Facebook says it might block Canadians' access to news

By MARIE WOOLF

OTTAWA - Facebook says it is considering blocking Canadians' access to news sites on its platform, in response to a proposed federal law that would force it to compensate media outlets for carrying links to their articles.

The tech giant upped the stakes in the battle over the online news bill, warning it may block Canadians from sharing or viewing news content out of frustration over the government's "misguided" approach.

Facebook issued its warning after it was not called to give evidence before a Commons committee considering Bill C-18 to voice its concerns and suggest changes, alongside Google.

Rachel Curran, public policy manager at Facebook, told The Globe and Mail: "We are surprised not to be part of the discussion at the committee."

In Australia last year, the platform temporarily blocked access to news on its platforms in response to a similar law. Australians woke up to find that Facebook pages with local and world news sites were unavailable.

The platform lifted the ban days later after an Australian minister held talks with Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg, and agreed to make amendments to the bill.

Marc Dinsdale, head of media partnerships for Canada at Facebook, said in a blog: "If this draft legislation becomes law, creating globally unprecedented forms of financial liability for news links or content, we may be forced to consider whether we continue to allow the sharing of news content on Facebook in Canada as defined under the Online News Act."

He said Canada is "incredibly important" to the platform.

"But faced with adverse legislation that is based on false assumptions that defy the logic of how Facebook works, we feel it is important to be transparent about the possibility that we may be forced to consider whether we continue to allow the sharing of news content in Canada," he said.

Paul Deegan, president of News Media Canada, said Facebook was threatening Canadians.

"It's déjà vu all over again from their Australian playbook. Canadians will not be cowed by threats," he said.

But Michael Geist, the University of Ottawa's Canada Research Chair in internet law, accused the government of stifling scrutiny of the bill by not setting aside parliamentary time to allow Facebook to be called as a committee witness.

"The decision to shut down witnesses at the Bill C-18 hearing is particularly problematic given the importance of the bill, and the Parliamentary Budget Officer's estimate that the majority of revenue will go to the CBC and broadcast giants such as Bell," he said.

On Friday, Heritage Minister Pablo Rodriguez and Ian Scott, chair of the Canadian Radio-televisio
tions Commission, which would regulate deals between platforms and news groups if the bill becomes law, gave evidence to the Commons heritage committee on C-18.

Mr. Rodriguez said the bill was about safeguarding the future of journalism and allowing Canadians access to reliable and authoritative news.

"A free and independent press is one of the pillars of our democracy," he said. "What we are talking about here is about the very existence of independent journalism - we're talking about its survival."

Asked by a Conservative MP whether he was concerned about the possibility of Facebook blocking Canadians' access to news sites, as it had in Australia, Mr. Rodriguez said: "It's a business decision to be taken by the platform."

He later told The Globe that the government was having constructive conversations with Facebook as recently as last week. "All we're asking the tech giants like Facebook to do is negotiate fair deals with news outlets when they profit from their work."

Mr. Dinsdale said the government's approach was "misguided" and urged the federal government to work with the platform to make changes to Bill C-18. He estimated that Facebook sends publishers "more than 1.9 billion clicks a year" worth hundreds of millions of dollars to the news industry each year.

"How can $230-million of free marketing not be considered as a contribution to the news industry?" he told The Globe.

Posts with links to news articles make up less than 3 per cent of what people see in their Facebook feed, he said, and Canadians had told the platform they want to see less news and politics on the site.

Google suggested amendments to C-18 on Friday, including changes to allow the smallest community papers to opt into the scheme.

In some provinces, around half of community newspapers are too small to qualify for any compensation, because they do not employ two staff, even though a key aim of the bill is to support struggling local papers.

Google said in its submission to the committee that news groups that adhere to "basic journalistic standards" should be eligible for compensation.

But it wants changes to be made to the wording of the bill to stop "foreign propagandists" and "bad actors" such as the Russiansponsored news outlets RT and Sputnik, from receiving funding.

Jason Kee, government affairs and public policy counsel for Google, said the current bill "basically means that any two people running a blog can actually qualify - foreign outlets can qualify. This is actually going to compel a platform like us to both fund and support low-quality outlets."

Google says it also wants the government to abolish what it calls a "link tax" which would make it compensate a news group for a link to a website or news article. It proposes having to pay a news group only if it carries the text of an article in full.