

Trans people have 99 problems, and Facebook is just one

By Guest

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Abstract

A personal reflection on the abuse of weaponization of Facebook's "Real Name" Policy By Emmagene Cronin I woke up Monday morning, the first day of Trans Awareness Week, as I do everyday before I'm off to classes. I get myself out of bed after hitting the alarm a few times, and then I trot downstairs to make [...]

Article

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By Emmagene Cronin

I woke up Monday morning, the first day of Trans Awareness Week, as I do everyday before I'm off to classes. I get myself out of bed after hitting the alarm a few times, and then I trot downstairs to make myself some coffee and read a news story or two while I try to wake up from the lack of sleep I know I just got. I then go turn the heater on in the bathroom and check my emails, text messages, tweets, and Facebook messages I may have received since I went to bed. Plans change quickly as a student, mom, and activist, so I have to make sure all my communication bases are covered. I had no important messages about a class cancellation, nothing pertaining to the kids, and only a few tweets to go through. I got to the point where I was going to check Facebook, but when I opened the app on my phone, I was immediately logged out. I thought, "Great, here we go iOS 8 problems to start out the day", so I went to my computer - Yosemite seems to be doing so much better out the gate.

It turns out that the problem wasn't my phone. The issue was Facebook itself. For anyone that remembers, way back in September, news broke that Facebook's "real name" policy was being used to target members of the LGBTQ community, most notably drag queens and trans people. It took no time to find out that this policy just hadn't been weaponized against a small group of people, but was instead affecting thousands of people. It didn't take long before trans-antagonistic individuals and trans-exclusionary radical feminists began weaponizing this specifically to silence, shame, and humiliate transgender people. For those that may not be aware, trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERF) are a group of individuals that actively, as well as consistently, target transgender people for harassment and abuse, especially those transgender people that decide to speak up against their misguided, but still harmful, hate. Using Facebook's policy as a form of harassment is not something that would be out of the ordinary for this small splinter hate group hidden within feminism.

A lot of people may think, so what's the big deal; why don't people just hand over their ID's and prove their identity? That seems like the easiest thing to do, and I admit, when considering this, I initially thought that myself. Many of us don't take the necessary time to stop and evaluate our thoughts and actions and determine how those are being formed based off of our many intersecting privileges that could be used to determine all of those thoughts and ideas. After reading that first story, I took some time to think about it. I didn't take me long at all to realize that, in many cases as a trans person, I am insulated from many of the problems that face the trans community as a whole. I'm a white lower to middle-class trans woman, in liberal leaning college with enough money to make ends meet. As a person that is in the process of claiming an education to become an attorney, as well as someone who worked as a volunteer paralegal for a prominent local legal services firm for low-income individuals, I have a better than working knowledge of the legal system. I also have the means to be able to use that system.

For me, the court system isn't some mystical, frightening, and anxiety-provoking monolith it seems to be for many people. As a paralegal, you do a lot of the legwork for the court system, and a significant amount of that is spent preparing cases for hearings. When it came time for my name change, I knew exactly where to look, what forms to file, what documents needed to be presented, and the entire process necessary to change my name. For me, it was something that was quick and painless. Also, as a disabled veteran, I have access to VA care, which allowed me to secure the additional documentation I needed to complete my name and gender change on all of my documents. If you would like some more specifics on these individuals, please look through the articles here at the Transadvocate or The TERFS for a bit more information.

I didn't have very many variables that could get in the way of being able to scrap the money together to pay for all of this: the name change filing fee, processing fees, passport fees, reissuance of my driver's license, amended fees for my birth certificate, and notarization of all of the above and additional copies of all that could be copied. So I'm extremely privileged when it comes to legal matters as they pertain to trans people, and though I wouldn't call it class privilege, I had managed to save enough money to change all my documents. This is just something that many within the trans community don't have access to; proper identification is a pipe dream for many trans people because there are a lot of issues that make that an impossibility.

It boils down to access of identification being a systemic issue among the trans community. I had spent a lot of time talking to other trans folk, via Facebook ironically, and discussing our concerns, and in some cases fears, of how this policy may be used against them. I was concerned about it, but for the most part I compartmentalized those fears that I knew I also had because I held up the false hope that I can easily prove who I am, that issue wouldn't affect me.

