

It's Time for the Press to Push Back Against Appl...

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It's Time for the Press to Push Back Against Apple

Yank iPad apps unless Apple cedes complete control over the right to publish

By Ryan Chittum

The Nieman Journalism Lab's Laura McGann has a disturbing report that ought to perk up every news organization that sees Apple's iPad as part of its future.

McGann talked to Mark Fiore, who won a Pulitzer this week for his trenchant editorial cartoons. Apple has denied his iPhone (and thus iPad) application because in the mega-corporation's own words, "it contains content that ridicules public figures" and violates its license, which says (emphasis mine):

Applications may be rejected if they contain content or materials of any kind (text, graphics, images, photographs, sounds, etc.) that in Apple's reasonable judgement may be found objectionable, for example, materials that may be considered obscene, pornographic, or defamatory."

"Ridicules public figures" is pretty much top of the job description for editorial cartoonists, who have been a critical part of our free press for a couple of centuries longer than investigative reporters have.

For a week now, Dan Gillmor has been asking news organizations to answer questions about how Apple's policy might affect them:

That's only one issue I raised with the Times' spokesman. Here's another, which I've also raised with Nisenholtz and people at the Wall Street Journal and USA Today: Does Apple, which maintains control over what iPad apps are made available, have the unilateral right to remove these journalism organizations' news apps if the apps deliver information to audiences that Apple considers unacceptable for any reason?

No one has answered the question.

They still haven't, and that is unacceptable.

McGann points to Wired's Brian X. Chen, who warned in February that:

Publishers should think twice before worshipping the iPad as the future platform for magazines and newspapers. That is, if they value their independence from an often-capricious corporate gatekeeper.

Look, let's face it. The iPad is the most exciting opportunity for the media in many years. But if the press is ceding gatekeeper status, even if it's only nominally, over its speech, then it is making a dangerous mistake. Unless Apple explicitly gives the press complete control over its ability to publish what it sees fit, the news media needs to yank its apps in protest.

Yes, this is that serious. It needs to wrest back control of its speech from Apple Inc.

It's easy to do it now while the press has leverage over Apple. If the iPad becomes a significant driver of media revenue, and Apple decides to crack down, it will be too late (yes, the iPad has a Web browser, but the monetary leverage it could gain with apps is what's concerning).

The press has got to step back and think about the broad implications of this. It would never let the government have such power over its right to publish. It shouldn't let any corporation have it, either. While it's at it, the media should campaign against speech restrictions for everybody.

And this is a good excuse to more closely scrutinize the market influence that Apple, now the third largest corporation (UPDATE: by market capitalization, I should have said) in America, behind Exxon and Microsoft, is gaining on markets, including software development.

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