

History will not be on Facebook's sociopath social manipulation side, no matter what Zuckerberg says

[Steve Kovach@stevekovach](mailto:SteveKovach@stevekovach)

Key Points

- Mark Zuckerberg's address at Georgetown on Thursday detailed his views on freedom of speech on Facebook.
- Zuckerberg's argument was that more speech will drown out the bad stuff on Facebook, and that history will say he made the right decision by not making the company the arbiter of truth.
- But Zuckerberg also ignored the role Facebook plays as a publisher, and the responsibility it carries to get the facts right.

watch now

VIDEO05:18

Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg draws strong reaction to free expression speech

In Mark Zuckerberg's view, this funky political moment we're living through is just a temporary blip. And Facebook's role in that moment — allowing election interference, fake news and

hate speech to spread across its network of more than 2 billion users — will ultimately look great in the history books.

In his address at Georgetown University on Thursday, Zuckerberg detailed his thoughts on free speech and Facebook's role in wrangling the views, feelings and political ad spending of billions of users.

He said he won't ban political advertising on the site, as some other social media companies like TikTok have promised. He provided a revisionist history of the founding of [Facebook](#), claiming it was meant to promote discussion about the Iraq War that started while he was a student at Harvard. (Facebook actually started as a way to rate the physical attractiveness of Harvard students.) He said no one wants tech companies to be the arbiter of truth and expression.

But what stuck out the most was how [Zuckerberg](#) thinks Facebook will be judged when we look back at this era decades from now. It wasn't just a rallying cry for conservatives who — despite evidence to the contrary — believe Facebook is snuffing out conservative voices. It was a reassurance for employees who have had to grapple with scandal after scandal over the last three years. The implication: The work Facebook doing on a whole is better for connecting people and promoting an open debate and dialogue.

"I believe in giving people a voice because, at the end of the day, I believe in people," Zuckerberg said in the closing of his speech. "And as long as enough of us keep fighting for this, I believe that more people's voices will eventually help us work through these issues together and write a new chapter in our history — where

from all of our individual voices and perspectives, we can bring the world closer together.”

Zuckerberg’s speech implies history will judge him for making the right decision by enabling more speech, even false or misleading speech and phony paid political advertisements. The bad stuff will be drowned out by the good. He thinks that Facebook’s policies transcend today’s chaos and that his decisions today will look like the right move in the long term.

It’s a tactic world leaders have used to defend their own controversial decisions, whether it was President George W. Bush defending the Iraq War, or war hawks in the 1960s making the case for the atrocities committed in Vietnam. Things seem terrible now, but don’t worry! We’ll be right in the end.

Zuckerberg’s stance may be rooted in the principles of the First Amendment. Like the saying goes, the only way to weed out bad speech is more speech. And what better platform to drown out bad speech than a website used by billions?

But that doesn’t account for the role Facebook plays as a publisher. While there’s almost no human involvement in deciding what to pump into your Facebook feed, there is an algorithm that’s making those decisions. In general, that algorithm is designed to keep users sucked in, and the best way to do that is showing them stuff that will engage, enrage or feed their biases.

Truth doesn’t matter to an algorithm. But when you’re delivering news and information at a massive scale, you also carry the responsibility to get it right. Facebook is doing that on a scale

never seen before in human history. And its leader admitted on Thursday that it wants no part in playing the role of fact-checker.

In fact, in the case of false political advertisements, it's willing to get paid to spread those falsehoods.

History won't look fondly upon that.