

Protesting a Facebook ban on photographs of lactating b...

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A simultaneous "virtual protest" will be held online, when women change their standard Facebook snapshot to a photo of themselves nursing — or, in the spirit of the holidays, an image of Madonna with child. Even an image of any mammal feeding her young will do, say organizers with the group Mothers International Lactation Campaign.

Facebook has removed these photos from members' albums and profiles, saying that displays of areola — the dark skin around the nipple — violate the company's policy regarding "obscene, pornographic or sexually explicit" material. Facebook also threatened to terminate the members' accounts. The social-networking site MySpace also has deleted photos of babies nursing from exposed breasts.

"What about a baby breast-feeding is obscene? Especially in comparison to MANY other pictures posted all over Facebook that really are obscene?" the event organizers asked on their Web site, called "Hey Facebook, breast-feeding is not obscene!"

One of the images deleted was a portrait of San Jose's Patricia Madden and daughters Zoe and Isobel, photographed while feeding in the bathtub. The birth doula, who encourages new mothers to breast-feed, was photographed by her husband.

"It's amazing to me that we're living in a world where people are upset by this," she said. "You can't see my nipples. It's completely legal to breast-feed in public. Breast-feeding is completely natural and healthy. They took off the photo, without my permission."

Facebook says its policies are designed to ensure its Web site remains a safe, secure and trusted environment for all users, including the many teenagers who use the site.

To decide what's appropriate, the company had to decide "how much of someone's butt must be showing or, in this case, how much of the breast. We've made a visible areola the determining factor. It is a common standard," said spokesman Barry Schnitt.

Facebook takes no action on the vast majority of breast-feeding photos, Schnitt said. "We agree that breast-feeding is natural and beautiful and we're very glad to know that it is so important to some mothers to share this experience with others on Facebook."

The issue has inspired a national conversation over privacy, free speech and the right of a business to control content.

So while it is legal to publicly breast-feed in 40 states, the same behavior can get you ejected from Facebook and MySpace (and, for the record, the pages of the Mercury News). Their terms of service give the companies the discretion to "prescreen, refuse or remove any content." While they aren't required to police content, they aren't prohibited from doing so.

Other Internet sites have different policies. The site LiveJournal exempts non-sexualized art and breast-feeding. YouTube features a video of a 7-year-old being breast-fed, then interviewed about the experience.

Companies in charge of seemingly "public" spaces write their own rules for users, said social-network analysts.

"I generally feel that when something offends a person, they should just stop looking or reading. But in the end, the companies who literally own the space have to set the standards — as baffling as they may be to me," said network expert Shel Israel.

Marjorie Heins, founder of the New York-based Free Expression Policy Project, agreed that Facebook had the legal right to pull the photos, but added:

"As a matter of public policy, of course, this is ridiculous. Facebook is a bulletin board and should allow folks a fair amount of freedom in what they want to post. Nursing mothers are a far cry from hard-core porn, and even Facebook should be able to tell the difference."

Despite their category as "social" networks, these are private businesses, said Charlene Li, co-author of the book "Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies."

"What people forget, when they say 'I do have a right, it's my page,' is that the page is provided to you as a service," said Li, herself a breast-feeding mom.

Facebook prefers faces. And despite its name, MySpace "is their space. It's really up to them, as a media company," she said.

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