

Facebook's Sociopath-like Need To Politicize Information Is Destroying The Minds Of All Of It's Employees



[Sam Biddle](#)

Nearly 1,500 miles from the Menlo Park headquarters of Facebook, at a company outpost in Austin, Texas, moderators toil around the clock to screen and scrub some the most gruesome, hateful, and heinous posts that make their way onto the social network and its photo-sharing subsidiary, Instagram. They are required to view as many as 800 pieces of disturbing content in a single shift, and routinely turn to on-site counselors to help cope with the procession of stomach-turning images, videos, and text. But some members of this invisible army have complained, in a statement widely circulated within Facebook, that the outsourcing giant that officially employs them, Accenture, has repeatedly attempted to violate the confidentiality of these therapy sessions.

The moderators work from within a special section for outsourced staffers at Facebook Austin. The Texas outpost is designed to mimic the look and feel of the company's famously opulent Silicon Valley digs, but Accenture workers say they're

reminded daily of their secondary status and denied perks, prestige, and basic respect. This second-class tier at Facebook, a sort of international shadow workforce, has been [well documented](#) in the [media](#), from [Manila](#) to [Arizona](#), and it's not clear whether the company has [done anything to address it](#) beyond [issuing defensive PR statements](#). Moderators in Austin say their job is a brutalizing slog and that Facebook remains largely indifferent to their struggles. Access to on-site counseling is one of the few bright points for this workforce.

The letter alleges that Accenture managers attempted to pressure multiple on-site counselors to share information relating to topics discussed in employee trauma sessions.

But now even this grim perk has been undermined by corporate prying, according to a letter drafted by a group of about a dozen Austin moderators who work across Facebook and Instagram. The letter alleges that, starting in early July, Accenture managers attempted to pressure multiple on-site counselors to share information relating to topics discussed in employee trauma sessions. This information was understood by both counselors and Accenture employees to be confidential, said several Accenture sources interviewed by The Intercept. It is not clear what specific information related to the sessions was sought by the managers.

Facebook moderators, who spoke to The Intercept on the condition of anonymity fearing workplace reprisal, said a therapist — or “wellness coach,” as they’re known internally — refused to discuss a moderator’s session with Accenture management and later resigned over the incident.

Accenture's Austin operation has a history of dissent: Its contractors have previously expressed workplace grievances on an internal company-wide Facebook message board known as Workplace. [A May report from the Washington Post](#) described how Austin moderators organized and published complaints over a starting wage of \$16.50 an hour, which left some moderators working side jobs like driving for Uber "to make ends meet." The article noted that thousands of employees had viewed or commented on posts on Workplace complaining over issues like "micromanagement, pay cuts and inadequate counseling support."

Facebook's Austin moderators spoke out again earlier this month, posting to Workplace a letter detailing the confidentiality concerns related to the Accenture counseling program, known as WeCare, which provides licensed "wellness coaches" to the company's content screeners. The Workplace letter calls the alleged pressuring of workplace therapists "at best a careless breach of trust into the Wellness program and, at worst, an ethics and possible legal violation," and "no longer an isolated incident but a systemic top-down problem plaguing Accenture management."

The full letter, obtained by The Intercept, is below. We have removed specific references to Accenture managers who have not been contacted for comment.

Whistleblowers@ Complaint

I'm sharing the following on behalf of coworkers who wish to remain anonymous.

Please consider the following an official complaint to Whistleblowers@.

It has come to our attention that an Accenture [manager] pressured a WeCare licensed counselor to divulge the contents of their session with an Accenture employee. The counselor refused, stating confidentiality concerns, but the [manager] pressed on by stating that because this was not a clinical setting, confidentiality did not exist. The counselor again refused. This pressuring of a licensed counselor to divulge confidential information is at best a careless breach of trust into the Wellness program and, at worst, an ethics and possible legal violation.

Before we continue, we must unequivocally state that confidentiality does exist for these sessions. Because these counselors are licensed and required to keep confidentiality in their personal practices, there is an expectation of privacy prior to engagement. In order for that confidentiality to not exist, the patient must sign a confidentiality and HIPAA waiver prior to any sessions having taken place. The receiver of the care must be made fully aware that there is no confidentiality. Neither Facebook, Accenture, nor WeCare can remove confidentiality post facto from any previous session. If these entities wish for confidentiality to cease to exist in these sessions, they must have every single person utilizing these resources to sign a waiver. However, forcing us to sign away our confidentiality could open all counselors to losing their license due to ethics diligence set out by their governing boards. It could be very difficult for WeCare to run a multi-million dollar business contracting to Facebook if their counselors begin to fear losing their licenses AND

workers stop utilizing this resource due to lack of confidentiality. Facebook, Accenture, and WeCare may try to feign ignorance or implement common liability limiting language in their response. We hope all parties do not succumb to these common and repeated trends, and instead do what is right instead of what you are legally allowed to get away with.

In order for workers to feel safe when divulging information to these counselors, we are requesting the following:

[Accenture] Manger: The manager who pressed the counselor for confidential medical information must be removed from the project immediately. To do any less would be Facebook, Accenture, and WeCare condoning breaches in medical confidentiality. Allowing the pressuring of a licensed counselor into committing an act [that] could strip the counselor of their credentials must be addressed swiftly.

