Jan 6 Capitol attack continues to be felt, we anticipate increased attacks on leftist social media channels as well as political targeting of leftist activists. We vehemently maintain that there is a fundamental distinction between groups calling for justice, equity, the end of state sanctioned murder, and an end to homelessness and poverty, and groups calling for the murder and abuse of vulnerable populations to aid in the dissolution of our democracy.

That fundamental difference must be recognized by content moderators at Telegram and other social media networks, and freedom of peaceful organization and protest must be maintained. Equating groups advocating for Black Lives or Anti-Fascism with those calling for genocide, murder, and race war to perpetuate systems of white supremacy only serves to assuage a misguided sense of fairness, and lacks both moral and ethical judgement.