

Is Censorship of Private Communications the “New Normal”?

Analysis by [Tessa Lena](#) | January 20, 2023

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Censorship of private communications is knocking on the door, and the first signs are here
- › Companies like Google are known for censoring incoming email and their cloud storage, too
- › New development: Outgoing private email not related to Google may have to pass the blackbox “spam” check before it can be sent
- › In a 2018 lawsuit, T-Mobile claimed their right to use “discretion” over certain types of SMS communication over their networks
- › In 2021, Biden allied groups, including the DNC, said that they “planned to engage fact-checkers more aggressively and work with SMS carriers to dispel misinformation about vaccines that is sent over social media and text messages”

In 1917, as a part of their successful military coup in Petrograd, the Bolsheviks famously made sure to, first and foremost, take control of the railway stations, the bridges, the postal office, the telephone service, and the telegraph. Taking over the communications was a critical piece of the coup.

As a [Soviet kid](#) learning history at school, I had that statement (“postal office, telephone, telegraph”) practically drilled into my head. It was supposed to demonstrate the genius strategic thinking of the Bolsheviks.

The point about taking over the communications came to my mind the other day when I was trying to send a private email, from my own domain, and it just wouldn't even send because my server perceived it as "spam." I had to make a few guesses and edit the text of the email in order for the server allow it to go through.

We already know that **Google** censors their **incoming Gmail email** as well as their **Google Drive**. And many of us have been dealing with our private emails from "politically incorrect" domains getting rejected by recipient servers, occasionally disappearing without trace, etc.

But the outgoing mail on my own domain (it's a small hosting company, not any of those giants)? I thought it was crazy. It was a private email, not a newsletter, not a "BCC," just a regular private email that I wrote in response to something a reader had sent. And it wasn't rejected by the recipient — it was rejected by my own hosting company's mail server! How crazy is that?

It wasn't an isolated occasion, either. Recently, it started happening more often, sometimes, a couple of times a day. And I want to discuss it now, while censoring private communications still a nascent trend. It is important to be aware of this trend to and object to it in real time, or else we'll end up living with it, which can barely be called "life."

In my case, to figure out the issue, I wrote to my hosting company, and the explanation that I got from the technical team was that the server automatically assigns a "spam score" to each outgoing email — and if the score is high, the server won't send it so as not to compromise the hosting company's reputation and not to land them on the "spammer" list.

"These security rules are crucial to ensure that compromised email accounts from you or any of the other users sharing the mail server are not sending spam (or mail that is interpreted as spam by the recipients system) which will get the mail server on an RBL / Reputation list resulting in none of your email being accepted."

“This means either there is an issue with the specific syntax or content of the email you are sending or there is something within your system environment (old software, excessive links in signature, virus, attachment mime type, link to phishing or malware site, connecting IP is on an RBL or Reputation list and any of these factors could increase the spam score of the email you are attempting to send causing it to be refused.”

“These systems are automated and work very reliably but there can always be an edge case where an email you think should go through will still trigger the filter due to the total score of the email.”

What a fascinating domino effect! And what a way to influence people’s thought! I, a sovereign citizen, had to paraphrase my private email (that, by the way, didn’t contain anything particularly outrageous in the first place but it shouldn’t even matter) in order for me to have the “privilege” of actually sending it.

Siri, what does this do to the neuronal pathways of the people who are forced to even privately talk in ways that please robots? And, Siri, do you know who **controls the algorithm**? And what will happen if the centrally managed “outgoing mail” algorithm starts banning certain medical information in private communications? Or flirting? Or swearing? Or any contrarian discussions about “climate”? Or anything else?

The Influence of Big Tech Algorithms on Journalism

I remember how it started — or rather, continued — in the media back in the day, in addition to the separate topic of direct **media influence by the alphabets**, which is also a thing. When Google and Facebook became the dominant dispatchers of traffic and the self-appointed kings of “page views,” writing in a “SEO-friendly” manner became a must if you worked in journalism.

