

Mark Zuckerberg's "Privacy Manifesto": A brief for intensifying Internet and social media censorship

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On March 6, Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg published a statement entitled "A Privacy-Focused Vision for Social Networking" on the Notes tab of his personal page. Widely described as a "manifesto," the document is a brief for ending the mass public exchange of ideas on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, as well as across the Internet as a whole, under the guise of "protecting privacy."

The manifesto begins with Zuckerberg emphasizing that he is "taking positions on important issues concerning the future of the Internet," not just social media. He says that he is "working openly and consulting with experts across society as we develop this." In other words, Facebook—which has grown to 2.7 billion users across the globe and has a Wall Street value of nearly \$500 billion—is working with consultants at the highest levels of the tech industry and US intelligence establishments to develop its plan.

The core of the new strategy is the idea that an open and public social media environment—where all users can freely communicate with one another and share each other's posts—must be replaced by a structure of one-on-one private communication between individuals. As Zuckerberg wrote, "Over the last 15 years, Facebook and Instagram have helped people connect with friends, communities, and interests in the digital equivalent of a town square. But people increasingly also want to connect privately in the digital equivalent of the living room."

A second aspect of replacing the "town square" with the "living room" is dispensing with the Facebook timeline feature of stored posts. He writes, "I believe the future of communication will increasingly shift to

private, encrypted services where people can be confident what they say to each other stays secure and their messages and content won't stick around forever."

In sum, Zuckerberg's proposal amounts to a gigantic about-face for Facebook. The company that was founded in the 2004 with the mission "to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together" will now be replaced by "a world where people can speak privately and live freely knowing that their information will only be seen by who they want to see it and won't all stick around forever."

Zuckerberg then elaborates on six technical and policy principles for putting the social media genie back in the bottle: private interactions, encryption, reducing permanence, safety, interoperability and secure data storage.

He makes clear that the new plan is being implemented on all of Facebook's services and writes, "We understand there are a lot of tradeoffs to get right, and we're committed to consulting with experts and discussing the best way forward." He never gets around to explaining precisely what the "trade-offs" are that need so much attention.

After three years of continuous battering by the corporate media and Washington political establishment over "fake news," unsubstantiated claims of Russian interference in the 2016 elections and numerous data privacy violations, Zuckerberg has dutifully drafted a plan intended to mollify his critics. However, from the standpoint of the ruling class, the real problem with Facebook is none of the above-mentioned transgressions.

The advisors that Zuckerberg is collaborating with—such as The Atlantic Council—are responsible for decades of false news, political meddling and mayhem in countries around the world and covering up public privacy violations. Meanwhile, the Wall Street valuation of Facebook is predicated upon the company’s ability to scrape social media profile information and tidbits of user behavior for sales and marketing purposes. Something much bigger and more threatening to the interests of imperialism and the stock market is behind Zuckerberg’s manifesto.

Under conditions where workers and young people around the world are using social media to communicate and organize their strikes and struggles—especially coordinating across industries and national borders—the ruling class has concluded that these open platforms are a significant menace and must be shut down as soon as possible. Thus Zuckerberg’s “trade-offs” involve a direct attack on online freedom of speech that he and his advisors must now repackage in the form of privacy protection.

Since Zuckerberg’s March 6 post, some in the corporate media have focused on skepticism that the plan can deliver on its ostensible goals. Others, such as Facebook critic Roger McNamee, have argued that the manifesto is a public-relations stunt designed to shore up investor confidence and push back calls for government regulation that would break-up big tech companies like Facebook, Google and Apple.

Nowhere in the official media response is there any connection drawn between Zuckerberg’s new vision and the blatant political censorship that Facebook has been engaged in for over two years. Under the guise of fighting “fake” accounts and implementing “harm prevention,” Facebook’s army of 30,000 censors and artificial intelligence bots have removed millions of user accounts and posts arbitrarily identified as inauthentic or misinformation.

As explained by the World Socialist Web Site in its Perspective of December 29, Facebook is today the global censor that decides what information is to be seen and read by billions of people all over the world. In particular, Facebook has specifically targeted accounts, pages and posts of a left-wing character, including those of writers of the World Socialist Web Site and members of the Socialist Equality Party.

The latest proposals from Zuckerberg are of a piece

with these past practices. They represent a deepening of the collaboration between the tech industry—references to encrypted communications notwithstanding—and the military-intelligence establishment. Workers and young people should not accept the claims by Zuckerberg, the media or the political establishment that they will protect the privacy rights of the public. The new Facebook vision is part of ongoing efforts to track what people are talking about on social media and, at the same time, to prevent them from using the platform to organize and coordinate their struggles.



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