Zuckerberg's Stunning Free Speech Announcement: Will Meta Really Fight Censorship?

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Glenn Greenwald (GG): It was really only after 2016 when these dual traumas took place in the West and really traumatised Western liberals. First was the British people's decision to leave the EU despite all the European elites telling them that it was not in their interest to do so. They ignored those people and they voted for the UK to leave the EU. And then four months later, in a huge shock to everybody pretty much, Donald Trump rolled over Hillary Clinton and won the electoral college and became president of the United States. And it was really then, and only then, that the idea emerged in a serious systemic way that free speech could no longer be tolerated on the internet because if it is, then the population can no longer be controlled. Power senators can't control any longer what people think and therefore can't control their behaviour, including their voting behaviour. And only then did you start to see all of the mechanics being created to justify censorship over the internet as something more noble. Obviously they couldn't come right out and say we have to censor political speech on the internet because we fear free speech and what people will do and think if we can't control the information they're getting. So they justified it instead with these fraudulently noble sounding terms like disinformation, anti-misinformation, countering digital hatred on the internet. All sorts of noble or even generic sounding objectives that were nothing other than political censorship masquerading as something else. And that was when all of these groups emerged that had never existed before that were extremely well financed by US intelligence agencies, other Western intelligence agencies, the same set of neoliberal billionaires like Bill Gates and Pierre Omidyar and George Soros. This huge industry emerged overnight. And it was all justified based on this completely fabricated, concocted expertise, where we were suddenly told that somehow there was a group of people who overnight had become qualified, had a credential to go around decreeing what is true and what is false, differentiating truth from falsity. Not just in their one trained area of expertise, for example, if you're talking about cardiology and then a cardiologist comes and says that's not true. That wasn't what we were talking about. Even within very trained, specific fields of highly specialised knowledge, people disagree all the time, even there you couldn't have a floating arbiter of truth. But that's not even what this was. This was something much more ambitious,

much more audacious, much more flagrantly fraudulent, which is the idea that there are certain groups of people who are just trained in the art of disinformation generally. They can identify disinformation in any field of discipline, with so much reliability and so much certainty that once they decree something to be disinformation, not only should people distrust it, but it ought to be banished from the Internet entirely. And ever since 2016, there has been this growing industry. And it would be bad enough if there were just an industry well financed and financed by states and by billionaires, but the problem has become far worse than that because these industries are tied at the hip to governments. Governments use these agencies when they want to politically censor and then justify it by saying we're not censoring for political ends: Oh, no. Perish the thought! There's just scholars over here who have decreed this information to be disinformation. And who benefits from disinformation? Nobody. It's in everyone's interest for us to banish that. And that's dangerous in and of itself, even if it's exercised in the best faith and most reliable way. But of course, that's not what happened. So many, not just the debatable claims, but true claims ended up being censored because they were politically inconvenient to these groups that had a political agenda and still do, and therefore declared it to be disinformation, even though so often it ended up being true. COVID was probably the most blatant example where from the very beginning, experts decreed based on nothing that they knew for certain that the origin of the COVID virus was not a leak from the Wuhan lab. That was disinformation. Instead, we were told that it was proven in January of 2020, in February of 2020, right when the pandemic emerged, that they knew for certain that it had jumped species. It was zoonotic. And therefore it was banished on the Internet, prohibited to question whether or not it came from a lab because that was decreed to be disinformation, only for four years later, major governments around the world, including major parts of the US government, to believe and to have opined that it's far more likely than not that the COVID virus actually escaped from the Wuhan lab rather than it was a naturally occurring virus in nature. These were the same groups of people who said the Hunter Biden laptop and reporting based on it was disinformation, Russian disinformation in particular, that ended up being a complete lie. Yet that reporting got censored based on the claim of disinformation.