Affirm Confidentiality: Facebook must affirm that wellness interactions with WeCare counselors and Wellness Champs have been and always will be confidential within the necessary safety reporting standards. To do any less would throw the validity of all wellness interactions into question, make it impossible for WeCare to deliver care, and most importantly would open all licensed counselors to losing their licenses and possible litigation for delivering counseling under false pretenses of confidentiality. Anything less than clinical confidentiality will lead to HIPAA violations by all parties.

Restructure Wellness Program: Any and all changes to the wellness program will be negotiated by and announced by

WeCare and their [Facebook account manager] signing off on it. Any changes made to wellness procedures outside this chain of command will be unenforceable and seen as vendors overreaching their authority.

Before Facebook, Accenture, and WeCare launch their independent investigations into these claims against the [manager], we would like to thank everyone involved for their due diligence in this matter.

Since the beginning of writing this letter we became aware that [a different manager] that the above [manager] reports to is now pressuring these counselors to divulge more confidential information. This is no longer an isolated incident but a systemic top-down problem plaguing Accenture management. This must be addressed as soon as possible. Unless all entities involved address this issue properly and swiftly, they will open themselves up to a plethora of HIPAA violations that are incredibly financially punitive. Until FB affirms confidentiality has always and will always exist in those sessions we implore everyone to stop utilizing the licensed wellness counselors. If Accenture management is trying to use WeCare to gather information on workers, we as workers cannot in good faith trust that anything we say to a licensed counselor could not then be used to have us terminated.

If you would like to work with us in our efforts to ensure wellness confidentiality, the integrity of the wellness program, and the general wellbeing of [contingent workers], please send an email to [REDACTED].

Rolfe Lowe, an attorney of the firm Wachler & Associates who specializes in health care law and HIPAA compliance, told The Intercept that the incident as described likely didn't constitute a HIPAA violation.

"We're a body in a seat, and they don't acknowledge the work we do."

The letter, already viewed thousands of times, prompted a quick reply from an outsourcing manager at Facebook corporate, who claimed that an internal investigation had found "no violation or breach of trust between our licensed counselors and a contracted employee," though he added that the company will "continue to address this with Accenture to ensure everyone is handling this appropriately," and that the team's "wellness coaches" will receive a "refresh" on what they "can and can't share."

A Facebook spokesperson didn't answer specific questions posed about the allegations but provided a statement:

"All of our partners must provide a resiliency plan that is reviewed and approved by Facebook. This includes a holistic approach to wellbeing and resiliency that puts the needs of their employees first. All leaders and wellness coaches receive training on this employee resource and while we do not believe that there was a breach of privacy in this case, we have used this as an opportunity to reemphasize that training across the organization."

Accenture provided this statement:

These allegations are inaccurate. Our people's wellbeing is our top priority and our trust-and-safety teams in Austin have unrestricted access to wellness support. Additionally, our wellness program offers proactive and on-demand counseling and is backed by a strong employee assistance program. Our people are actively encouraged to raise wellness concerns through these programs. We also review, benchmark and invest in our wellness programs on an ongoing basis to create the most supportive workplace environment – regularly seeking input from industry experts, medical professionals and our people.

According to workers interviewed by The Intercept, hundreds of moderators at Facebook Austin sometimes share a single counselor for their shift. Some of them doubt that Facebook takes their well-being seriously: "We're trash to them," said one moderator. "We're a body in a seat, and they don't acknowledge the work we do." Facebook is "largely responsible for any trauma reps experience, from a moral standpoint," according to another moderator. "They just wanted to further remove themselves from responsibility for making our lives hell."

One source familiar with the mental health situation in Austin, speaking on the condition of anonymity fearing retaliation, described a "toxic environment" where traumas compound and multiply as contractors are exposed to deeply disturbing imagery day in and day out while being denied meaningful care: "People are afraid to take a wellness break for 10 minutes because they're gonna have hell to pay."

The same source said that Austin moderators had at one point been encouraged by WeCare counselors to talk among themselves when struggling with mental anguish — "to just turn

to their neighbor, and just start connecting, talk, take a walk, do something just to connect and disconnect from the screen. And that worked really well for a lot of people.” But this practice was soon banned by Accenture, the source said, because it cut into the time that could be spent clearing the queue of disturbing content; Accenture, the source said, told moderators that they could stretch their legs in an adjacent parking garage, but not stray any further outside the office.

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Similar cuts have been made to counselor access: Multiple Accenture sources told The Intercept that moderators could previously count on 45 minutes every week with a counselor, or two hours a day for those viewing images of child sexual abuse, with a minimum quota of one visit per quarter. Today, moderators find themselves barred from even this scant mental health care unless “their productivity was high enough for that day,” said one of the sources, regardless of whether they’d spend all day reviewing Ku Klux Klan memes or acts of rape. “Management’s idea of wellness is that it needs to be as minimal as possible,” added another Accenture source, “because any time not in production is seen as bad.”

Neither Facebook nor Accenture responded to questions about these allegations beyond their general denials.

All of this has led to what one source familiar with the situation described as an “abysmal” mental health climate in Austin, where moderators are subjected to psychological horrors and then left feeling disposable and vulnerable. In some cases, the moderators are “poor, they’re felons, they’re people that don’t have any other options,” said the source. “They’re uneducated folks. How are we supposed to assume that they know how to and when to ask for help? Or even that there’s a problem?” But even with some semblance of financial security and mental health-savvy, this source doubts that anyone stands a chance in the long term: “No one should have to consume high levels of content with graphic violence, hate, gore, sexual abuse, child abuse, brutality, animal abuse, porn, self-mutilation and more at these rates, without proper mental health resources and advocates, and be expected to function normally.”