

Online protest of Facebook ban on breast-feeding photos draws tens of thousands

December 30 2008, By Sharon Noguchi



Facebook logo

Online, the virtual "nurse-in" to protest Facebook's ban on breast-feeding photos took off, with hundreds joining a group that crept toward 70,000 members Saturday evening.

The real-life, pavement-pounding protest drew fewer placards than photojournalists Saturday, with only a handful turning out to sing, chant and breast-feed in front of Facebook's downtown Palo Alto, Calif., headquarters. But it had all the elements of a Palo Alto protest: a handful of peaceful pickets discreetly tucked away in a University Avenue plaza; placards reading "Hey Facebook, Breast-feeding is not Obscene"; protesters chatting up the media; and indifferent passers-by. A member of the Raging Grannies, the Midpeninsula activists who stage various theatrical protests, showed up to proclaim in song that "our breasts aren't porn."

It's hard to say whether either demonstration will move Facebook

executives - who appeared to not be at work Saturday - to lift the site's prohibition of breasts displayed on members' profiles and albums. Facebook says the areola, the dark skin around the nipple, violates a policy on "obscene, pornographic or sexually explicit" material.

On their Facebook group site, which also serves as an open petition to the company, nursing advocates by Saturday evening had posted more than 10,000 wall comments, two dozen videos and nearly 3,000 photos of breast-feeding, while starting more than 1,500 discussion threads. Facebook, it seemed, was not removing them.

All this might not have happened had the social networking site simply answered Heather Farley's e-mail asking why the networking giant in October removed photos of her breast-feeding her baby.

When she posted another photo and then received a letter threatening to delete her account, she went public.

"I felt bullied," said Farley, of Provo, Utah, who decided to protest while she was in California for the holidays visiting in-laws.

Her challenge drew support from other Facebook critics and lactation advocates. Among the picketers Saturday were mother-in-law Sheri Farley of Placer County, who breast-fed her eight children and now boasts that 19 of her 20 grandchildren have been nursed.

Alexa Sockol of Redwood City, a doula who assists with childbirth and newborns, was nursing 6-month-old Ethan at the protest. "There are enough challenges with initiating and continuing breast-feeding without complicating it with social rules," she said.

The picketing also drew Facebook newbies like Lucile Couplan-Cashman, 56, of Palo Alto, and Bernadette Gersh, 46, of Redwood City.

"I didn't know that Facebook was so Puritan," said Couplan-Cashman, who doesn't have an account on the site.

Heather Farley, a self described "avid user" of Facebook with 200 online friends, said she doesn't know how far she'll pursue her protest. She doesn't want to lose her Facebook account, which is the primary way she keeps in touch with high school and college friends and is the place she and her husband post their family photos.

Still, she's blogged about her disputes with Facebook. And although the company still hasn't answered any of her electronic messages, she's now hearing from people worldwide. "I can't believe this is happening," she said in wonderment.

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