This has happened over and over. It is an incredibly threatening and repressive and authoritarian industry that has grown and grown and grown. It suffered blows when certain social media platforms like this one that were on, Rumble, announced that it would refuse to take orders from this joint consortium of state and corporate power. They said, we're going to let our adult viewers decide what disinformation is. We're not going to dictate to people what they can and can't hear. And then when Elon Musk bought X and laid the banner of free speech, even though he has not always been faithful to put it mildly in the promises he made when he did, that was another blow for the idea that there was a growing backlash against online censorship. And I would suggest that today, with Mark Zuckerberg's announcement about new policies enacted by Meta, the parent company of Instagram and Facebook and WhatsApp, the announcement not just in and of itself of a new policy, but what it was that he said and how he said it, he put himself in front of a camera, not just to announce the policy, but to argue quite forcefully and sometimes even aggressively in defence of the idea that the Internet should be free, that it should no longer be dictated by disinformation experts,

admitting that Facebook and Instagram have often themselves been quite repressive in the kinds of political censorship to which they acquiesced or even imposed and issued a series of new policies to cut off Facebook and Instagram from this disinformation industry, even if none of that ends up happening, even if he follows through on none of that, the mere argument he advanced, the recognition he expressed, the attacks on the disinformation expert industry that he endorsed, all of that is extremely significant. And the people who know that best are the states that increasingly rely on political censorship and especially the disinformation experts; that fraudulent industry that has made so much money and has acquired so much power that sees just how threatening and menacing this announcement is and to say that they're in hysterics over it really does dramatically understate the case. So we definitely want to delve into the context for what happened, the implications of it, the reactions of it, the possible consequences. But before we do, we want to make sure that you have a very good understanding of exactly what it is that Mark Zuckerberg said, what he announced, the holes in some of the claims that were intended to appear to be absolute in its proclamation of the importance of free speech. And so I think it's really worth – it is only about five minutes, breaking it up into a few different segments so we can talk about everything that he said, how he said it. So here he is on the screen. You see him there. He has his new branding appearance with his frizzy hair and he wears chains and he appears only in sweatshirts, part of his new, kind of new, more relatable, more likeable Mark Zuckerberg that he and others seem to think is working, instead of that highly robotic appearance that we've all become accustomed to and this is how he appears now. And here he was on camera, not in a very formal setting at all, in sort of this – it almost looks like a hostage video. It's in front of a kind of faux brick wooden wall but here is what it is that he said and we'll look at this first part here.

Mark Zuckerberg (MZ): Hey everyone. I want to talk about something important today because it's time to get back to our roots around free expression on Facebook and Instagram. I started building social media to give people a voice. I gave a speech at Georgetown five years ago about the importance of protecting free expression and I still believe this today. But a lot has happened over the last several years. There's been widespread debate about potential harms from online content. Governments and legacy media have pushed to censor more and more. A lot of this is clearly political but there's also a lot of legitimately bad stuff out there. Drugs, terrorism, child exploitation; these are things that we take very seriously and I want to make sure that we handle responsibly. So we built a lot of complex systems to moderate content. But the problem with complex systems is they make mistakes. Even if they accidentally censor just 1% of posts, that's millions of people and we've reached a point where it's just too many mistakes and too much censorship. The recent elections also feel like a cultural tipping point towards once again prioritising speech. So we're going to get back to our roots and focus on reducing mistakes, simplifying our policies and restoring free expression on our platforms.

GG: Now just as a side, he has this very ennobling, mythological story about how he founded Facebook and why. He said, I founded it to give people a voice as you might recall, he was in Harvard and he basically created Facebook to enable fellow frat members to rate whether

they found particular women in college hot or not and it kind of turned into this massive platform. He also says that about five years ago he gave a speech at Georgetown in which he emphasised the urgency, the importance, the supreme importance of free speech on the Internet. That would be about January of 2020, five years ago. And of course in November of 2020, both Twitter and Facebook engaged in some of the most historically significant and unjustifiable political censorship in American history when they both decided to block critical reporting about Joe Biden and his family's activities and trying to profit in China and Ukraine just weeks before the 2020 election based on the CIA's claim that that information was Russian disinformation, which turned out to be false. It was also Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook that just a couple of weeks after that election in January of 2021, banded together with other social media platforms to ban the sitting president of the United States, Donald Trump, from using that platform, something that horrified and shocked even a lot of Donald Trump's most vocal critics in the international community, world leaders, said you can't have social media companies silencing elected leaders. So Mark Zuckerberg's reference to his past and his belief system, as I said, is highly questionable. But the fact that he's saying here that the censorship framework has gotten completely out of hand, there's too much censorship and it's time to correct that, going back to our roots of free Internet, that in and of itself, that acknowledgment, that admission, that confession is really, I think, a turning point in this debate. Now, it's not Mark Zuckerberg doing it. He even admits there that in part the reason he's doing it is because of the results of the 2024 election. And the criticism has been mostly that social media companies are censoring too much and particularly they're censoring conservative speech. And obviously, Donald Trump coming into office with an army of people who believe that makes it very difficult for people like Mark Zuckerberg to continue to censor, given the perception, even though it's not the case, that generally, that censorship is directed at conservative voices. It is often directed at conservative voices, but not only that. But obviously, if you're Mark Zuckerberg and you now have a new president coming in with a wildly different set of beliefs on questions like Internet censorship, you're going to want to try and position your company, which relies on the federal government for all sorts of things, to appease and placate the new administration. He basically admits that it is Donald Trump's victory that signals the backlash against censorship. But again, scepticism of Mark Zuckerberg aside, the announcements itself and the arguments he harnesses in order to justify them are going to be very long lasting. Let's look at the next segment of what he says here.

