

Mark Zuckerberg never really cared about the facts

In following Elon Musk and ditching falsehood checks, Meta's boss has rung the death knell on efforts to regulate tech

So now we know what happened to Nick Clegg. The former deputy prime minister left the tech giant Meta last week. Already it looks like he spent his seven years at the company much as he spent his time in government, which was with his shoulder blades exposed, walking guilelessly back on to a knife.

This week, his erstwhile boss Mark Zuckerberg solidified Meta's shift to being a MAGA-friendly firm at which the likes of Clegg are no longer welcome. He did this by announcing the abandonment of all fact-checking on its platforms — Facebook, Instagram, Threads — at least in the United States. Instead, all will rely on users flagging up alleged falsehoods, following the model of Elon Musk's Twitter/X.

After buying Twitter and renaming it X, he simply stopped fact-checking. Now anyone — racists, Nazis, health conspiracists, whatever — could say what they liked, subject only to other users objecting. And this, now, is the model Zuckerberg aims to copy.

One reason for this may be that he lives in terror of Trump, who has threatened to jail him. Another may be that despite unfettered fake news in the election of 2016, and many more curbs on it in that of 2024, the same maniac still won both of them. Which, politically speaking, perhaps renders this whole approach rather moot.

But it's also clear that Zuckerberg never really wanted to be responsible for content anyway. Last year, you might recall, he rolled out end-to-end encryption on his platforms, despite child protection agencies warning that it would make paedophiles harder to catch. Fundamentally, viscerally, ideologically, he just doesn't think the social consequences caused by his platforms are his problem. Thanks to Musk, he no longer need pretend.

Meta's scrapping of fact-checkers, then, is a big victory for Musk and not only ideologically. Advertisers fled X after Musk's changes and he has been suing them ever since. Their position will be harder to defend now that X's policies are basically the industry norm.

More importantly, Meta's decision, despite only applying to the US, is a shot across the bows of the European Union and the UK. "We're going to work with President Trump," said Zuckerberg this week, "to push back on governments around the world that are going after American companies and pushing to censor more." That means us. It also means that, henceforth, our own efforts to regulate tech will be thrown back in our faces in trade negotiations. A new age of First Amendment colonialism dawns.

Just possibly, this is not all entirely horrible. With social media now on a path towards unmediated chaos, the hunger for publications with actual editorial standards — such as this one — really ought to grow. Although this, I'm afraid, is the only positive note I can strike.

Social media is not the last word in technology. With Silicon Valley now unabashed in its belief that it bears no responsibility for the consequences of its own inventions — much like the US gun industry, I suppose — we should ponder with fresh trepidation the looming revolution in AI.

The people who make this stuff will not save us from it. Nor, even, will they stand back while we attempt to save ourselves. The ideology now is stark. Anything that can be invented will be. And the downsides? "Not our problem," say the tech bosses. "Your problem." Good luck.

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