

Basecamp's protest of Apple's policies is already benefiting other developers

A weird thing about running a tech company is that if you are very successful, at some point you will also be operating a vast quasi-legal system. Up to a certain point, one of your users complaining that they got locked out of their account is just a customer service problem. But after some threshold – after you've reached a billion people, certainly, but also well before then – the same complaint can look strangely like a human rights issue. Do you have the right to speak? Do you have the right to conduct business? And if you lose that right, to whom do you appeal?

That's one reason I suspect Basecamp's public protest of Apple and its App Store policies has gotten so much traction. Basecamp, you will remember, is a mid-sized 16-year-old company that makes project management software, and a week ago it introduced a new email service called Hey. Because email is the kind of service you expect to be accessible on all your devices, Basecamp made six native clients for Hey, including one for Apple's iOS. I installed it on my phone and used it without any issue during the time I was reviewing Hey.

But then Basecamp submitted its first bug fix release for Hey, and Apple rejected it. The issue: Hey did not let users sign up for the product within the app. Apple presented this purely as a customer experience issue – account creation is a necessary part of an email app – but it was also a revenue issue. Apple keeps 30 percent of revenue from signups like these, and Basecamp did not want to give it to them.

Eventually Apple said it had been a mistake to let Hey into the App Store to begin with.

If we lived in a world with more than two mobile phone operating systems, it seems unlikely that Apple would be able to take 30 percent of an email app's revenue just for hosting it in an app store. Instead the fees might resemble those in the more competitive payments industry, which hover in the low single-digit percentages. But more than 1.5 billion iOS devices are in use, and many of the customers who would potentially pay for Hey at \$99 a year are users of those devices and expect to find Hey there. Amid a flurry of interest lately in Apple's anticompetitive behavior from regulators here and in the European Union, Apple's obstinance in the Hey case drew outsized attention. What once might have been dismissed as a lone, cranky developer seemed symbolic of a larger of injustice.

It started to look, in other words, like something closer to a human rights issue.

The Basecamp developers are – and I say this with fondness – loudmouths, and they have seemed to relish in highlighting the various logical gaps and inconsistencies in the App Store's policies and their enforcement. Look close enough at any system of law or content moderation and it can start to feel arbitrary, but Apple's has proven to be particularly vulnerable to criticisms. What Apple has prevented Hey from doing, for example, it has allowed the much larger Netflix to do, because Netflix has been designated a "Reader" app, exempting it from offering sign-up within the app. Maybe there's a good, principled reason for holding email apps to one standard and video streaming apps to another. Or maybe Apple is just playing favorites.

In any case, users of the App Store don't get to vote, and neither does Hey.

What Hey could do, though, was embrace Apple's pretzel logic and concoct the strangest app imaginable, a dadaist take on email whose sole real purpose was to highlight the absurdity of software development in the modern era. And that's just what it did. Here's Nilay Patel writing Monday in *The Verge*:

Basecamp isn't done with the fight. The company has submitted a new version of Hey that meets the strict letter of Apple's rules but clearly defies their spirit: the company will now offer iOS users a free temporary Hey email account with a randomized address, just so the app is functional when it is first opened. These burner accounts will expire after 14 days. Hey is also now able to work with enterprise customers, as Apple initially took issue with the app's consumer focus.

Hey has not adopted Apple's own in-app payment system or allowed users to sign up for its full, paid service through the iOS app. Instead, users will still need to subscribe by going directly to Hey's website.

Surprisingly, it worked – at least for now. Hey is in the App Store as negotiations continue. And whether out of fear of antitrust regulation or a desire not to see this week's Worldwide Developer Conference overshadowed by a developer dispute, the historically obstinate Apple has even shown sides of yielding. Nick Statt had the surprising news at *The Verge*:

Apple today to how it handles App Store disputes with third-party developers. The first is that Apple will now allow developers to appeal a specific violation of an App Store guideline, and that there will also be a separate process for challenging the guideline itself. Additionally, Apple says it will no longer delay app updates intended to fix bugs and other core functions over App Store disputes.

“Additionally, two changes are coming to the app review process and will be implemented this summer. First, developers will not only be able to appeal decisions about

whether an app violates a given guideline of the App Store Review Guidelines, but will also have a mechanism to challenge the guideline itself,” reads a from Apple published this afternoon. “Second, for apps that are already on the App Store, bug fixes will no longer be delayed over guideline violations except for those related to legal issues. Developers will instead be able to address the issue in their next submission.”

Buried hundreds of words into a long press release about improvements to the developer experience, “a mechanism to challenge the guideline” doesn’t exactly leap off the page. At the moment, no other details are available. But these changes suggest that Apple is taking an important question – who has the right to conduct business? – more seriously than it has before, and might begin to answer it in a more rigorous and principled way.