On Wednesday October 1st, Chris Cox of Facebook posted an apology for the problems the companies "real name" policy had caused and assured the world that Facebook was fixing it. It appeared as though everyone's concerns and fears could be let go and they could relax. Within a day or two of Cox's apology, some of my friends had fallen victim to Facebook's weaponized "real name" policy. Despite the fact, just a few days prior, Facebook had assured everyone that problems were already being corrected, is the fact that most of the people in my circle being targeted were openly, and unapologetically, trans. Trans-exclusionary radical feminists and right-wing bigots were abusing Facebook's well-intentioned policy, and using it as a weapon to abuse, harass, and intimidate trans

people. Within a day of some trans activists confronting trans-antagonism on almost every form of social media, these activists were being suspended from Facebook for violations of the real name policy. This is only a small portion of the transgender community that was continuing to be targeted.

I fell victim to this harassment, intimidation, and abuse on October 16th. In this specific case I was targeted for speaking out against the bigoted and hateful comments being made about Jennifer Laude's violent murder. Many of my friends could probably tell you that wasn't one of my best weeks. As a matter of fact, it was probably one of my worst, if not the worst. I actually ended that week moments from committing suicide, had it not been for a few words on the top of a piece of mail. I'm actually very glad that everything that transpired over the week happened in the manner that it did. I'll save the details for just about all of it, except that being victimized by this weaponized Facebook policy was about halfway through this horrible week. Had it happened a day later, I'm positive that might have been worse, but it didn't end up that way.

When it happened, I was immediately met with a message that I had been reported for using a fake name. Even though I had the tools to get past this, I didn't expect to be so emotionally affected by it. At that time, in order to get access to your account, you were forced to alter your name before ever getting the chance to show your ID. I couldn't use the very documents I was relying on to help me; I felt so completely powerless; if erasure has a specific set of feelings, those ones I felt were certainly it. I was forced to change my real name, the one that completely complies with Facebook's policy, to one that would be in violation of it.

I felt absolutely horrible. You don't really realize what a name is until its taken from you. I was devastated by it. I had fought to be the person that I am, to the extent that I was almost beaten to death for it, had it not been for a bystander that attempted to intervene. I managed to get away with having to have my right eyebrow reattached to my face - I still can't feel very much in that part of my face - and a massive scar from having several inches of skin ripped from my leg. I fought for my identity, I fought for my name, and I fought for my life.

Facebook judged first, and asked questions later. This was a broken system. After several hours, I decided to remove one letter from my name, because there was never a chance I was going to deadname myself. This hurt, and it hurt a lot. I felt like I was being robbed of my identity and very existence, and it cut me to pieces. I felt lost in a sense.

The appeal process at the time was absolutely horrible - if you could find it. It required several different links to get to an obscure page to finally prove yourself - again if you have those documents. I was further traumatized by the chain of emails sent during the verification process that kept triggering me, until finally having my name restored. There are still many people that can't achieve that, so I consider myself one of the lucky ones. This was my first time being harassed, intimidated, and abused by the weaponization and abuse of Facebook's "real name" policy. I provided Facebook with five forms of government documents to prove my identity: My Driver's license, US Passport, US Social Security Card, Birth Certificate, and a copy of the notarized Order of Name change.

Yesterday, just a few days over a month after being forced through this process - after having been assured at the end of the first process that it wouldn't happen again - I was being subjected to it again. This time the process was different. Here is the message you now receive when you are forced to

abandon your identity.

