

## **Facebook, Breastfeeding, and the Policing of Public Visibility**

Tarleton Gillespie is an assistant professor in the Departments of Communication and Information Science at Cornell University. He also teaches in the Department of Science & Technology Studies. He is a non-residential fellow with the Center for Internet and Society at the Stanford Law School (tlg28@cornell.edu).

All social media platforms police their content. They all have rules of some kind, they all have mechanisms for removing content or suspending users, they all have moderation teams to handle this process. For most users, it is easy to pass through these platforms without ever encountering these restrictions, so much so that it can be easy to imagine they do not exist, or to be ignorant of what they prohibit and what they allow. Other users are distinctly aware, running up against and sometimes contesting the guidelines regularly, finding their preferred cultural practices curtailed by the commercial platforms they have come to depend on. In the study of social media platforms, these rules and the manner in which they are enforced are an important but largely overlooked element of the socio-technical governance of sociality and public discourse.

A look at Facebook's years-long struggle to set and impose rules around breastfeeding photos highlights what it takes to assert and maintain editorial oversight in a new media environment. I want to suggest that where Facebook draws its lines on these issues matters for the contested issues themselves, and leaves a heavy footprint on an already contested public question - especially when the issue, like this one, is about public visibility. This case raises important questions about the impact of social media platforms on public space: some of the women affected by Facebook's rule are concerned that it will have an ancillary impact on the acceptability of breastfeeding in public spaces; some argue that Facebook is the public space of most concern, where their visibility and legitimacy matters most. Finally, it highlights how the platform itself can become a public site of contestation and activism: where the issue can be debated, where support can be gathered, and where both the rule and its imposition can be challenged.