

Censorship Threatens to jam the Social Media Highway

By Chris Chinn

Farmers and ranchers are telling their stories far and wide, from face-to-face meetings to harnessing the popular power of social media. Communications tools such as YouTube, a video hosting site, have helped us put our faces on American food production. As a result, more Americans are learning about modern family farms, including the values and ethics that guide us in providing exemplary care for our animals and the environment.

I never hesitate to tell my family's farm story. The importance of communicating about agriculture has shot through the roof. We have a lot riding on our ability to tell our stories. The adversaries of modern family-based agriculture know that too.

Earlier this year I was shocked to discover how far some would go to silence my voice. I know it is a harsh word, but their tactics strongly suggest censorship. They did not want the story of my family's farm to be told.

Two years ago, my husband and I shot and posted a five-minute video tour of our family hog farm on YouTube. I took people inside our hog barns, showed them intricate details about our farm and introduced them to members of my family. The video grew in popularity.

About the time our video would have eclipsed 27,000 views, in January of this year, my daughter asked if she could watch it again. I typed in the title of our video, "Truth About Modern Pork Production" and instead of being directed to our video, I received a message that our video was inappropriate for viewers under 18. I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

I tried to contact YouTube multiple times through their website. Eventually, I received a response that indicated members of the YouTube community had flagged my video as having inappropriate content. Since then, I have learned that a team of people at YouTube review a video flagged for elements that would deem it inappropriate for a general audience. They look for violence, nudity, drug abuse or animal abuse, as well as concerns such as hateful content, sexual abuse, cyberbullying or dangerous conduct.

I can only speculate, but I believe my video was the victim of a deliberate effort to mislead YouTube officials into thinking it did not meet their guidelines. My video and its pro-agriculture messages were effectively gagged. My best assumption is that people who oppose my livelihood were responsible.

The video tour of my farm did not contain any inappropriate material. Simply put, my pigs are about pork, not porn. We posted our video so the public could see how we care for our animals, how we protect them from predators, weather and disease and how we care for the environment.

Our video features our family farm, where we raise our kids and teach them the importance of caring for our land and livestock. I love my kids more than anything in this world. I would never put them in harm's way. Our farm is a safe place to raise our kids and we are proud of the commitment we make to keep our animals safe and healthy. Having our video flagged as inappropriate offended me as a mom. Even more frustrating was the feeling that my freedom of speech was stolen.

At any point, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of unblocked videos posted on YouTube that include outrageous and shocking footage. I could not understand why my video, which was intended to be educational, was being banned. It felt

like I was being indicted for telling the truth. My video went from having approximately 1,000 views a month to barely 100 views a month.

After nearly six months of silence, I decided recently to talk about YouTube's censorship and their unresponsiveness to my pleas. I did several stories on the subject. A number of people began talking about my case on the micro-blogging site Twitter. Only after reporters began calling YouTube did I receive attention. To my surprise, when I checked my video one morning last week, it had been removed from the flagged list and reinstated with its original "G" rating.

My faith in both YouTube and my First Amendment rights has been restored, and I am thankful I will be allowed to tell my family farm's story once again.

I have learned a few lessons in this saga. I've learned to never give up hope. I've learned that the truth about farm animal care intimidates those who want to distort the story. It is more important than ever for farmers to tell their stories using social media sites like YouTube. We have a great story to tell, but it is a story only we can tell.

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Chris Chinn raises hogs in the Midwest and is always eager to share the story of her family's farm. You can follow her on Twitter at @chrischinn.