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British Columbia

After Facebook account hack and weeks-long ban, B.C. woman calls for social media transparency, accountability

Facebook parent company says they strive for transparency and there are options to appeal bans

[Liam Britten](#) · CBC News · Posted: Nov 03, 2021 5:00 AM PDT | Last Updated: November 3, 2021

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North Vancouver real estate agent Patricia Houlihan says the scope and reach of social media giants like Meta — the company that owns Facebook and WhatsApp — mean they should be treated more like a public utility, with stronger regulations to protect users. (Antonin Sturlese/CBC)

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A North Vancouver real estate agent is calling for more accountability and transparency from Facebook after her accounts were banned for seven weeks.

Patricia Houlihan, 58, said after a hacking attempt, she was banned from Facebook and WhatsApp, both owned by the [newly rebranded Meta company](#).

"It's very important to my business, so I was panicking," Houlihan said. "I'd lost all of those contacts. All the ones on my business page, my 400 or 500 friends ... family, et cetera. And how do you recreate all that, right? These are people that are all over the world."

On Aug. 17, Houlihan received a message on Facebook purportedly from Microsoft tech support asking her to call a number.



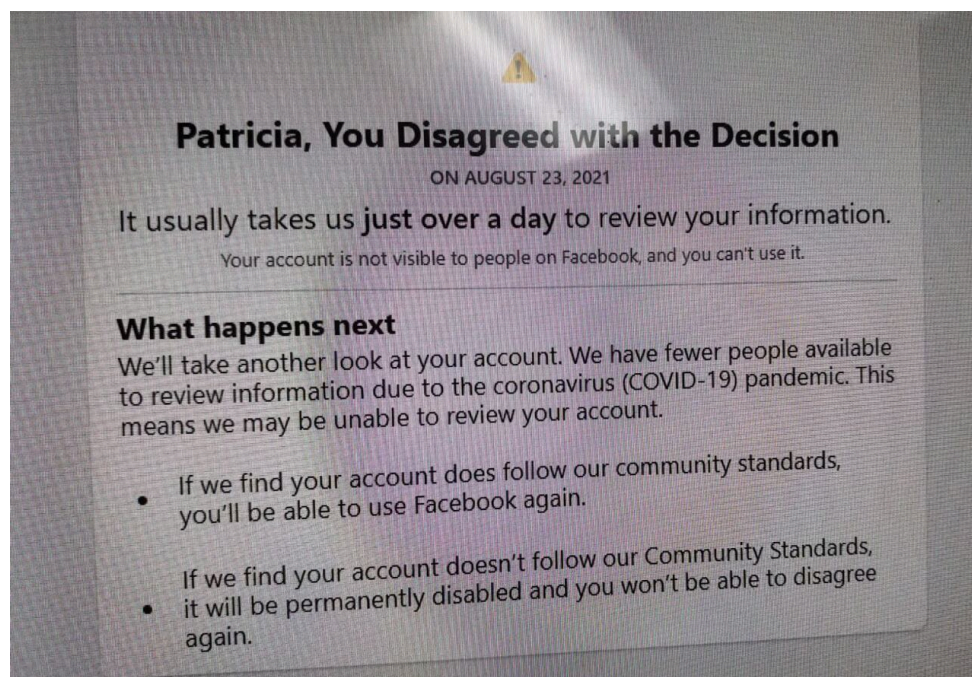
Patricia Houlihan got her accounts back after seven weeks, but says she never should have been banned in the first place. (Antonin Sturlese/CBC)

While on the line, she realized the number wasn't actually Microsoft's and hung up.

Shortly after, Houlihan's accounts were suspended. She received a message from Facebook claiming she posted content violating community standards, which she denies.

She said Facebook didn't explain what was posted, citing privacy reasons.

"You're telling me I posted it. What is the privacy issue here if you really think I posted it?" Houlihan said.



Houlihan said that for weeks after her account was banned, this is the message she would get when logging onto Facebook. (Patricia Houlihan)

On Oct. 5, seven weeks later, Houlihan's Facebook accounts were back without explanation.

A week after CBC contacted Meta about Houlihan's story, her WhatsApp account was restored although her contacts were deleted.

A Meta spokesperson confirmed the bans were erroneous. Since one of Houlihan's accounts was flagged, all were banned.



A spokesperson for Meta said when it comes to account and content issues, their teams are focused on things that could cause real-world harm. This can lead to some issues taking longer than others to resolve. (Dado Ruvic/Reuters)

Experts say this situation is an example of how social media companies can be unresponsive to users and how their processes can be opaque.

'It's ludicrous, really'

Meta acknowledged that losing account access can be distressing and said they strive for transparency. Their spokesperson couldn't say what kind of content hackers tried to post with Houlihan's accounts.

