



AD

TECHNOLOGY

The meaning behind Mark Zuckerberg's aggressive plea for 'free expression'

The Facebook CEO's Georgetown speech tried to assuage the complaints of Democrats, Republicans and the news media against his company. But will it work?



By **NANCY SCOLA** and **CRISTIANO LIMA**

10/17/2019 04:20 PM EDT

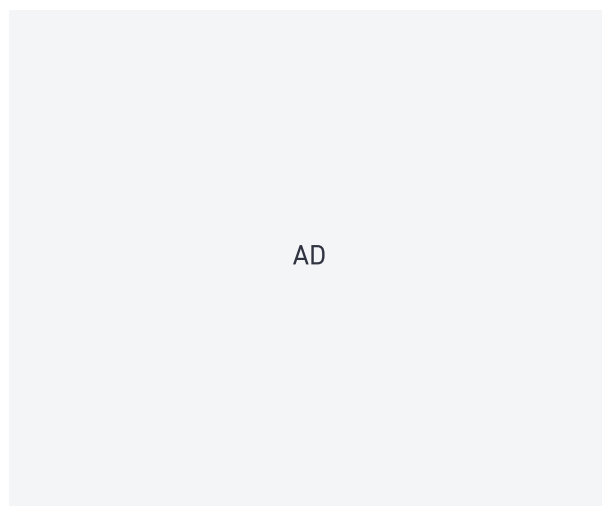


Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg decried the dangers of censorship. He invoked civil rights icons Martin Luther King Jr. and Frederick Douglass, and hailed the contributions of protesters stretching from World War I to Black Lives Matter.



And he delivered a pointed attack on critics who “no longer trust their fellow citizens” to sort out facts from falsehoods online.

The social media mogul's 37-minute speech Thursday, delivered in a stained-glass hall at Georgetown University, was Facebook's most assertive effort to date to repel the wave of assaults it's facing from across the political spectrum. Zuckerberg also attempted to do something he has so far struggled to accomplish — assert that his company is making society better by giving people a free platform for all kinds of content, from their weddings to their acrimonious political views.



It's no accident that Zuckerberg came to Washington to make his plea, or that his speech contained messages for detractors on all sides: He reminded liberals of their history, by citing the First Amendment's value to civil rights and anti-war activists. He said Facebook has no interest in censoring political speech, addressing a major complaint of conservatives who feel squelched on social media. He even shouted out to the landmark 1964 Supreme Court case that eased the threat of libel suits for the news media, an industry that has been lobbying Congress to lessen big internet companies' stranglehold on the digital ad market.

The big question: Will it work?



This is POLITICO's breakdown of the highlights from Zuckerberg's speech, what they mean and how they may play in Washington's tech debate:

JOURNALISTS NEED FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION TOO

“We didn't have the broad free speech protections that we have now until the 1960s, when the Supreme Court ruled in opinions like *New York Times vs. Sullivan* that they can criticize public figures as long as they're not doing so with actual malice, even if what you're saying is false.”

Here, he is citing a landmark 1964 Supreme Court decision that freed the news media to aggressively cover public officials without the threat of libel suits for inadvertent mistakes. By nodding to a court case that's a staple of journalism schools, Zuckerberg is aiming for some common ground with the news media, even as that industry lobbies [Congress](#) to help news companies compete with Facebook and Google for digital ad money.

Zuckerberg also points out an often-overlooked aspect of the SCOTUS case: It involved an ad, much like the ones Facebook sells.

NO, YOU'RE DANGEROUS

“Now, some people believe that giving more people a voice is driving division rather than bringing people together. More people across the spectrum believe that achieving the political outcomes that they think matter is more important than every person having a voice and being heard. And I think that that's dangerous.”

Zuckerberg alludes to recent criticisms from Democratic leaders, most notably presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren, who say the platform has done too little to crack down on misinformation from politicians such as President Donald Trump. Zuckerberg tries to flip the critics' arguments on their head, saying it's "dangerous" — not just politically expedient — for a candidate to urge a social media company to take down a foe's message.



AD

LEARN THE LESSONS OF HISTORY

“In times of social tension, our impulse is often to pull back from free expression because we want the progress that comes in from free expression but we don't want this tension. We saw this when Martin Luther King Jr. wrote his famous letter from a Birmingham Jail when he was unconstitutionally jailed for protesting peacefully. And we saw this in the effort to shut down campus protests during the Vietnam war. We saw this way back when America was deeply polarized about its role in World War I and the Supreme Court ruled at the time that the socialist leader Eugene Debs could be imprisoned for making an anti-war speech. In the end all of these decisions were wrong.”

Martin Luther King's letter is a foundational text for civil rights activists and a revered part of American history. Citing it, as well as the experience of dissenters stretch back to Debs, is a way to remind the left that its own heritage has relied on free speech.

The short version of Zuckerberg's message: "People in power often roll back human rights when times get tough and scary. Don't be those people."

But the CEO is on potentially treacherous ground if people think he's trying to liken his hugely profitable corporation to a hero like King.

LIVESTREAMING ISN'T JUST ABOUT ATROCITIES

“Take livestreaming for example. This allows families to be together for moments like birthdays. We've even had a few weddings. It allows schoolteachers to read children bedtime stories they might not otherwise have read to. Of course it allows us to witness some really important



cultural moments. But we've also seen people broadcast self harm and suicide, some terrible acts."

Zuckerberg's company faced huge criticism after a gunman used Facebook Live to stream the video of two mosque massacres that killed 51 people last March in Christchurch, New Zealand — including demands that Facebook just yank the service. Zuckerberg's effort to paint a picture of people celebrating their birthdays via Facebook Live — how often does that really happen? — suggests that he hasn't really figured out his argument for not shutting it down.