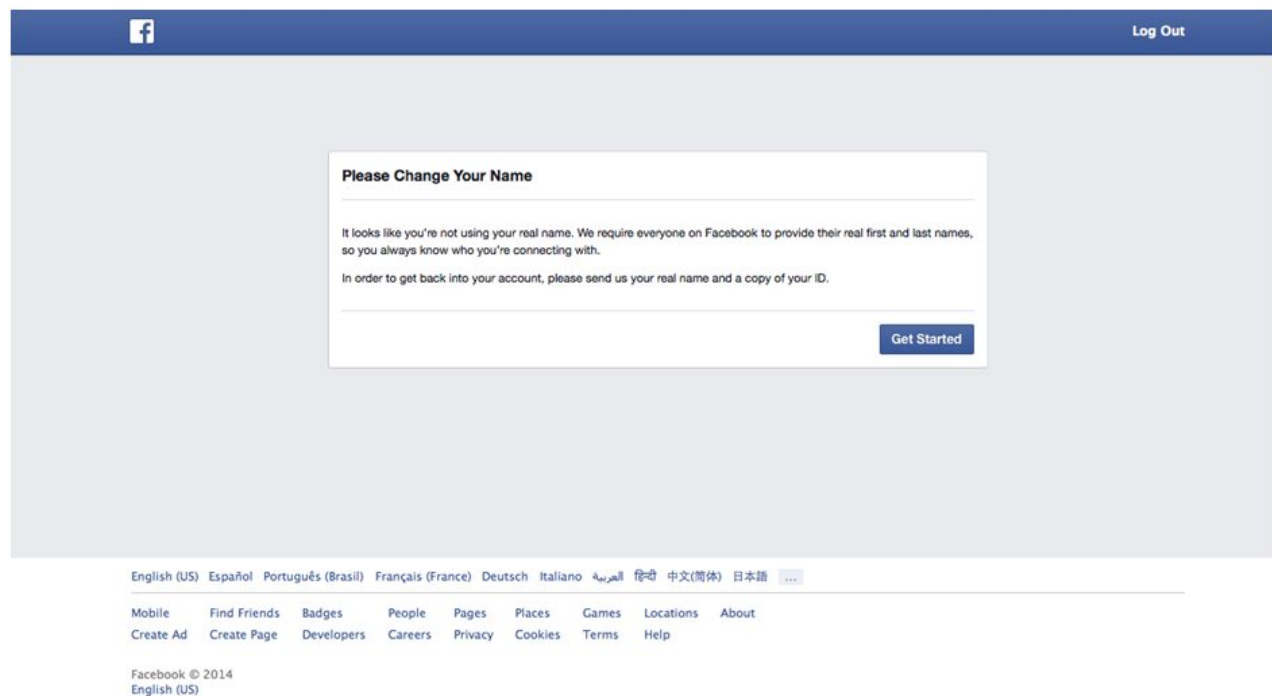


Figure 1. NvmV2fr[1]

Yes, let's "get started" with Facebook being used as a weapon against me to harass, intimidate, and untimely silence me - you are then presented with this screen.