If you worked for a media outlet, you couldn’t just pour your heart out and write like a normal human being. You had write both for the people and for the robots. You had to

write as if a robot has possessed you, or else your story would get no views. And it's not such a hard skill to learn but after you do it for some time, it eats your soul.

To add insult to injury, both traffic kings, Google and Facebook, kept changing their algorithms randomly – and the journalists had to keep up in order to ensure that their companies stayed afloat, and they kept their jobs.

And yet, by the extra crazy “new normal” standards of 2022, “back in the day” wasn't even a bad time! At least we could more or less say things we thought. No, not all things, of course – but most things. Wow, that says something about where we are right now.

“The Healthy Apologize to the Sick”

A couple of years before COVID showed up, I wrote this innocent poem and also this, by today's standards, very timid, [warning](#) against social media censorship. At the time, I was looking at the trends and worried that we would be rendered helpless by the algorithm, and driven increasingly crazy by irrational rules impacting our sanity and our ability to eat.

Back then, criticizing Big Tech was a lonely and unpopular affair – but booooy, did all the warning come true in the past three years – and more!

The healthy apologize to the sick,
The ones with a heart
Dance for the robots.
What is this?
Certainly, not the world I live in,
No.

Censorship of Private Texts: The T-Mobile Claim

In 2022, the news about social media censorship is no longer news. But how about the censorship of what we say to each privately, via traditionally “uncensored” media like

text messages or email? Here is Wired [article](#) from 2018 that looks at a legal case in which T-Mobile claimed that they had the right to use discretion over a particular kind of text messages:

“T-Mobile told a federal judge Wednesday it may pick and choose which text messages to deliver on its network in a case weighing whether wireless carriers have the same “must carry” obligations as wire-line telephone providers.”

“The Bellevue, Washington-based wireless service is being sued by a texting service claiming T-Mobile stopped servicing its ‘short code’ clients after it signed up a California medical marijuana dispensary. In a court filing, T-Mobile said it had the right to pre-approve EZ Texting’s clientele, which it said the New York-based texting service failed to submit for approval.”

“T-Mobile, the company wrote in a [filing](#) (.pdf) in New York federal court, ‘has discretion to require pre-approval for any short-code marketing campaigns run on its network, and to enforce its guidelines by terminating programs for which a content provider failed to obtain the necessary approval.’”

“Such approval is necessary, T-Mobile added, ‘to protect the carrier and its customers from potentially illegal, fraudulent, or offensive marketing campaigns conducted on its network.’ It’s the first federal case testing whether wireless providers may block text messages they don’t like.”

According to [JUSTIA](#), the most recent update on the case is that “the plaintiff(s) and or their counsel(s), hereby give notice that the above-captioned action is voluntarily dismissed.” Was the precedent set?

“Fact – Checking” Our Private Text Messages

Most recently, in July 2021, [Politico](#) reported a call for censoring private text messages, causing an uproar:

*“Biden allied groups, including the Democratic National Committee, are also planning to engage fact-checkers more aggressively and **work with SMS carriers to dispel misinformation about vaccines that is sent over social media and text messages [emphasis mine].***

The goal is to ensure that people who may have difficulty getting a vaccination because of issues like transportation see those barriers lessened or removed entirely.”

“We are steadfastly committed to keeping politics out of the effort to get every American vaccinated so that we can save lives and help our economy further recover,” White House spokesperson Kevin Munoz said. “When we see deliberate efforts to spread misinformation, we view that as an impediment to the country’s public health and will not shy away from calling that out.”

It seems it didn’t go very far, and a year after that outrageous claim, we can still text more or less freely (thank you, dear masters, you are very kind).

But I think that censoring our private communications is where it is going — and fast — unless we object to all censorship in real time, and keep objecting to it loud and clear, now and until it goes away. Life under the “new normal” isn’t fun.

About the Author

To find more of Tessa Lena's work, be sure to check out her bio, [Tessa Fights Robots](#).