A MESSAGE TAILORED FOR LAWMAKERS

"I believe that we have two responsibilities: to remove content when it can cause real danger as effectively as we can and to fight to uphold as wide of a definition of freedom of expression as possible and to not allow the definition of what is considered dangerous to expand beyond what is absolutely necessary."

The funny thing here is that Congress, too, thought online platforms had those same two responsibilities when it passed Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act, a law that protects online companies from lawsuits over content from their users.

The thinking back then: If all these new websites did a decent job handling the worst of what people post, they could otherwise be largely left alone. Silicon Valley regularly cites that law as the only reason the internet has flourished as it has.

AD



But in recent years many Democrats and at least some Republicans have argued that Facebook — plus Google, Twitter and others — have failed to maintain a basic level of decency on their platforms, letting everything from ads for sexual slavery to terrorist recruitment materials run rampant. And because of it, Congress has started rolling back Section 230.

WE'RE NOT THE 'TRUTH' POLICE

“We don't fact check political ads and we don't do this to help politicians, but because we think people should be able to see for themselves what politicians are saying. For the same reason, if content is newsworthy, we also won't take it down.”

Zuckerberg has argued again and again that Facebook doesn't want the company's moderators serving as "arbiters of truth." For one thing, that would require the company to hire on or contract a whole lot of moderators.

But here, Zuckerberg's trying to align himself with those who find his own power over the speech of 2 billion people to be unsettling. Of course, he gave himself much of that power by structuring Facebook, from its founding, as almost totally under his control.

LET'S TRY THIS ARGUMENT AGAIN

“We don't fact check political ads and we don't do this to help politicians, but because we think people should be able to see for themselves what politicians are saying. For the same reason, if content is newsworthy, we also won't take it down.”

Part of what Zuckerberg was trying to pull off with this speech was cleaning up for Nick Clegg, the company's head of global public policy (and a former deputy prime minister in the United Kingdom). In remarks a few weeks ago in D.C., Clegg laid out the company's policy of not pulling down politicians' misleading content. The result wasn't what Facebook intended — Clegg's remarks caused



much confusion and anger from its critics, including Democratic frontrunners Warren and Joe Biden.

But Zuckerberg's message wasn't much different from Clegg's. Facebook is betting on the broader arc of Zuckerberg's speech to help the rest of us make sense of the policy. But a punchier talking point here would probably have helped, too.

OTHER COMPANIES RAN TRUMP'S AD TOO

"I know many people disagree with this, but in general, I don't think it's right for a private company to censor politicians or the news in a democracy. And we are not an outlier here. The other major internet platforms and the vast majority of media also run the same ads."

Facebook has faced the brunt of criticism from Democrats for running a misleading Trump campaign ad attacking Biden. Here, Zuckerberg points out that competitors like Google-owned YouTube and Twitter, plus mainstream news outlets like Fox News and MSNBC, also signed off on the advertisement.

AD

HITTING THE BOTTOM LINE

"Given the sensitivity around political ads, I've considered whether we should stop allowing them altogether. From a business perspective, the controversy certainly is not worth the very small part of our business that they make up. But political ads can be an important part of voice,



especially for local candidates and up-and-coming challengers and advocacy groups the media might not otherwise cover so that way they can get their voice into the debate. Banning political ads favors incumbents and whoever the media chooses to cover. But practically, even if we wanted to ban political ads, it's not even clear where you draw the line."

Zuckerberg addresses the elephant in the room: Facebook profits from having more relaxed rules for political advertising. The company has already pocketed more than \$50 million from 2020 candidates running ads on its platform, according to figures compiled by POLITICO. Even though that amount might just be a "small part" of Facebook's business, as Zuckerberg notes, it still calls into question the notion that it's willingness to greenlight nearly all political ads is rooted purely in high-minded ideals. And his all-or-nothing framing sets up a bit of a false dichotomy; not everyone objecting to Facebook letting candidates including Trump lie in ads wants a total ban on political advertising.

TECH AND CHINA: 'IT'S COMPLICATED'

"I wanted our services in China because I believe in connecting the whole world. And I thought maybe we could help create a more open society. This is something I worked hard on for a long time. But we could never come to agreement on what it would take for us to operate there. And they never let us in. And now we have more freedom to speak out and stand up for the values that we believe in and fight for free expression around the world."

These comments highlight the tech industry's challenging relationship with China, a hugely lucrative market where competitors like Google have struggled with how to navigate Beijing's strict controls on free speech. Not to mention the endless political headaches in Washington.

Zuckerberg's criticism of China may also play well in the Trump White House, which has been waging a trade war in an attempt to counter Chinese influence around the world. And it may resonate with people alarmed at the way other



organizations, most recently the NBA, have tiptoed around China's speech crackdowns.

Christian Vasquez contributed to this report.

FILED UNDER: CYBER SECURITY, GOOGLE, FACEBOOK, TECHNOLOGY, CHINA, MARK ZUCKERBERG, U.S. SUPREME COURT,



POLITICO

Help us do better!

To support and inform our journalism, it helps to learn more about you.

SENIORITY

Select Seniority



INDUSTRY

Select Industry



Submit

The use of this information is governed by POLITICO's [privacy policy](#) and [terms of service](#). You can contact us [here](#). This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#) apply.

SPONSORED CONTENT

By Outbrain |



**The World's Biggest
Stopped The Virus.**



**This Giant Sailboat Will
Transport Cars Across the**



**Trevor Noah Picks up \$27.5
Million Bel Air Mansion**