

Facebook removed posts on abortion pills even when they didn't break any rules



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The status of legal access to abortion is now prohibited, restricted, or uncertain in more than half of the US. However, abortion pills are still deemed safe by the Food and Drug Administration, and it's still legal for consulted certified prescribers to mail abortion pills to patients in any state. Thousands took to social media to post and raise awareness of options for mail-ordering abortion pills, only to

have their posts deleted within minutes, sparking user protests of censorship.

Facebook and Instagram confirmed in an Associated Press report that posts offering to mail abortion pills to people in states suddenly without access would continue to be removed.

These posts violate company policies that prohibit the gift or sale of pharmaceuticals or drugs on the platforms, a Meta spokesperson told AP.

On Instagram, Community Guidelines say that buying and selling pharmaceutical drugs is not allowed but do not directly state that posts offering pharmaceutical drugs as gifts or donations are banned.

That's different from Facebook's Community Standards, which state that only "legitimate healthcare e-commerce businesses" can make "attempts to buy, sell or trade pharmaceutical drugs." And nobody is allowed to post "attempts to donate or gift pharmaceutical drugs."

The only exceptions are made for Facebook posts asking to discuss "affordability, accessibility, or efficacy of pharmaceutical drugs in a medical context." Those are currently permitted. So, theoretically, posts telling others how to order abortion pills in the mail should remain visible.

However, a tweet from Meta spokesperson Andy Stone has confirmed that the company is investigating why some permitted posts have been incorrectly removed. Meta did not immediately respond to Ars' request for comment to clarify which kinds of posts have been incorrectly removed or when that issue will be resolved.

What triggers removal?

It's unclear what triggers the removal of Instagram or Facebook posts, but reports suggest enforcement of community

standards is inconsistent, and sometimes consequences are severe. Vice conducted tests on posts using varied references to abortion pills and reported that posting about abortion pills can lead to 24-hour account bans.

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A major point of contention for social media users has been Meta's inability to consistently distinguish between posts that say "abortion pills can be mailed" and posts directly offering to mail abortion pills. This means that sometimes perfectly allowable posts following community standards and discussing the accessibility of abortion pills are being flagged for removal.

The AP conducted tests similar to Vice, posting on Facebook, "If you send me your address, I will mail you abortion pills." That post was removed within a minute, but when AP changed from mentioning "abortion pills" to other regulated goods that Community Standards also ban—like "I will mail you a gun" or "weed"—those posts stayed up. The inconsistency in what phrasing prompts immediate removal leads to an impression that Meta more expediently removes posts regarding abortion pills.

When Facebook flags posts for removal, users have a choice to disagree or agree with the decision. Some users have disagreed and had their posts removed anyway, without experiencing temporary account bans, while Vice reported that some users who disagreed experienced 24-hour account bans.

Where Meta stands on abortion access

The sale of abortion pills in the US seems unlikely to be threatened by new state laws. Attorney General Merrick Garland stated clearly that "States may not ban mifepristone"—the medication used to induce an abortion—"based on disagreement with the FDA's expert judgment about its safety and efficacy."

As abortion procedures become less accessible across the US, advocates will likely continue to turn to social media to raise awareness of how to access abortion pills. A New York Times tracker shows nine states currently signaling interest in enacting new abortion restrictions, and The Washington Post recently reported that conversations around abortion are playing a significant role in the next election. Whether social media posts on abortion will be subjected to further restriction is a topic of concern.

This week Meta joined many companies in pledging to protect abortion access for employees by funding any out-of-state travel expenses. However, the company also came under fire for restricting employees from discussing abortion openly in the workplace. That introduces a seeming tension for any employees seeking to discuss out-of-state travel expenses and suggests at Meta, on the issue of abortion, inconsistency remains the rule.

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