

Facebook pressured to remove page deemed racist

August 9 2012, by ROD McGUIRK

(AP) — Facebook is under pressure in Australia to take down a page that insults Aborigines with the government accusing the social networking company of using its U.S. base to avoid Australian anti-discrimination laws.

The Aboriginal Memes Facebook page has created a furor in Australia this week with its depictions of indigenous Australians as drunks and welfare cheats.

Australia's media watchdog, the Australian Communications and Media Authority, is investigating complaints about the page and Race Discrimination Commissioner Helen Szoke said it could breach Australian anti-discrimination laws.

Communications Minister Stephen Conroy said late Wednesday his office had called on Facebook's Sydney office to take the page down.

But he said the page had recently been reclassified "controversial humor" and that Facebook maintained it did not adjudicate on humor.

Conroy said the creator of the page, whom he believed was a 16-year-old Australian living in the west coast city of Perth, was getting around Australian anti-discrimination laws through U.S. guarantees of free speech.

"We don't live by American laws here in Australia; we live by Australian

laws and this is an Australian who is using the fact that Facebook is based in the U.S. to get away from Australian laws," Conroy told Australian Broadcasting Corp. television.

"Facebook should take this site down," he added.

He said Australia had tried to get Australian court orders enforced in the U.S. against Facebook and other websites in the past, but "we've got nowhere."

Facebook said in a statement issued by its Sydney office that it sometimes restricts access to content that violates local law and was engaged in a constructive dialogue with Szoke.

"We believe that sharing information and the openness that results invites conversation, debate and greater understanding. At the same time we recognize that some content that is shared may be controversial, offensive or even illegal in some countries," the statement said.

Some offensive images disappeared from the page Wednesday and all were gone by Thursday.

The controversy comes after Australia's advertising watchdog ruled that companies were responsible for comments left on their Facebook pages by members of the public.

The Advertising Standards Bureau said Australia-based Carlton & United Breweries, also known as CUB, could be held responsible for "lewd and crude" comments posted on a Facebook beer fan page because it constituted advertising. The comments breached alcohol advertising guidelines by connecting alcohol with social or sexual prowess and promoted excessive drinking, the bureau said.

The ruling has far-reaching consequences for companies' use of social media and raises questions about the culpability of enterprises outside Australia that inadvertently breach Australian laws via the Internet.

CUB told AP in a statement Wednesday that while it did not consider user comments to be advertising, it would not appeal the decision.

The brewery will monitor public comments more closely and remove inappropriate ones, it said.

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