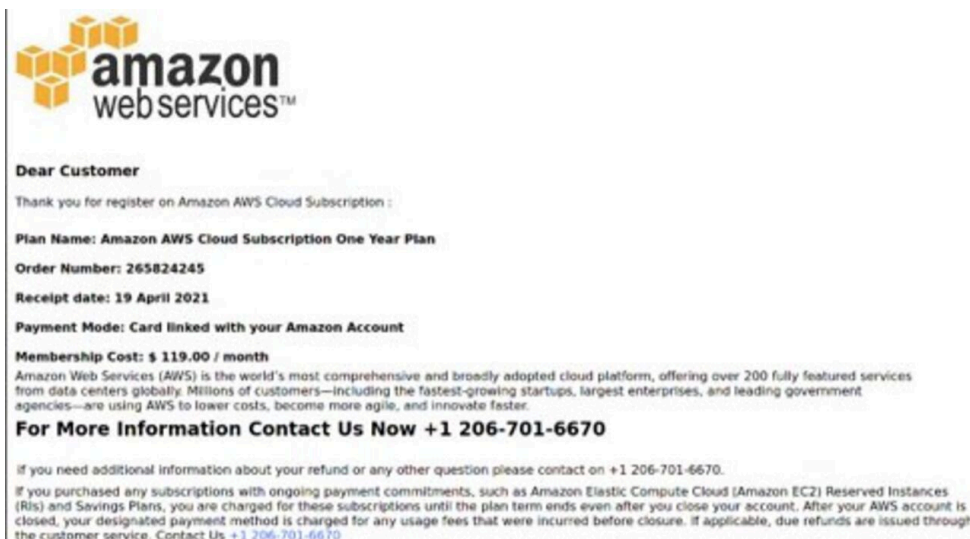
Houlihan requested a review of her ban through Facebook's appeal process, which was denied. She said it was frustrating she couldn't reach a human at Facebook.



Cybersecurity expert Chester Wisniewski says Houlihan sounds to be the victim of a hack. He says he believes Meta was overzealous in banning her account for such a long time. (Antonin Sturlese/CBC)

"I don't know how a big corporation like that can be so hard to get in touch with," she said. "It's ludicrous, really."

The Meta spokesperson sent CBC links for users seeking help but Houlihan said she and her friends tried those unsuccessfully.



Chester Wisniewski says over the last nine months or so, instead of calling potential victims directly or sending them emailed links, hackers are asking them to call bogus phone numbers to direct them further into their scams. (Chester Wisniewski)

Chester Wisniewski, lead research scientist at cybersecurity firm Sophos, said he suspects hackers were trying to use Houlihan's accounts to spread their bogus phone number to other potential victims.

"You'd think with the hundreds of billions of dollars a year they make, [Meta] could maybe staff a small help desk to help people out," Wisniewski said.

"It can be really scary to get locked out of one of these platforms if you're someone who relies on them."

He said anyone who receives a message allegedly from a company like Microsoft shouldn't call any number provided and look up their phone number themselves.



Victor Tang said it's a common experience for business users to be banned from social media platforms. Often, bad-faith reviews or user reports are to blame. (Antonin Sturlese/CBC)

Victor Tang, an adjunct professor specializing in digital marketing at the University of British Columbia, said Houlihan's case — and the complete outage of Meta's services in October — illustrate how business users should have a social media presence on multiple platforms along with a website in case they lose access to some platforms.

It can be difficult to get answers from social media companies, he said, but business users who buy ads tend to get more options when they run into problems.

"It's an unpopular opinion, but if you aren't actually paying for services on Facebook or Google, you're using it for free," Tang said. "If you really want a service level agreement with Facebook or Google, you should be buying ads for them."

The Meta spokesperson disagreed that users who buy ads get better service but agreed they will get access to teams dealing with a smaller number of users than general support teams.

Balancing user access with protection from online harms

Houlihan said she agrees platforms should ban harmful accounts or content, like hate speech and misinformation. But, she argued, users should get a fair hearing when banned.

"[Social media] has infiltrated all of our business and social interactions to such an extent that I think as members of the public, we deserve to be protected," she said.

Facebook plans to shut down facial-recognition system, delete data

Facebook is now Meta, but critics say same old problems remain

Houlihan said she believes governments should do more to mandate what social media companies owe their users.

Matt Hatfield with OpenMedia, a Vancouver-based non-profit that advocates for digital rights, said experts are still divided about what a balance between free expression and preventing unfettered use by bad actors on social media might look like, although he feels social media companies at least owe the public transparency.

Facebook says it will do more to prevent online hate, harassment

Facebook calls on Canadian government to set social media rules

"I think the biggest single problem with online platforms is how much of it is a black box," Hatfield said.

"[Houlihan]'s right to be frustrated. We're all frustrated that the primary online spaces that we use for speech today, we have so little control or accountability over and I think in the long term, that needs to change."