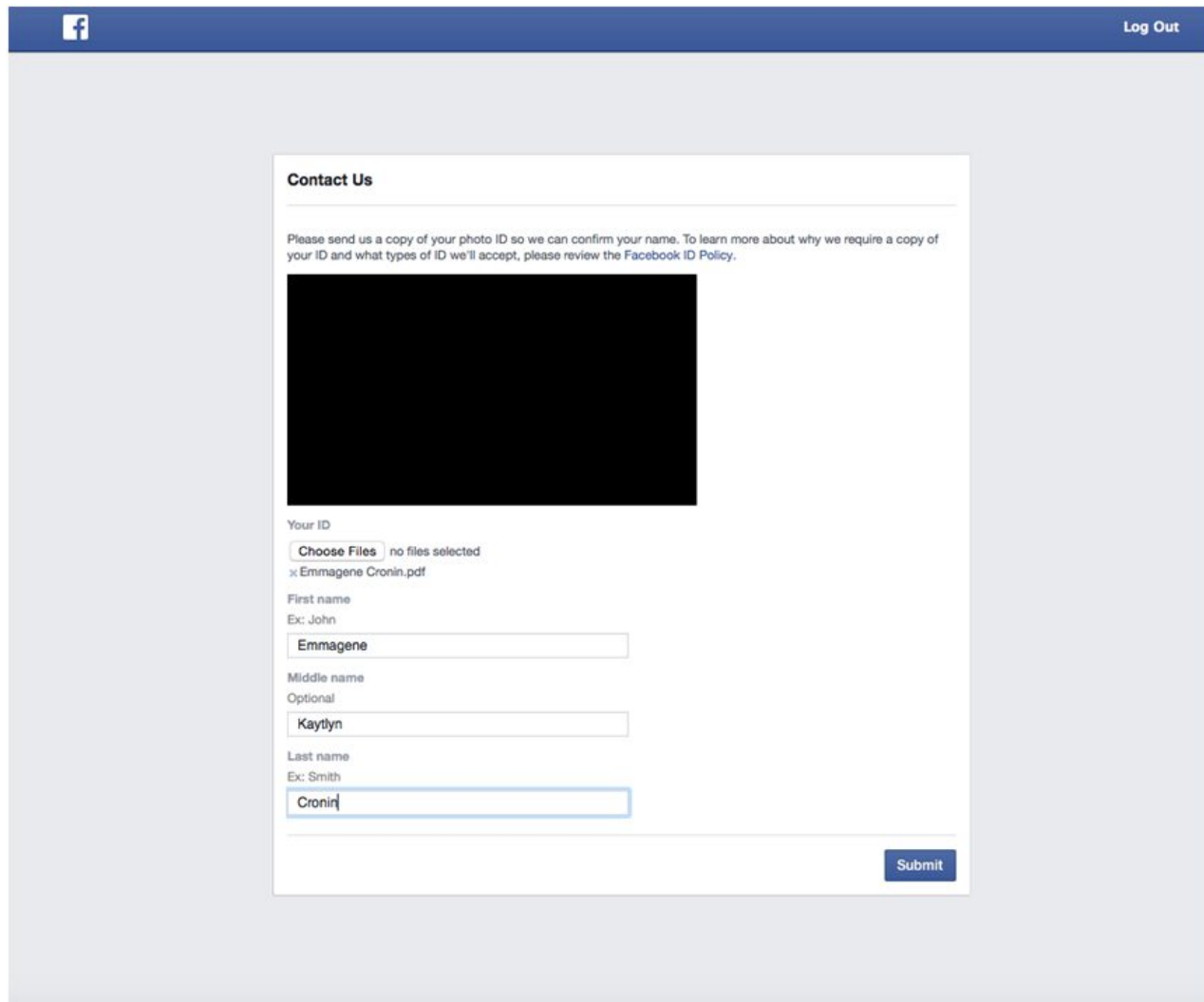
The image is a screenshot of a Facebook 'Contact Us' form. At the top, there is a blue header bar with the Facebook logo on the left and a 'Log Out' link on the right. The main content area is white. The form is titled 'Contact Us' in bold. Below the title, there is a paragraph of text: 'Please send us a copy of your photo ID so we can confirm your name. To learn more about why we require a copy of your ID and what types of ID we'll accept, please review the Facebook ID Policy.' Below this text is a large black rectangular box, likely a placeholder for a photo or a redacted image. Underneath the box, the form asks for 'Your ID' and includes a 'Choose Files' button with the text 'no files selected' and a file name 'x Emmagene Cronin.pdf'. The form then asks for the user's name in three parts: 'First name' (with an example 'John' and the input 'Emmagene'), 'Middle name' (with an example 'Optional' and the input 'Kaytlyn'), and 'Last name' (with an example 'Smith' and the input 'Cronin'). A 'Submit' button is located at the bottom right of the form.

Figure 2. 3uqSfAA[1]

Now think back to the documentation I provided the first time I was abused by this policy being wielded by bigoted and hateful people. I provided Facebook with 5 significant forms of Identification, all being government documents. All of which I spent a great deal of time getting. That's all the stuff that should have, according to Facebook's accepted documents, eliminated the possibility of being reported for a "fake" name. Those also just so happen to be the very same documents shown in that last screenshot. I proceeded to provide the information, for a second time, to Facebook. A few minutes later I received an email, just like those triggering ones from the first time I was abused by this policy. I replied back to that email with,

Hi Facebook,

I would like to say, that under no circumstance does my name fall within, "It looks like the name on your Facebook account may not be your authentic name." You're probably wondering why this is the case. Well, I was subjected to the "real name" policy on October 16th, 2014, where I provided 5 different form of government-issued identification including : US Passport with Emmagene Kaytlyn Cronin on in, US Social Security Card with Emmagene Kaytlyn Cronin on it, State of [removed] Drivers License with

Emmagene Kaytlyn Cronin on it, State of [removed] Birth Certificate with Emmagene Kaytlyn Cronin on it, and a State of [removed] Order of Name Change on it (I have also attached those exact same documents here).

