

# That Facebook vision thing: a platform still grappling with political realities

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2017/02/17/that-facebook-vision-thing-a-platform-still-grappling-with-political-realities/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2017/02/17/that-facebook-vision-thing-a-platform-still-grappling-with-political-realities/)

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I initially described Mark Zuckerberg's [latest mission statement](#) as 'vacuous'. That was a rather rude way of saying that there is a vacuum at the heart of his rhetoric. It's politics.

What's fascinating is that he probably realises this and is struggling to understand something that doesn't seem to be a natural part of his mental world.

*The Guardian's* Alex Hern has [already annotated the inconsistencies and even contradictions](#) in Zuckerberg's visionary, but curiously nebulous grand plan. What links many of the gaps is this paradox: Facebook is a technology company being driven towards a more engaged, sociological understanding of the world by the political reaction to its power and influence. And yet, because of its history and its commercial logic, it is not very good yet at understanding the political reality of the world for which it wants to provide a (or rather 'the') social media platform.

Put aside for a moment any conspiratorial hostility to Facebook as some kind of neo-liberal, Silicon Valley plot to rule the world, in the vein of Egger's dystopian novel, *The Circle*. Let's accept and even celebrate the fact that it provides an extraordinary communications resource to the world that is increasingly popular across borders, generations and social groups.



Let's also assume for a moment, that while profit is its corporate aim, it also has a strategic desire to be a benign

presence in our lives. Even if you don't think Zuckerberg is a saint, Facebook's business and operational logic is to avoid causing offence or conflict while keeping the networks as free and open as possible. That's how it makes money.

But when you read Zuckerberg's statement, it becomes clear that Facebook's political problem isn't just that it must now negotiate with real world interests: publishers angry at how it has 'stolen' their advertising revenue or politicians who accuse it of spreading dangerous propaganda for example. Handling that is going to be a real policy problem, especially as solutions will vary according to custom and context in different markets or regions.

However, the real problem is that Facebook still sees the world as essentially apolitical. I think they could go a long way to improving their understanding by not using the word 'community'. The Ku Klux Klan is a 'community' as well as Black Lives Matter. I might be part of a West Ham 'community' but (I hope) that's not the only thing that defines me.

Zuckerberg's blogpost makes this extraordinary claim:

*In times like these, the most important thing we at Facebook can do is develop the social infrastructure to give people the power to build a global community that works for all of us.*

I don't think that in any real or helpful sense there can be such a thing as a 'global community'. As the United Nations soon discovered, there are only competing national or regional interests. These are made more complex by religious, ideological or economic interests. Insisting on a 'community' rather than recognising these often conflicting forces can often make things worse not better.

Facebook needs a better understanding of [Realpolitik in its true sense](#) – not cynical bartering, but a realistic application of a principled policy. Trying to pretend that Facebook can be all things to all people might sound lovely in general. But what happens in practice? for example, in China?

There are some very realistic things that Facebook could do right now to help create better public information and debate. Spending more of its money on filtering out fake news or signalling sources of more credible content is something they've started work on. Though I agree with Facebook that they should not go too far down that road in the face of recent moral panics. I don't want Zuckerberg to be a global editor of news.

But what is its role in fostering human happiness beyond that kind of tinkering with algorithms?

To be fair to Zuckerberg, when he sets out the five strategic challenges for Facebook, he acknowledges that these are 'questions' not answers and that Facebook can only be an enabler, not a driver of specific changes in people's lives:

- *How do we help people build supportive communities that strengthen traditional institutions in a world where membership in these institutions is declining?*
- *How do we help people build a safe community that prevents harm, helps during crises and rebuilds afterwards in a world where anyone across the world can affect us?*
- *How do we help people build an informed community that exposes us to new ideas and builds common understanding in a world where every person has a voice?*

- *How do we help people build a civically-engaged community in a world where participation in voting sometimes includes less than half our population?*
- *How do we help people build an inclusive community that reflects our collective values and common humanity from local to global levels, spanning cultures, nations and regions in a world with few examples of global communities?*

Without being too negative, it soon becomes clear that this raises more questions than answers, especially with that 'c' word. Why should we 'strengthen traditional institutions'? Many of them are sclerotic. And which ones? I personally am a Europhile, but I accept the EU needs to change. But my vision of reform would be quite different to, say, Nigel Farage's. The differences are sorted out by politics.

Likewise, isn't there something of a contradiction between exposing us to 'new ideas' and building 'common understanding'? What exactly are 'our collective values'? What is an 'inclusive community' when in practice any definition of a 'community' must exclude some people?

