

Concerns Raised Over Free Speech as Pro-Palestinian Content Faces Online Restrictions

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Human rights organisations have warned that pro-Palestinian online content in the United Kingdom could face increasing censorship under the combined effect of the Online Safety Act and the recent proscription of the protest group Palestine Action. The concern centres around how digital platforms may interpret or moderate content relating to Palestine, amid fears of overreach and confusion around what constitutes unlawful support.

A coalition of civil liberties organisations, including Index on Censorship and Open Rights Group, has written to Ofcom, the UK's independent communications regulator, to seek clarity, according to a report from *The Guardian*.

They argue that legitimate expressions of support for Palestinian civilians, criticism of the proscription, or discussion of nonviolent protest could be wrongly flagged as promoting terrorism. The letter also urges the regulator to consider the impact on marginalised communities and warns against disproportionate censorship.

Sara Chitseko, pre-crime programme manager at Open Rights Group, said: "Crucial public debate about Gaza is being threatened by vague, overly broad laws that could lead to content about Palestine being removed or hidden online. There's also a real danger that people will start self-censoring, worried they might be breaking the law just by sharing or liking posts related to Palestine and nonviolent direct action."

The letter notes that the United Kingdom, unlike the European Union, lacks a formal user appeal process for online content moderation decisions. As a result, those who find their posts removed or restricted have limited recourse. The rights groups are calling for the creation of a UK-based dispute resolution mechanism to ensure transparency and fairness in the moderation of lawful speech.

They also express concern that legal ambiguity may lead to widespread algorithmic suppression of content related to Palestine. "We are concerned that the proscription of Palestine Action may result in an escalation of platforms removing content, using algorithms to hide Palestine solidarity posts and leave individuals and those reporting on events vulnerable to surveillance or even criminalisation for simply sharing or liking content that references nonviolent direct action," the letter reads.

On 5 July, the UK government formally designated Palestine Action as a proscribed organisation under the Terrorism Act 2000, effectively making it a criminal offence to support the group. While the move targets a group accused of engaging in criminal damage as a form of protest, rights advocates argue that this development could have unintended consequences for broader discussions online relating to Palestinian rights and solidarity.

Under the Online Safety Act, which became law in 2023, online platforms are obligated to monitor and act on illegal and harmful content. However, Ofcom has stated that platforms are not required to take down lawful material intended for adult users. The regulator added

that companies must “carefully consider how they protect users’ rights to freedom of expression while keeping people safe.”

Despite this guidance, rights groups say major platforms, including those owned by *Meta*, *Alphabet*, *ByteDance*, and *X* (formerly Twitter), may choose to implement stricter censorship policies than legally necessary to avoid scrutiny. These policies often rely on automated moderation systems that critics say lack nuance, increasing the risk of suppressing political speech, particularly from minority groups.

The government has defended the proscription of Palestine Action, citing public safety concerns and the group’s tactics, which include targeting defence and arms industry sites. However, rights groups argue that the resulting atmosphere may have a chilling effect on free expression, stifling legitimate political commentary and debate on issues relating to the Middle East.