Zuckerberg doubles down on free speech—the Facebook way



Enlarge / “I’m here today because I believe we must continue to stand for free expression,” Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg told an audience at Georgetown University Thursday.
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Mark Zuckerberg came to Washington, DC, on Thursday to claim the mantle of Martin Luther King and the Founding Fathers as a champion of free speech. Standing in the stately Gaston Hall auditorium at Georgetown University—which has hosted the likes of Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and Bono—the Facebook CEO declared, “I’m here today because I believe we must continue

to stand for free expression."

And a city full of regulation-hungry politicians and foes of Big Tech undoubtedly thought: *How's that working out?*

Zuckerberg's highly promoted speech introduced no new Facebook features or initiatives, but was a defiant reply to critics of Facebook's destructive effects on global society—manipulating voters, fomenting division, and even aiding genocide. He doubled down on Facebook's handling of the treacherous business of implementing free expression at an unprecedented global scale. Despite considerable evidence that the approach has often fallen short, Zuckerberg still professes optimism: Giving people a voice and connecting the world, he believes, are transformationally positive actions. Essentially, he's saying—as he always has—that *Facebook* is essentially positive.



What's more, he was claiming high ground for Facebook's values. If you disagree with him on speech, he implied, you're siding with the forces of censorship and elitism. He described a "countertrend … to pull back on free expression." His foes, he implied, are the same kind of people who wanted Eugene Debs in prison, who wanted Vietnam protesters stopped. But the people whose Facebook presence is more disturbing include the likes of Alex Jones (whom Facebook ultimately banned) or … Donald Trump. The speech didn't really take on those kinds of choices.

Furthermore, rejecting his point of view will align you with the oppressive overlords of China! He pointedly noted that his dreams of taking Facebook to that country have been stalemated by that country's demands on data and censorship. While Facebook's encrypted WhatsApp service is a boon to protesters, he says, the Chinese TikTok app censors mentions of protests even for users in the US.

Zuckerberg clearly believed in what he was saying: Though his presentation was sometimes halting (maybe reflecting that he was tinkering with the speech until his deadline), his voice grew stronger when invoking Facebook as an instrument of empowerment. He spoke for almost 40 minutes, which is what happens when senators aren't interrupting you.

But while he constantly described Facebook as giving voice to everyday people and underrepresented groups, he gave short shrift to the way that powerful forces are using his platform to manipulate people. In the past two years, Zuckerberg and his leadership team have admitted that they were late to recognize the downside of free expression: political extremism, intentional misinformation, and political ads that baldly lie.

At every turn, the company has avoided becoming an arbiter of what is news and what political utterances are destructive. "I don't think it's right for a private company to censor politicians or the news in a democracy," he said, a sentiment he often expresses. But neither does that mean that a private company has to *promote* outright lies and divisive content. It would have been interesting if he'd grappled with that concept more in his Georgetown address.

Maybe the most powerful part of the speech was when he said, "I'm not going to be around forever," and so he thinks it essential to deeply embed free speech values into Facebook so the company continues giving voice to people long after he's gone.

Zuckerberg's foray into the belly of the Beltway to deliver a message of free speech was, in a sense, a daring gambit. It's hard to disagree with the First Amendment, and even less attractive to align with censors. But his critics—and a lot of people who are simply unhappy with Facebook—are asking for more. Boosting speech at global scale is a tricky and unprecedented practice. Though Zuckerberg constantly cites the

army he now employs in matters of security and safety (up to 35,000), it’s not clear that a “community” of almost 3 billion people can be purged of truly destructive content. Facebook is a huge experiment that constantly tests Zuckerberg’s deeply felt claim that connecting the world will yield a net positive. The results are far from settled.

After the speech, Zuckerberg took a few questions from Georgetown students in the audience (which were submitted in writing, not offered spontaneously). One questioned whether Facebook was favoring conservatives with its green light to misinformation in political ads. Zuckerberg agreed with Georgetown’s moderator that liberals are angry, too. “Right now, we’re doing a very good job of making everyone angry at us,” he said.

No one seemed to disagree with *that*. And things won’t change after Zuckerberg’s Tom Paine moment.

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