Again, this is about politics. In the real world.

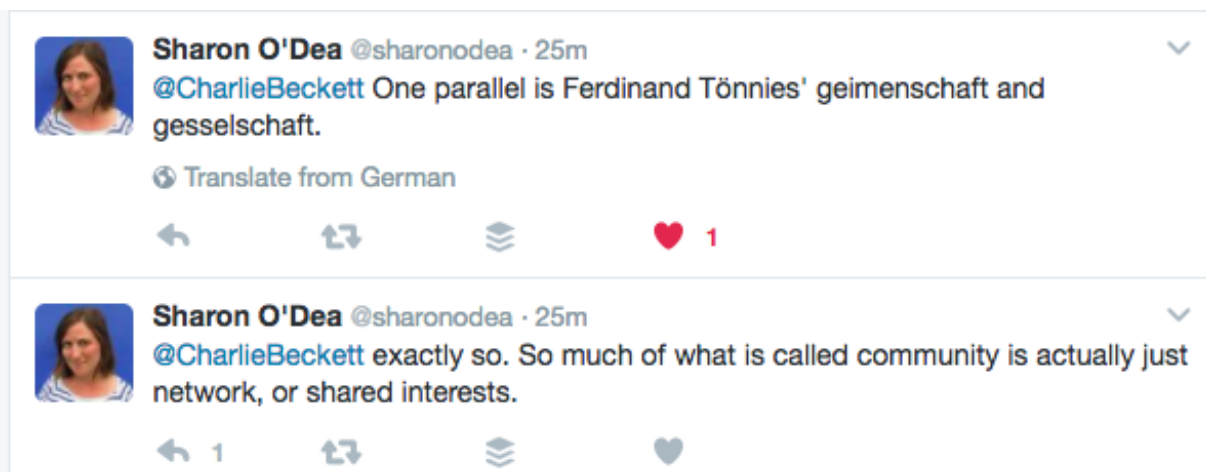
Perhaps Zuckerberg should focus on his admirable but rather more modest end thought: that Facebook should start by "mitigating areas where technology and social media can contribute to divisiveness and isolation".

I don't mean this as a cheap dig, but if his company paid more tax then perhaps those real world communities would have the resources to improve media literacy and social cohesion projects? Facebook already contributes much to providing human pleasure and sociability, if it wants to improve the world politically it could start by being a better citizen itself?

*This article by Professor Charlie Beckett, director of Polis, the LSE's news media think-tank.*

@CharlieBeckett

A classy comment on this article from Twitter:



Thanks to @sbanetweiser for pointing me to [this good article](#) by @tshepski which accuses Zuckerberg of neo-colonialism:

*"As Zuckerberg states, "I want to emphasize that the vast majority of conversations on Facebook are*

*social, not ideological,” directly contravening a fact that underlies any understanding of the global dilemmas articulated in the manifesto: the fact that the social is inherently ideological.”*

George Brock, journalism professor at City University has [also dissected the Zuckerberg speech](#) and, like me, focuses in on its struggle with ideas of politics and power. He makes some interesting points about how Facebook must adapt its design to achieve its expressed goals:

*“If you want to build a ‘global community’, you may need to decide whether its design is made by reason or emotion. People share things on social media which move or excite them. I write a post which attacks I get more hits; if I write on-the-one-hand-on-the-other, I get fewer. If Facebook wants to do good, the instinctive, emotional action of sharing which drives so much of its business model may have to give way to reasoning the best solution and the way to get to it.”*

Intriguing but unlikely proposition from [Nathan Schneider in the American Magazine](#) that if Facebook is serious about global democracy then it should start by making Facebook more democratic:

*“On the one hand, Mr. Zuckerberg would be demonstrating that he takes democracy seriously—that he really believes in collective wisdom, rightly organized and incentivized, as wiser than any one mind. On the other hand, users might then have at least a seat in the boardroom when decisions are being made about what to do with their valuable, personal data now locked up in the platform.”*

In [an article that looks at the structural power of Facebook](#), Ben Thompson makes some interesting points about it’s dominance and suggests that it might be time to limit their ability to grow further:

*“Facebook should not be allowed to buy another network-based app; I would go further and make it prima facie anticompetitive for one social network to buy another. Network effects are just too powerful to allow them to be combined. For example, the current environment would look a lot different if Facebook didn’t own Instagram or WhatsApp (and, should Facebook ever lose an antitrust lawsuit, the remedy would almost certainly be spinning off Instagram and WhatsApp).”*

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