MZ: First, we're going to get rid of fact checkers and replace them with community notes similar to X, starting in the US. After Trump first got elected in 2016, the legacy media wrote nonstop about how misinformation was a threat to democracy. We tried in good faith to address those concerns without becoming the arbiters of truth, but the fact checkers have just been too politically biassed and have destroyed more trust than they've created, especially in the US. So over the next couple of months, we're going to phase in a more comprehensive community note system.

GG: Now, again, I'm not going to keep pointing it out, the fact that Zuckerberg and Meta and Facebook in particular have often been leaders in the exact kind of censorship and arbitrating truth that here he is denouncing. The much more significant part of this excerpt in particular,

and I think it's the most important part of his announcement in general, is not only that Facebook is getting rid of fact checkers, meaning the media outlets and the think tank groups and the organisations that believe that they are and they alone are competent to dictate what the truth is, Facebook is no longer going to use those groups, no longer is going to use those outside media outlets or organisations to dictate what truth is, instead, they're going to basically copy the innovation of Elon Musk and X to rely upon community notes where the statement that people dislike remains visible and everyone can read it, but there's also a note under it that is the byproduct of community consensus about why it's out of context or inaccurate or wrong, which is obviously, so obviously, the most democratic way to conduct political discussion. He also, in that excerpt, really fully, frontally assaulted the disinformation experts who rely on this sanctimonious image of high integrity and nobility. It's the only way they can justify their role, by saying we have no political agenda, we're not interested in politics, we're interested in truth, we're scientists, we're scholars. And obviously, Mark Zuckerberg has dealt with these people a lot, and he has concluded and then said today that these people are basically just political actors abusing the authority that they've claimed for themselves. And for that critique to come from him, a head of a company that has probably done more than anyone to fuel this industry, to give them power and money, clearly signifies a major turning of the tides when it comes to this entire debate. Now, here's the next segment. Let's take a look at that.

MZ: Second, we're going to simplify our content policies and get rid of a bunch of restrictions on topics like immigration and gender that are just out of touch with mainstream discourse. What started as a movement to be more inclusive has increasingly been used to shut down opinions and shut out people with different ideas. And it's gone too far. So I want to make sure that people can share their beliefs and experiences on our platforms.

GG: So I'm kind of divided on that excerpt because he's saying we're going to eliminate restrictions around the debates over immigration and gender. And you can pretty much assume that all he's doing is changing Facebook's policy to accommodate what he now perceives to be prevailing public opinion. Back in 2018, in the wake of Me Too, back in 2020, in the wake of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protest movement, and then the election of Joe Biden, it seemed as though people had sided with the liberal consensus on these issues. So it was very easy and Facebook did it to ban race-based critiques of open borders, saying we only want white people in the country, we don't think these groups of people can assimilate well. That was all banned and now it's going to be unbanned. And then on gender, one presumes that it has everything to do with the debate around transgender people and whether you can misgender them, which have been banned on Facebook, whether you can make arguments about the dangers gender ideology poses. These are examples that are pretty easy in light of the victory of Donald Trump and his movement to just accommodate power. And if that's all this is, if there's only going to be a loosening of censorship when it comes to the easy issues where he knows that the people in power won't tolerate him suppressing speech of that kind, but there's still going to be censorship in accordance with the agenda of the people in power, it's not really a step forward in terms of policy. So that remains to be seen whether or not this is actually going to be a waving of the

