

Should Apple Cede its “Gatekeeper” Role?

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Yesterday, Wired posted an [inflammatory article](#) [1] calling for transparency in Apple’s App store. A reasonable request, but the piece goes further, arguing that Apple is muzzling free speech—or in the author’s hyperbolic language, Apple could “take control of the press.” I think it’s time for a sober appraisal of the situation.

The author bases his case on one [Mark Fiore](#) [2], Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist. Fiore’s cartoon was rejected for “ridiculing public figures” (in violation of Section 3.3.14 from the iPhone Developer Program License Agreement). The fact that Apple reversed itself after the public outcry is immaterial. Because Apple hasn’t published a “clear set of guidelines” about what’s permissible inside the App store, critics feel the Fiore decision is arbitrary, and portends greater disaster.

Wired points to an [article](#) [3] from the Columbia Journalism Review, which claims the press is “ceding gatekeeper status.” The author gives Apple an ultimatum—either allow full freedom of the press (i.e. relinquish “gatekeeper status”), or the press should yank their apps in protest. This threat is based on the questionable premise that Apple needs the press, rather than vice-versa. The press should act while they still have “leverage over Apple.” Even Wired disagrees with this, arguing that Apple should merely “come clean” with its App guidelines.

I agree that Apple ought to publish its App guidelines. Third-party developers spend hundreds (if not thousands) of dollars creating Apps, and arbitrary rejection means a straight loss. But Apple is not required to (nor should they be). As Wired [points out](#) [4] in a separate piece, “From a legal perspective, Apple can do whatever it wants with the content in its App Store. Apple is not government, and thus it is not governed by the First Amendment.”

Apple’s primary concern is quality control, and even her detractors admit that the App store is rock solid. I don’t think that Apple *should* reject politically-sensitive material, but if they feel that controversy will hurt their bottom line, it is their right to avoid it. Legally, Apple can arbitrarily reject any App for any reason. I touched on this issue briefly in my [review](#) [5] of new mobile web browsers, whereby Apple suddenly approved Apps with “duplicate functionality” (seemingly reversing itself).

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The media shouldn't assume that Apple needs *them*. Amidst the media's fawning coverage of the iPad, many portrayed it as the "[savior of journalism](#)" [6]. Major publications like the Wall Street Journal promptly announced iPad-only editions. The assumption is that these publications are vital to the platform's success. But the iPad is a multimedia device, and the ability to read newspapers is only a small facet. Ask yourself this: who's on-the-hook if the media's iPad gambit fails? The media? Or Apple?

Dow Jones charges [\\$18 a month](#) [7] for its WSJ iPad edition. Or for [\\$10.76 per month](#) [8], you can subscribe to the standard print and online editions (together). Presumably, you could access the online edition with the iPad's browser. So to summarize: you could pay \$18 a month for the special iPad edition, or pay \$10.76 for *both* the print *and* online editions. And the media thinks that Apple is dependent on *them*?

I'm skeptical that readers will shell out \$18 for an iPad subscription—especially when there're cheaper options. Along with the standard online edition, there's the free Wall Street Journal app. The App (seen to the right) might not resemble the

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look of a newspaper, but that’s the point—print and online are *not* the same, and publishers are bound to learn this the hard way. What about e-readers you say? E-readers recreate the look and feel of books. But news is meant for quick consumption. The format and method of delivery for these shorter articles is relatively unimportant.

The media needs to take a deep breath. Apple doesn’t need *them*. But the media (or some publications, at least) seems very dependant upon the iPad to “save” journalism.

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Links:

- [1] <http://www.wired.com/gadgetlab/2010/04/app-store-transparency/>
- [2] <http://www.niemanlab.org/2010/04/mark-fiore-can-win-a-pulitzer-prize-but-he-cant-get-his-iphone-cartoon-app-past-apples-satire-police/>
- [3] http://www.cjr.org/the_audit/its_time_for_the_press_to_push.php
- [4] <http://www.wired.com/gadgetlab/2010/02/ipad-magazines-newspapers/>
- [5] <http://www.ecnmag.com/Blogs/2010/04/Mobile-Browsers-Challenge-Safaris-Dominance/>
- [6] <http://www.spiegel.de/international/business/0,1518,674768,00.html>
- [7] <http://www.wired.com/gadgetlab/2010/03/wall-street-journal-ipad-edition-18-per-month/>
- [8] <https://order.wsj.com/sub/f3>