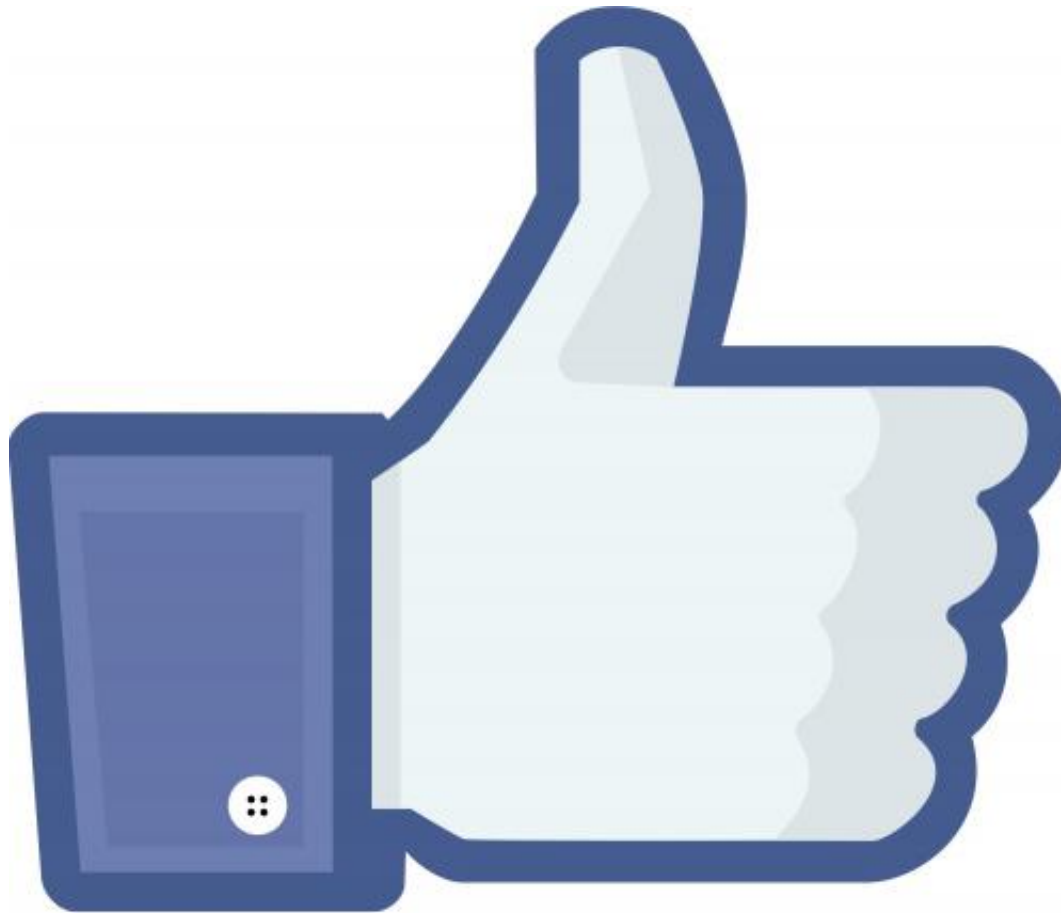


As Facebook's grown, so have its challenges

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In 2011 as Facebook inched ever closer to 1 billion active monthly users, it faced a vexing crisis: uproar about a facial recognition algorithm that tagged people in photos without their consent.

Six years later, and as Facebook nears the 2-billion-user milestone, that complaint almost seems quaint.

Consider the problems facing the world's biggest social network today. The Menlo Park, Calif., [company](#) is taking fire for spreading propaganda and misinformation, potentially influencing the outcome of elections in the United States and abroad. It's being criticized for allowing hate and terror groups to foment on its platform. And it's scrambling to stamp out horrific videos of suicides and murders streamed live.

That these setbacks come at a time when Facebook now reaches a quarter of the globe's population only underscores how much the stakes have grown for the company. It connects people in ways never experienced before, providing the only outlet for free speech in some countries. Facebook is one of the few companies in Silicon Valley that can proclaim without a hint of irony that it has changed the world.

Armed with enormous power, the nation's fifth-largest company by market capitalization has to take into account both the needs of shareholders and the communities it serves. How Facebook navigates its journey toward its next billion users could portend not just the financial health of the company but also the health of the societies increasingly influenced by its products.

"The more mature their tools become, the more profound the challenges they have," said Mike Hoefflinger, a former Facebook marketing employee who wrote "Becoming Facebook," a book about the company's evolution into a behemoth valued at \$430 billion.