At the moment, this “mechanism” sounds less ambitious than what Facebook is attempting with its Oversight Board, an independent group that later this year will begin hearing appeals from people who believe their posts have been removed in error. Facebook has spent more than two years developing the board, funded it with \$130 million, and it still isn’t operating quite yet.

But the basic idea is the same. If our entire working and personal lives are to be mediated by the policies of four or five for-profit corporations, those policies will have to shift from a mindset of customer service to one of justice. I find it heartening that Apple is moving down this path, even if took Basecamp dragging them there.

The Ratio

Today in news that could affect public perception of the big tech platforms.

Trending up: Twitter is giving US employees Election Day off from now on. Employees around the world will get paid time off to vote in national elections. (Barbara Ortutay / Associated Press)

Trending up: Facebook is adding spending trackers to every US Senate and House race through the Facebook Ad Library. The information will allow the public to track how much each candidate is spending on political ads on the platform. (Salvador Rodriguez / CNBC)

Trending up: Amazon launched a \$2 billion fund to advance technologies that will cut down greenhouse gases. The fund will help Amazon reach its goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2040. (Justine Calma / *The Verge*)

Trending down: But Amazon also said its carbon footprint rose 15 percent last year. The company revealed that activities tied to its businesses emitted 51.17 million metric tons of carbon dioxide in 2019, the equivalent of 13 coal burning power plants running for a year. (Joseph Pisani / Associated Press)

Governing

□ **Twitter** restricted a tweet from **President Trump** where he promised to use “serious force” if Washington, DC ever tried to create an autonomous zone like Seattle’s Capitol Hill Occupied Protest area. The company said the tweet violated its policy against abusive behavior. Adi Robertson at *The Verge* has the story:

Restricted tweets can’t be liked or replied to, although they can be retweeted with a comment. Despite this, Trump’s huge social media following almost guarantees any tweet will be widely seen on Twitter. So the decision is largely symbolic, but it helps Twitter stake out a position of acknowledging and acting on Trump’s problematic social media posts – in

contrast with Facebook, which has kept a largely hands-off approach but did remove a Trump ad for using Nazi imagery last week. A Facebook post with Trump's "serious force" message has so far not been labeled or removed.

Facebook suffered a setback in a key challenge to its advertising model, as Germany's highest civil court said that it has "no doubt" the social network misuses its dominant market position. The court ruled that Facebook must comply with a strict order curbing how it tracks users' browsing and smartphone apps. Facebook is appealing the decision. (Karin Matussek / Bloomberg)

Weeks after content moderators reached a \$52 million settlement with **Facebook** over trauma they suffered working for the company, many are being told that they must view some of the most disturbing content on the internet for an extra 48 minutes per day. (Sam Biddle / *The Intercept*)

Nine months after **Facebook** vowed to investigate abusive posts by anti-vaxxers, none of the users involved have been penalized. Anti-vaxxers have posted violent, horrific comments and death threats to vaccine advocates on the platform. (Elizabeth Cohen / CNN)

The police chief who helped create the "**Facebook** Unit" in Menlo Park abruptly stepped down on Friday, citing a loss of community trust. Earlier this month, local residents protested the police unit, and demanded Facebook cease funding the Menlo Park Police Department. (Sarah Emerson / *OneZero*)

More than 70 employees at **Mark Zuckerberg's** philanthropy are calling for significant internal change at the organization to combat systemic racism. Employees at the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative are asking management to commit to 12 changes that will make the philanthropy more inclusive. (Theodore Schleifer / *Recode*)

Facebook is suing a developer who is allegedly behind a data scraping campaign that took personal information, including login credentials, from thousands of people. Facebook has increasingly turned to lawsuits to stop data abuses on its platform in recent years. (Alfred Ng / CNET)

Twitter and **Apple** spoke out against Trump's suspension of a variety of guest worker visas. The new restrictions would fall particularly hard on H-1B visas, which are often used by tech companies to hire foreign workers without engaging a traditional immigration process. (Russell Brandom / *The Verge*)

Google also released a statement condemning the new restrictions, saying: "Immigrants have not only fueled technological breakthroughs and created new businesses and jobs but have also enriched American life." (Russell Brandom / *The Verge*)

A group of black **YouTube** creators filed a lawsuit regarding alleged racial discrimination in the YouTube algorithm. They say the platform has been systematically removing their content without explanation. (Reed Albergotti / *The Washington Post*)