banner of free speech. I should also point out that Facebook has a long history of censoring in accordance with what they perceive to be popular opinion. This is the most amazing example and we've reported on this several times before and documented it. Up until January of 2022, Facebook had a policy that formally classified the Azov Battalion as a hate group, and it was prohibited on Facebook to say anything positive about or let alone express support for or praise of the Azov Battalion because it had been declared to be a neo-Nazi group. And Facebook's rules against expressing support for neo-Naziism included Azov. As soon as Russia invaded Ukraine and the West rallied behind Ukraine and relied upon Azov fighters as the most important, most experienced, most well-trained fighters, Facebook instantly abandoned that policy and said, Oh, from now on, you're free to praise Azov. They're no longer considered to be a hate group, very similar to how the United States government had characterised as terrorist groups the groups that just took over in Syria, had offered a $10 million reward for the new Syrian leader, and then it instantly withdrew that when it became convenient for them. So Facebook has a history of saying, we're going to censor speech that we think is unpopular, but the minute we see it's popular, we're going to allow it. But given everything else Zuckerberg said here, he has at least created a lot of pressure on himself to make sure that he's adhering to what he announced here, and I think any type of political censorship that Facebook engages in the future, his critics are going to have a lot of ammunition. Just like people do with Elon Musk, who came out and said, I'm buying Twitter, I'm a free speech absolutist, I'm going to ensure free speech absolutism prevails. I define that as being all speech unless it's illegal, and whenever he censors political speech that is not illegal, as he does often now, and has several times before that, people have a lot of ammunition to say you're violating your own commitment. That's what Mark Zuckerberg at the very worst has done here as well. Alright, let's look at the next excerpt.

MZ: We are changing how we enforce our policies, to reduce the mistakes that account for the vast majority of censorship on our platforms. We used to have filters that scanned for any policy violation, now we are going to focus those filters on tackling illegal and high severity violations. And for lower severity violations we are going to rely on someone reporting an issue before we take action. The problem is that the filtors make mistakes and they take down a lot of content that they should not. So by dialing them back, we're going to dramatically reduce the amount of censorship on our platforms. We're also going to tune our content filters to require much higher confidence before taking down content. The reality is that this is a trade off. It means we're going to catch less bad stuff, but will also reduce the number of innocent people's posts and accounts that we accidentally take down.

GG: Now, that is the balance that every free country has struck. Obviously, the founders, when they guaranteed free speech, understood that by doing so, there was going to be a lot of ideas that would be expressed that were dangerous, had the potential to cause harm. Same with the free press, same with freedom of religion, allowing all sorts of religions, even very toxic and harmful ones to be practised because the government has no right to interfere. If you say the police can't invade people's homes without a search warrant, on some level, in some cases, you're going to make it easier for criminals to get away because the police can't just do whatever they want, it's a restraint on police, recognising that it might have some bad

consequences, but the freedom is worth it. That is the framework of every endorsement of freedom, which is we've been erring on the side of safety, we've been erring on the side of not allowing any potential speech that might be threatening, we're going to dial that back, we're going to significantly restrain that, and yes, we acknowledge that that will result in some, quote, "bad things" being posted, but the danger of allowing free speech, of allowing some bad things to be said is a far less danger, a far less threatening policy than having a centralised policy of censoring, including where you rely on automation and errors on the side of censoring, knowing that a huge number of people who have said nothing wrong will end up being silenced as a result. That is a ringing endorsement of the foundational view of how liberties, including free speech, operate. Let's look at the next excerpt.

MZ: Fourth, we're bringing back civic content. For a while, the community asked to see less politics because it was making people stressed, so we stopped recommending these posts. But it feels like we're in a new era now, and we're starting to get feedback that people want to see this content again. So we're going to start phasing this back into Facebook, Instagram, and Threads, while working to keep the communities friendly and positive.

GG: I guess I forgot to mention when I was listing the social media platforms that Meta controls Threads, in case you are interested in that or know what that is, it was sort of intended to be an apolitical alternative to Twitter. And that really has been Meta's policy is to depoliticize Instagram, Facebook, and Threads to prioritise cultural content or just general socialising and sharing of ideas that are not political in nature. And that's just not what people want. That's not what they're looking for any longer, and he has a recognition that that's the case. And he probably cannot have good relationships with the Trump administration if he's deliberately suppressing political content. So again, every one of these rules is designed to dilute censorship, weaken the control of the sectors that have seized control of political speech on the internet, and to allow more vibrant and free discussion. Let's look at the next excerpt.