"My sense is that they're absolutely maturing into their role in the world," Hoefflinger continued. "But the history of Silicon Valley has taught us that no company, no matter how great, can dominate forever."

That vulnerability - and a willingness to adapt - has rarely been more evident than since the 2016 presidential election. Against the backdrop of a bitterly divided country, Facebook, which did not respond to a request for comment, has provided valuable clues as to how it will behave in the new political era.

Initially, Facebook founder and Chief Executive Mark Zuckerberg dismissed the notion that his platform helped spread propaganda and partisan clickbait that some say helped Donald Trump win the election. Zuckerberg even went so far as to call the idea "crazy." But as criticism mounted, the 32-year-old executive began addressing the issue more forcefully and accepting his platform's role.

Facebook partnered with independent fact checkers to help vet content, it restricted ads from fake news sites and it tried to educate users about how to spot hoaxes in several countries undergoing elections, including in Britain, Germany and France. To combat criticism that Facebook only fortifies the echo chamber effect online, the company is testing a "Related Articles" feature that will give users more perspectives on the news.

Zuckerberg was also compelled to take action over the rise of live-streamed violence on Facebook's popular video broadcasting platform.

Last month, Zuckerberg had to kick off the company's annual developers conference by offering condolences for the murder of 74-year-old Robert Godwin Sr. in Cleveland. Video of the crime was uploaded onto Facebook by the gunman, 37-year-old Steve Stephens, who later bragged about the killing on Facebook Live.

Last week, Zuckerberg announced plans to hire 3,000 more moderators to screen content for disturbing material.

The efforts to crack down on fake news and objectionable video also comes months after Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and YouTube agreed to share information to weed out terrorists and their content. That's being done even as Facebook and others are deflecting allegations that technology companies are complicit in terrorist attacks because the perpetrators use their platforms.

Viewed collectively, observers say the recent actions by Facebook show a company deep in soul-searching mode. They cite Zuckerberg's sweeping 5,600-word manifesto in February that argues Facebook can forge a [global community](#) by expanding the number of users connected on the platform through groups, like ones for parenting or neighborhoods.

"Building a global community that works for everyone starts with the millions of smaller communities and intimate social structures we turn to for our personal, emotional and spiritual needs," Zuckerberg wrote.

The hope is that those connections will spill over into the physical world to strengthen bonds between people - even if it means taking a break from Facebook. It's something of an antidote to the feeling of isolation for which social media is so often blamed.

"To implement his manifesto, Zuckerberg might have to jump headlong into a political minefield, and even change his company's entire business model," Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari wrote in the Financial Times. "You can hardly lead a global community when you make your money from capturing people's attention and selling it to advertisers. Despite this, his willingness to even formulate a political vision deserves praise."

It's a grown-up move for Zuckerberg, who has long been dogged by the reputation (fair or not) that's he's a petulant leader, thanks largely to his

depiction in the 2010 Aaron Sorkin film "The Social Network."

Now Zuckerberg is more openly contemplative. He's even been acting like he's campaigning for office, attending a rodeo, planting a community garden and thanking police during a visit to Dallas. He's had to deny rumors that he's interested in running for president.

Zuckerberg's attempts to quell its problem with [fake news](#) and the like are all steps in the right direction for mitigating Facebook's shortcomings, experts say. But the question invariably remains: How can Facebook ever have enough moderators, fact-checkers or even sophisticated enough artificial intelligence to back up its lofty intentions?

"Two billion users is a challenge no company has ever had," said David Kirkpatrick, chief executive of media company Techonomy and author of "The Facebook Effect."

"Just dealing with suicide prevention alone is a huge challenge," he added. "And freedom of speech is such a multifaceted issue that it could occupy all of Zuckerberg's time."

At some point, Kirkpatrick said, Facebook may struggle to balance competing interests to keep its platform safe and grow users at the same time. And because Facebook is a publicly traded company, Zuckerberg will be under continual pressure to favor the latter.

"They're a company optimized for profit that reports to Wall Street, not Congress," Kirkpatrick said. "I believe they have good intentions and want to do the right thing. On the other hand, they want to keep growing profits by 50 percent every quarter. Those two things may increasingly come into conflict."

Zuckerberg probably anticipated this. He made sure that he would command a majority of the company's voting rights after its initial public offering of stock in 2012. Then last year, he created a new class of non-voting shares that would allow him to give away his wealth but also maintain control of the company. And in his pitch to investors in the run-up to the public listing, he let his priorities be known.

"We don't build services to make money," he wrote, "we make money to build better services."

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