Facebook Fails Its Own Audit Over Civil Rights and Hate Speech Decisions

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Facebook has released a long-awaited civil rights audit that's bound to ramp up pressure to change policies that allow hate speech and other troubling content to flourish. It revealed that executive decisions by the company caused "significant setbacks for civil rights" and that the site could become an "echo chamber" of extremism if it doesn't take stronger measures. "The company must recognize that failure to do so can have dangerous (and life-threatening) real-world consequences," the report states.

Throughout the document, Facebook was faulted for placing free expression above hate speech. It singled out misinformation by Donald Trump around mail-in votes in Nevada and Michigan that could potentially affect the upcoming US elections in November 2020. Despite the false statements, Mark Zuckerberg left the posts as they were.

"Allowing the Trump posts to remain establishes a terrible precedent that may lead other politicians and non-politicians to spread false information about legal voting methods, which would effectively allow the platform to be weaponized to suppress voting," according to the report. It also found "troubling" Facebook's decision to allow Trump's comment "when the looting starts, the shooting starts" to stay up without any content warning, when other platforms like Twitter flagged

it.

The report noted that the site doesn't enable free speech the way Zuckerberg has repeatedly preached that it does. "When it means that powerful politicians do not have to abide by the same rules that everyone else does, a hierarchy of speech is created that privileges certain voices over less powerful voices," it found.

> *The Auditors believe that Facebook should do everything in its power to prevent its tools and algorithms from driving people toward self-reinforcing echo chambers of extremism, and that the company must recognize that failure to do so can have dangerous (and lifethreatening) real-world consequences.*

The report, led by civil rights leader Laura W. Murphy and the civil rights law firm Relman Colfax, had a number of recommendations. To start with, Facebook needs to apply its rules more consistently and "take steps to address concerns about algorithmic bias or discrimination." The report also suggested that the site engage more with civil rights leaders, much as ad boycott organizers suggested at recent meetings. Finally, it said Facebook should invest resources to "study and address organized hate," and prohibit "praise, support and representation of… white nationalism."

In response to the report, COO Sheryl Sandberg said that Facebook has made some progress, having committed to hiring a civil rights leader to bring "much-needed civil rights expertise in-house." It also expanded voter suppression policies, announced that it will include a link directing people to a voting information hub and committed to building a more diverse workforce.

However, the company also repeated talking points it has used before. "Facebook stands firmly against hate," it's "making progress… but still a long way to go," and "it is the beginning of the journey, not the end," Sandberg wrote. The

company committed to making some, but not all the changes suggested in the report. Facebook said earlier that it will not “make policy changes tied to revenue pressure.”

Given the tide of advertisers, civil rights leaders, users and now its own audit turning against it, that might not fly anymore, however. “Facebook has what I call an appeasement strategy: Tell us what we need to hear, and Facebook can keep doing whatever they like,” said Free Press co-executive officer Jessica J. Gonzales, who participated in a call with Zuckerberg and Sandberg yesterday. “What they really need is a comprehensive sweep of the site of white supremacists, homophobes, anti-Semites and other hateful groups.”

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