

Mark Zuckerberg's U-turn on fact-checking is craven—but correct

Social-media platforms should not be in the business of defining truth



Illustration: Getty Images/The Economist

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Apart from the million-dollar wristwatch, it had the look of a hostage video. On January 7th Mark Zuckerberg posted a clip to Facebook and Instagram in which he announced [changes to his social networks' content-moderation policies](#) in response to what he called the “cultural tipping point” of Donald Trump’s election. There have been “too many mistakes and too much censorship”, he said, adding that Mr Trump’s return provides an “opportunity to restore free expression”. He also appointed [Dana White](#), an ally of Mr Trump’s, to Meta’s board (as well as John Elkann, the boss of Exor, which part-owns *The Economist*’s parent company).

For all the talk of freedom, Mr Zuckerberg’s video was another example of the capture of American business by the bullying incoming president. Mr Trump has called Facebook an “enemy of the people” and threatened to ensure that Mr Zuckerberg “spends the rest of his life in prison”. Mr Zuckerberg is not the only executive to submit: everyone from Apple’s Tim Cook to OpenAI’s Sam Altman is said to have donated to Mr Trump’s inauguration vanity fund. This week Amazon announced a \$40m biopic of the incoming First Lady.

The circumstances may be grotesque and the motives suspect. But the substance of Meta’s sweeping changes is, in fact, correct. Speech online urgently needs to become freer. Making it so will shore up America’s democracy against whatever tests it faces in the years to come.

Mr Zuckerberg was once a free-speech enthusiast, allowing content such as Holocaust denial on Facebook even as many urged him to block it. But following claims of Russian online interference in Mr Trump’s first election, in 2016, and an outbreak of misinformation around the covid-19 pandemic, in 2020, the company cracked down on a broad range of “lawful but awful” content, from quack medicine to crackpot groups such as QAnon.

What first seemed like common sense has placed a growing cost on users’ freedom of expression. Never mind the freedom to be wrong; in some cases perfectly accurate claims have been blocked, as when Facebook suppressed a *New York Post* story about Joe Biden’s son, Hunter, which turned out to be true. The definition of hate speech has expanded in a way that limits debate about subjects such as transgender rights. Automated filters are so strict that even Meta says 10-20% of the content it removes is taken down in error. Mr Zuckerberg’s promise to replace fact-checking with user-led “community notes”, and loosen the rules on what can be said about testy topics like gender, is welcome.

There are risks. Mr Zuckerberg acknowledges that moderation involves trade-offs and that his new rules will mean more “bad stuff” online. Advertisers, desperate for “brand-safe” content, will resist this. Another danger

is that platforms use “free speech” as an excuse to scrimp on efforts to curb illegal content, which are expensive and difficult. On X, where Elon Musk has dismantled much of the moderation apparatus, posts inciting violence—a criminal offence—spread rapidly during a recent spate of rioting in Britain. Telegram, a libertarian network popular in Russia, has become a haven for crooks owing to its hands-off approach.

The best way to guard against these dangers is to be transparent about how rules are set. Meta’s Oversight Board, an independent standards watchdog set up in 2020, appears to have been wrongfooted by this week’s announcement, first supporting the measures and then expressing concerns. The rules on what can and cannot be said online should be explained and defended transparently, not overturned by the company’s chief executive in a pre-inauguration panic.

For all that, Meta’s moves are a step in the right direction. Social networks should stamp out illegal content. For the sake of advertisers’ business and users’ enjoyment, they will probably want to keep things civil. But it is past time that they got out of the business of ruling on what is right and wrong. Only a fool would claim that his social network was the truth.■