So, in case there was some sort of mistake, and 5 forms of government identification documents weren't sufficient and you need me to say it again.

My name is Emmagene Kaytlyn Cronin

After providing this overwhelming amount of evidence that I am, in fact, who I say I am, my account was restored (please refer to the attachments of those emails for verification). So, my identity and name has already been verified by facebook as real, legal, and authentic. So it does not look like I am using a false name. You have already {asked} me to use the name I use in real life, which I have from the moment I began to use Facebook, and even provided the information when requested. I am, however, now being harassed, and further being discriminated against because of my identity as a transgender person. Facebook is enabling this, and I would go so far as to say encouraging it.

So, the name on my account is as it should be. This has already been verified by Facebook (again, see attached emails). I am also reporting this to the news media.

Thank for fixing the problem (not that one really existed),

Emmagene Kaytlyn Cronin

However, until Facebook got around to fixing the problem, I was effectively erased from who I was, again. In addition, this time around I wasn't allowed to log back in during verification; I had friends contacting me, asking if I had deleted my account. I lost the majority of my support system. There aren't many trans people, so reaching out to each other on social media for the support is important. I had nobody to really turn to that's could understand my feelings, and how hurt I was and I wasn't able to have my voice heard. I had literally been silenced. The goal of this harassment is not just about harassment, intimidation, and abuse; it is literally about silencing voices, and further marginalizing an already marginalized group of people. It's essentially saying, "If you speak out against the cisnormative status quo, we will silence you." I don't know any other way to define that other than saying its violence. Violence being wielded in in a manner that is no departure from systemic violence against the transgender community. It is the used to isolate people, disrupt their daily lives, possibly causing them economic hardships, and is used as a tool of hate to create fear. This time it rests not with the right-wing bigots, but with trans-exclusionary radical feminists. What did I do? I called people out for libeling me by slapping my name on random things, saying I have some tie to it. I guess speaking out against the malicious use of your name is a trigger for violence in the TERF community.

There were also unforeseen things that arose from this harassment and silencing. Over the last couple of months, the Women's Advocacy Council, which I am a member of on my campus, has been planning our portion of an immersive and powerful awareness event held on campus known as the Tunnel of Oppression. Our committee was also working with the Campus Awareness for Relationship Education chapter on our portion, dealing with the signs and aspects that create abusive relationships as well as the media culture that reinforces that abuse as acceptable. I was also coordinating some aspects for our campus' HOPE Alliance chapter on a section devoted to the violence, abuse and harassment that the

trans community faces.

All of our activities for this multiple day presentation were being cooperatively coordinated through Facebook, which I no longer had access to. I had no way to communicate with the members of my group, on the first day of the event, because Facebook was our means of relaying information. Throughout the day, as we prepared for the opening of this exhibit, I ended up getting bits and fragments about developing stuff through people I managed to run into, and eventually through text messaged screenshots of what was happening, posted in our groups on Facebook - pages that my university recognizes as a form communication for groups and clubs, just like many organizations are doing.

Thought this hurt significantly, and it still hurts even after finally having my account restored, I was a little more prepared for it this time as it happened before. However, I don't believe that actually something Facebook is accounting for. What would happen if someone just had that absolutely perfect-storm of a horrible week, and this is what drove them to commit suicide? I would hate to be in the shoes of anyone that would have to explain something if that happened, and it would be absolutely horrible if it did. However bad that could possibly be, at the very least Facebook is unknowingly allowing itself to be used as a tool of oppression and a weapon to harm people.

This is just what I've been through, and what I have seen within my own community. I know this is being used to harm many others within the LGBTQ community, and they are suffering because of this also. I know Facebook is trying to fix these issues, but will I, or the many others this has happened to, have to be traumatized by this until those fixes happen with this policy? More importantly, when is Facebook going to address the root of this trauma, trans-antagonism, and cissexism that is rampant on Facebook?

Editor's Note:



Figure 3. These tweets were sent to the TransAdvocate's twitter account around the same time Emmagene had her FaceBook account shut down.

We at the TransAdvocate receive complaints from other trans people who've had their trans identities erased by FaceBook, denying them access to a support system - sometimes the only support system -

they've been able to cultivate.

Suggested citation

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