The FBI used **Instagram**, an **Etsy** review, and **LinkedIn** to identify a protestor accused of setting two police cars on fire during recent protests in Philadelphia. The case shows how police have been able to use social media and other publicly-available online records to identify protesters from just a few scraps of initial information. (James Vincent / *The Verge*)

As local governments ease shelter-in-place restrictions related to the coronavirus pandemic, they're relying on contact tracing apps to help stop the spread of the disease. But the apps are far from ready for a major rollout, as this latest piece on the subject documents. (Rolfe Winkler and Patience Haggin / *The Wall Street Journal*)

China is cracking down on live-streaming services for “vulgar content” amid their explosion in popularity due to the coronavirus pandemic. The move is hitting big Chinese tech companies like **Tencent** and **ByteDance**. (Wayne Ma / The Information)

EU officials admitted the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has been difficult to implement and enforce. Regulators have struggled with a lack of clarity around how the rules apply to fields like artificial intelligence, blockchain and the internet of things, and the burden has fallen most heavily on small businesses. (Javier Espinoza / *Financial Times*)

Industry

□ More than 70 people in the gaming industry, most of them women, have come forward with allegations of gender-based discrimination, harassment and sexual assault since Friday. They have shared their stories on **Twitter**, **YouTube**, and **Twitch**. Here's Taylor Lorenz and Kellen Browning at *The New York Times*:

The outpouring of stories from competitive gamers and streamers, who broadcast their gameplay on platforms like Twitch for money, led to the resignation of the C.E.O. of a prominent talent management company for streamers and a moment of reflection for an industry that has often contended with sexism, bullying and allegations of abuse.

Already, the response has been a far cry from Gamergate in 2014, when women faced threats of death and sexual assault for critiquing the industry's male-dominated, sexist culture. Now, some are optimistic that real change could come.

Over the weekend, a former **Mixer** employee shared a blog describing his experiences with racism while working at **Microsoft's** streaming platform. The post included allegations

that upper level management refused to act when a racist analogy was used during a meeting. (Ian Walker / *Kotaku*)

As a streaming platform, **Mixer** was ultimately a failure. But it kicked off a talent war between the big streaming platforms that will likely continue even after Mixer no longer exists. (Andrew Webster / *The Verge*)

Microsoft's surprise closure of **Mixer** comes with a plan to port its creators over to **Facebook** Gaming. But it's difficult to find many Mixer streamers who are willing to move to Facebook instead of the much more popular, **Amazon**-owned **Twitch**. (Tom Warren / *The Verge*)

Pinterest sent an email to staff saying it will add a person of color to its board and will start evaluating managers based on diversity hiring. The news comes in response to employee concerns about racial disparities after two black former workers on the policy team said they faced discrimination there. (Sarah Frier / *Bloomberg*)

Facebook promoted tips to help users spot fake news. When scientists tested the effectiveness of the company's advice, the lessons appear to work. Encouraging news. (Kaveh Waddell / *Consumer Reports*)

Oculus is ending sales of its low-end Oculus Go virtual reality headset to focus on Oculus Quest. The company will maintain Oculus Go firmware through 2022 and accept new apps through December 2020, but it will stop selling Go hardware after the current stock runs out. (Adi Robertson / *The Verge*)

Accessibility advocates criticized **Twitter** for the lack of captions in the company's brand-new audio tweet feature. The company doesn't have a team dedicated to accessibility, instead relying on employees who volunteer their time above and beyond their usual duties. It's not a good look. (Kim Lyons / *The Verge*)

Social media influencers are actively participating in the online conversation about racial justice following the police killing of George Floyd and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. In the past, many say they lost followers for speaking out about politics. (Rachel E. Greenspan and Kat Tenbarge / *Insider*)

Things to do

Stuff to occupy you online during the quarantine.

Play a new game on Houseparty. It's called Word Racers and it looks fun!

Look at this botched art restoration. The destruction of our cultural heritage is a tragedy but also I can't stop laughing!

Subscribe to Bnet. Brian Feldman is an excellent internet culture writer who recently left *New York* magazine. His newsletter, Bnet, is a reliably sharp and entertaining guide to trending memes that you may or may not have already encountered. Half the posts are free; I'm a happy paying subscriber.

Watch a possum play tic-tac-toe. His name is Pablo and he's better than you might guess. (Via Bnet.)

And finally...

We couldn't wear masks for 3 months, so now we're going to have to wear them for 2 years.

– Laurie Kilmartin (@anylauriel6) June 21, 2020

Sometimes I wish we knew what happened in Germany in the 1940's but they tore down all the statues so it is impossible.

– Jennifer Wright (@JenAshleyWright) June 22, 2020

Talk to us

Send us tips, comments, questions, and appeals to the App Store review board: casey@theverge.com and zoe@theverge.com.

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