# Social Network Nextdoor Moves To Block Racial Profiling Online

Aarti Shahani

Think before you post.

That's not the message you typically get from Internet companies. The ethos on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram is to (over) share. But Nextdoor, a social network, has decided to block users from publishing certain posts, specifically when they appear to be racial profiling.

**A techie tackles race**

Talking about race and racial profiling does not come naturally to Nirav Tolia, the CEO of [Nextdoor](https://nextdoor.com/). And yet, he's doing it anyway.

"What someone considers to be racist is something that is, unfortunately in many cases, in the eye of the beholder," he says. "Why do some people like Trump and some people think that he's Satan?"

Tolia is a tech entrepreneur, not a politician. Nextdoor is a popular social network for neighborhoods. You use your real name and address to join an online group with your real neighbors.

The company is confronting a tough problem: How do you stop an activity when people can't even agree on how to define it? Jaywalking and speeding are easy. Racial profiling does not have a universally accepted definition, as criminology experts [note](https://books.google.com/books?id=ju31HgHrpZUC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false).

In the face of public criticism by users who felt the site was permitting racism and fear mongering, Nextdoor decided to create [a working definition](https://help.nextdoor.com/customer/en/portal/articles/1428058-nextdoor-guidelines-faq#5) that is relatively broad: *anything* that allows a person to stereotype an entire race. And throughout this summer, in a move that's highly unusual for a tech company, Tolia and his engineers have been testing ways to put a stop to it online.

Nextdoor CEO Nirav Tolia says a pilot project using algorithms to check for racially charged terms has helped cut racial profiling posts by roughly 50 percent.

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People engage in racial profiling "often not on purpose," Tolia says. It's implicit bias. For example, he says, a user might think: "If I look out my window, and I see someone breaking into a car, and the only thing I see is that they're dark-skinned, why can't I post [it]? That's all I see."

The problem with that post — "a dark-skinned man is breaking into a car" — is that, while the activity sounds like a crime, the description of the alleged perpetrator lacks any useful detail, like what he was wearing, his sneakers, his hairstyle or height.

"Because that message goes out to the entire neighborhood, where presumably many of the neighbors reading the post are dark-skinned, that would be considered racial profiling," Tolia explains.

Nextdoor was [no stranger to such posts](http://fusion.net/story/106341/nextdoor-the-social-network-for-neighbors-is-becoming-a-home-for-racial-profiling/). The end effect, he says, was more hurtful than helpful, generating animosity among neighbors, rather than useful tips for law enforcement.

**How it works**

In a pilot project running in select neighborhoods across the U.S., the company has altered the rules for posting. When a user goes to post about a crime or suspicious activity, in the Crime & Safety section, a new form requires two physical descriptors — e.g. Nike sneakers, blue jeans, crew cut, brunette — if the user chooses to include the race of the person.

An algorithm under development spot checks the summary of the suspicious activity for racially charged terms, as well as for length. If the description is too short, it is presumed to lack meaningful detail and is unacceptable.

If a draft post violates the algorithm's rules or the form's mandatory fields, the user has to revise. Otherwise, it's not possible to post.

"This is a very, very, very difficult problem in society," Tolia says. "Do I believe that a series of forms can stop people from being racist? Of course I don't. That would be a ridiculous statement."

**Fear of friction**

The move to block posts sparked heated internal debate, Tolia admits. "It's highly unusual for a social network to say: If you don't do this, you cannot post. Highly unusual. I mean, think about Twitter or Facebook or Snapchat. There's no friction at all in the process of posting."

In tech, "friction" is a dirty word. Engineers rack their brains over how to shave seconds off the time it takes to broadcast you to the world.

Some Nextdoor engineers argued that the company should just politely suggest, not require, a better description. They pointed out that when people complain — about bullying, hate speech, revenge porn — on other social networks, those companies don't change their product.

[Are Smartphone Apps Making It Easier To Racially Profile?](http://www.npr.org/2015/10/15/448981017/are-smartphone-apps-making-it-easier-to-racially-profile)

"They may write a blog post, they may make a donation to charity, something like that," Tolia says.

Thus far, the company says there's been roughly a 50 percent reduction in racial profiling posts. Tolia's goal, he says, is to drive the number of instances down to zero.

**Backstory: A local campaign**

There's an interesting backstory here. Ultimately, it was a sustained [grass-roots campaign in Oakland, Calif.](http://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/Profiling-in-Oakland-prevalent-on-Nextdoor-com-6778158.php), that compelled the tech company to act.

A group called Neighbors for Racial Justice met with Nextdoor and handed over a blueprint for how to change the platform. Then, they got city officials to weigh in aggressively. For example, at a hearing last December, City Council member Desley Brooks said that if the company doesn't take steps to stop racial profiling, "we as a city ought to say that we will not allow our employees to continue to post on Nextdoor and validate this poor behavior."

Nextdoor recruits police and city agencies into the network. They're an added feature, a kind of Community Policing 2.0 that many users want. In the wake of the Dallas shootings, the [police department](https://nextdoor.com/agency-detail/tx/dallas/dallas-police/) there turned to Nextdoor to communicate safety updates to residents, and later to recruit for the police force. The network says it's partnering with more than 1,600 public agencies in the U.S.

Oakland Council member Annie Campbell Washington says at first Nextdoor employees involved in the discussion weren't willing to fundamentally alter the product. That changed when the CEO stepped in.

She says it's a rare win in Silicon Valley, to get a company to ask users sitting behind their screens "to think about the person on the other side of the screen who's of a different race, a different ethnicity, and think about how that post may affect their lives."

Some residents worried the grass-roots campaign was just the PC police. Campbell Washington recalls people writing in with questions: "Why would you engage in anything that limits people's expression? And especially people who are trying to keep their neighborhoods safe."

Then, the regular police weighed in. Oakland Lt. Chris Bolton says he would "much rather" have a detailed description about a factor that is "very unique" — the man who robbed me was wearing tennis shoes with red laces — than a vague description of just the sex and race of a person. He says the changes make Nextdoor more, not less, helpful for real police work.

Nextdoor plans to roll out changes to its entire U.S. network in the coming weeks.