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Facebook's dispute resolution tool helpful, but needs work

BEYOND DISPUTE

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Not too long ago, Facebook launched an online dispute resolution tool to help people deal with issues arising out of annoying, insulting or even dangerous posts and photos. Under the new program, users now have a set of online tools with communication templates to help them handle disputes between themselves.

As described by Mary Novak of Resolution Systems Institute in her excellent blog at aboutrsi.org, the program has an elaborate decision tree that takes users through various screens depending on the selections they make. At various points, the program asks users to rate the strength of their emotions and even offers them a template to send a message to someone to try to resolve the matter.

For example, after selecting "I don't want to see this," a user is asked, "Why don't you want to see this photo?" The choices are: "It's annoying or not interesting," "I'm in this photo and I don't like it," "I think it shouldn't be on Facebook" or "It's spam." If the user selects "It's annoying," the next screen appears, and the choices are: "It's trying to sell me something," "It's trying to get me to like or share something," "I don't care about posts from x," "Too many posts from x in my feed," "It's silly and trying too hard to amuse" or "Something else."

One of the most interesting aspects of the new program is the backstory on why certain language appears in the various templates offered to users hoping to resolve their disputes. Researchers helped Facebook by trying various word choices and looking at how users responded. When few users picked the offered selections, the researchers changed the language and tried again.

The research confirmed what leaders in non-violent communication such as Marshall Rosenberg and Sharon Strand Ellison have been telling us for a long time: Word choice is critical in dispute resolution.

According to Novak, in the first iteration, the original choices offered for why a user didn't like a particular post were: "It's embarrassing," "It insults me by name," "It's threatening" and "Something else." In practice, 85 percent of users either chose "Something else" or dropped out. The researchers kept tweaking the language until the language seemed to strike a chord, and usage went up.

It also turns out that your mother was right and the word "please" is very important to people. When researchers substituted "please" for "would you mind" in a request to take down a post, the requests were honored more frequently.

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The language choices also vary geographically to reflect local culture, such as the sensitivity in India to posts that make fun of celebrities.

Perhaps the most important, if not surprising, finding in the research, was that there was an enormous disconnect between what people thought was intended by a particular post and what the person who posted it reported about intention. Most of the people posting things thought others would like it or find it interesting, and the recipients made a lot of negative assumptions about what the poster was thinking.

Although the tools are helpful because they encourage direct communication and offer specific language suggestions — and Facebook should be applauded for these efforts as well as for creating a resource center for cyberbullying — the new system does not do enough to actually teach people how to resolve conflicts.

From the videos Facebook has posted of its consultants and company experts describing the development process, it is clear that it was difficult for the company to find the right balance between providing more nuanced conflict resolution guidance to users and keeping users engaged. The earlier iterations of the program had many more communication template screens, but apparently, many users did not read through the available information. In the end, Facebook made a decision to keep the templates very short for all users because of limited attention spans.

This is a real loss. With Facebook's global reach, Facebook could be providing resources that actually teach users something about conflict resolution. Why not have links for those who are interested to videos of simulated conflict resolution, articles on negotiation and dispute resolution, lectures by leading experts and mediation resources embedded into the dispute resolution program?

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What if everyone who ever had a dispute arising out of a Facebook post were given the chance to learn conflict resolution skills?

For example, looking for interests behind positions, employing active listening skills, considering the likelihood of erroneous assumptions about others' intentions and generating creative solutions?

Given the profits that Facebook is making from a product that many experts feel is decreasing society's ability to interact positively and peacefully, Facebook in particular has an ethical obligation to do more in this area.

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