

Echos of McCarthyism as Hearst censors employees in response to growing solidarity with Palestine

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New York, November 10 (RHC)-- Media giant Hearst is instituting a new social media policy that bans its employees, including its journalists, from expressing “personal political opinions” online. “Hearst is declaring that our channels for personal expression are company property, even when we’re off the clock,” Hearst Magazines Media Union said in a statement.

Political posts, such as personal views about political candidates or opinions about Israel’s war on Gaza, must first be reviewed by a supervisor before being posted on staff’s personal social media accounts. Staff who violate the rule are subject to discipline. The policy also encourages staff to report their coworkers for posts that they view as “inflammatory.”

“We should be careful to consider the impact that a controversial statement on a hot-button issue may have on Hearst’s reputation,” the policy, which was shared with The Washington Post, reads.

“As Palestinians lose their lives, Western media loses the last shreds of its credibility,” one observer said.

Palestine Legal, a U.S.-based advocacy group that defends people who support Palestinian rights, believe that the implementation of this policy is in direct response to growing solidarity with Palestine. “This is #McCarythism,” the group said on social media.

In mid-October, Samira Nasr, editor-in-chief of Hearst-owned Harper’s Bazaar, was forced to apologize after posting an Instagram story where she called the Israeli siege of Gaza “the most inhuman thing I’ve seen in my life.”

On Monday, Hearst Magazines Media Union shared the new policy on social media, urging members to not sign the restrictive policy while legal review is underway. On Wednesday, the union filed an unfair labor practices complaint with the National Labor Relations Board, arguing that the policy should have been negotiated with the union first before going into effect.

“Today, @Hearst Magazines released a social media policy that restricts our speech on our private social channels. Do not sign it! The @WGAEast legal team is looking it over and will be in touch about what comes next,” the union said on social media.

The union also expressed concern about the vagueness of the policy, saying that it could be used by the company as a pretext to fire employees from marginalized backgrounds, such as LGBTQIA+ staffers who share pro-LGBTQ content online.

“It feels like a drastic overreach on the part of our parent company,” Lizz Schumer, a senior editor and union shop steward at Good Housekeeping, a Hearst magazine, told The Washington Post.

In recent weeks, Palestine Legal has been getting “dozens of reports of firings — an exponential increase like nothing we’ve seen before,” Palestine Legal Senior Staff Attorney Radhika Sainath recently told The Cut.

Multiple journalists have been publicly fired and taken off air for sharing content with pro-Palestine sentiment on their personal social media accounts. In October, the editor of the magazine Artforum, David Velasco, was fired after his magazine published an open letter in support of Palestine. Velasco’s firing sparked resignations by the magazine’s staff and calls for writers and artists to boycott the publication. Last week, New York Times Magazine writer Jazmine Hughes resigned after allegedly violating newsroom policy by signing an open letter that accused Israel of genocide.

The Palestinian Youth Movement (PYM), a transnational, independent, grassroots movement of young Palestinians in Palestine and in exile worldwide, has called on media workers’ unions to demand an end to biased pro-Israel coverage of the conflict and to the targeting of pro-Palestine journalists.

“SHUT IT DOWN,” the group said on social media. “Western media is not only implicated in the genocide unfolding in Gaza through its double standards against Palestinians, but through its deep institutional complicity and collusion with the governments that are funding and committing this genocide.”

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