MZ: Fifth, we're going to move our trust and safety and content moderation teams out of California, and our US-based content review is going to be based in Texas. As we work to promote free expression, I think that will help us build trust to do this work in places where there is less concern about the bias of our teams. Finally, we're going to work with President Trump to push back on governments around the world. They're going after American companies and pushing to censor more. The US has the strongest constitutional protections for free expression in the world. Europe has an ever-increasing number of laws, institutionalizing censorship, and making it difficult to build anything innovative there. Latin American countries have secret courts that can order companies to quietly take things down. China has censored our apps from even working in the country. The only way that we can push back on this global trend is with the support of the US government, and that's why it's been so difficult over the past four years when even the US government has pushed for censorship.

By going after us and other American companies, it has emboldened other governments to go even further. But now we have the opportunity to restore free expression, and I'm excited to

take it. It'll take time to get this right, and these are complex systems. They're never going to be perfect. There's also a lot of illegal stuff that we still need to work very hard to remove. But the bottom line is that after years of having our content moderation work focused primarily on removing content, it is time to focus on reducing mistakes, simplifying our systems, and getting back to our roots about giving people voice. I'm looking forward to this next chapter. Stay good out there, and more to come soon.

GG: Stay good out there. Now, there's a lot of really meaty components to that excerpt that I want to delve into. I just have to say, though, this initial announcement of that excerpt of we're going to move from California to Texas, we're going to move our content moderation there, it's almost cringe-worthy, and it really reflects the kind of inauthentic lack of conviction behind everything Zuckerberg is doing. This is what Elon Musk did with SpaceX. It's what Joe Rogan did, and a bunch of people who follow Joe Rogan. We're going to leave California. It's too left-wing. It's too liberal. It's too reliant on censorship. We're going to move to Texas, the land of the free. And now you see Mark Zuckerberg copying that just less than two weeks before Donald Trump is going to take office. He's being extremely transparent about what he's saying. But the vision that he laid out of governments around the world, particularly in Europe and Latin America, and not only Latin America in general, but Brazil in particular, the largest country on the continent, that they are engaged in a unified effort to force American companies to adopt a view of censorship that is deeply un-American, that is deeply repressive, by threatening them that they will not be allowed to operate in those countries unless they censor in accordance with those governments' demands, that is a major recognition. It has created huge repercussions in Europe and Brazil. Because he took direct aim at those countries. He didn't actually name Brazil. He said censorship orders that are being issued by secret order by courts in Latin America, but everyone in Brazil understood that to mean only one country, which is Brazil. We were actually the first one to report, to acquire and report on the censorship orders that came from Brazil's Supreme Court that are done in complete secrecy. No notice whatsoever to the person who's being censored, no opportunity for them to object. The censorship orders are sent directly to the social media companies. There's no rationale or explanation provided, just an order that they are required to take down posts or to ban people, including elected officials. And if they don't do it, within two hours they face massive fines, and then the last part of the order says, you are required to keep this order a secret. So that's what he was talking about with Brazil, and then anyone who watches this show understands what he means in Europe with the Digital Services Act by the EU, the Online Safety Act in the UK. This whole panoply of efforts, in Canada, too, to create a legislative framework that allows the state to force social media companies to politically censor on their behalf. He's declaring war on that, much like Rumble did, and followed through with it, which is why Rumble is not available in places like Brazil or France. Much like Elon Musk vowed to do as well, to wage war on this international censorship framework, although he has backed down on several occasions, including when he got banned in Brazil and then promised to follow censorship orders. But his announcement that he intended to fight against it certainly brought a lot of positive attention to this issue. But for Zuckerberg to now weigh in with Instagram, Facebook, Threads, and WhatsApp, all owned and controlled by his company, proclaiming war on the European and Brazilian attempt to unite to create a

censorship structure over the internet and force big tech companies to obey, and to vow that he will work with President Trump to prevent that effort from succeeding, that is a very serious announcement. It's basically a declaration of war against the EU and Brazil in their escalating efforts to constantly censor.

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