Zuckerberg dismisses fact-checking after bragging about fact-checking

Enlarge / Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg testifying before Congress in April 2018. It wasn’t his only appearance in DC this decade.

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Almost exactly two weeks ago, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg was touting the success his platform has had with fact-checking and false-content warnings on posts. This week, however, Zuckerberg told Fox News that, really, he doesn’t think Facebook should be in the fact-checking business at all.

“I just believe strongly that Facebook shouldn’t be the arbiter of truth of everything that people say online,” Zuckerberg said in an interview with Dana Perino. “Private companies probably shouldn’t be, especially these platform companies, shouldn’t be in the position of doing that.”

The comments come amid a renewed debate about fact-checking on social media as Twitter and its most famous user, President Donald Trump, find themselves at odds. Twitter appended a fact-check notice—its first—to two Trump tweets relating to mail-in ballot fraud. In retaliation, Trump is expected to sign a new executive order as soon as today explicitly targeting Facebook’s and Twitter’s ability to fact-check, restrict, or otherwise manage content.

Zuckerberg has been reasonably consistent in making sure to leave large carve-outs in site policy for politicians, including the president. Last year, Facebook made clear that its community standards—including hate speech and abuse rules as well as fact-checking policies—do not apply to politicians or other newsworthy figures. The company has also said many times that political content and advertising does not need to be truthful, instead putting the onus on users to avoid lies or to recognize every time they are being lied to.

Even Facebook has a few standards, however, and those relate to election security and COVID-19. In March, the company removed a Trump campaign ad that spread misleading information about the 2020 US Census after reporters noticed and began to ask about the sponsored posts. Facebook also put a "partly false" label on a misleading video of Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden shared by members of the Trump campaign.

Zuckerberg earlier this month bragged about the effectiveness of fact-checking as relating to the COVID-19 crisis. In a call, he told media that, in the month of April alone, Facebook's fact-checkers put 50 million warning labels on COVID-19 content shared to the platform. Those labels were super effective, he crowed: 95 percent of the time, viewers didn't click through to content that had been warned to be false.

Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey took to his own platform to rebut Zuckerberg's statement.

"We'll continue to point out incorrect or disputed information about elections globally," Dorsey said in a series of Tweets. "This does not make us an 'arbiter of truth.' Our intention is to connect the dots of conflicting statements and show the information in dispute so people can judge for themselves."

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