

# Facebook's New "Manifesto" Is Political. Mark Zuckerberg Just Won't Admit It.

By Will Oremus



Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg wrote a 6,000-word open letter to his "community."

Photo by David Ramos/Getty Images

What is Facebook? It's a question that seems like it ought to become easier to answer over time. Instead, it has become more difficult. CEO Mark Zuckerberg's latest and most lengthy attempt to define the service that he created—a **6,000-**

**word open letter to the Facebook “community”**—instead underscores just how murky its purpose and agenda have become.



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When Zuckerberg founded Facebook in 2004, the concept was simple. It was a social network in the classic sense: a place to post a personal profile, connect to other people's profiles, and interact with them online. Over the years, the news feed evolved from metaphorical to literal as Facebook became the dominant online platform for reading and sharing news, opinion, and other content from around the wider web. It turned out that online friend networks were a singularly potent way for ideas to spread.

The downsides of this arrangement emerged more gradually. But the **Advertisement** 2016 U.S. presidential election, in which Facebook served as a **vector for fake news and sensationalism** and a force for ideological polarization, helped to distil them. That, and a series of **more or less related controversies** in the United States and elsewhere, prompted founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg to embark on a **countrywide listening tour** that many interpreted as a signal that he planned to one day run for office.

## A careful read reveals a lot about how Zuckerberg views Facebook.

More likely, it was a signal that he's rethinking Facebook's role in society. On Thursday, that soul-searching bore fruit in the form of a lengthy and high-flown open letter addressed to “our community.” The letter's title: “**Building Global Community**.” Yes, the word *community* features

prominently throughout, as does the phrase “social infrastructure,” which I'll get to in a moment. As *The Verge's* Casey Newton **points out**, the sprawling epistle essentially becomes Facebook's new manifesto, modifying and complicating its well-known mission to “**make the world more open and connected.**”

Read the letter and you'll see why critics have accused it of using a lot of words while saying rather little. Jargon is rife; specifics are scarce. Still, a careful read reveals a lot about how Zuckerberg views the site he created and how he hopes it will evolve. It's been obvious for some time now that **Facebook is much more than a social network**. But just what it is—a **media company? A tech company? A utility?**—has become a matter of debate.

Zuckerberg's letter tries to settle that question in many ways, but perhaps the most direct is exemplified by his persistent use of the phrase "social infrastructure." The sole sentence that appears entirely in bold is this one (italics mine):

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.

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Zuckerberg never explicitly defines "social infrastructure," despite deploying the phrase 15 times—an oversight typical of his **unrigorous armchair philosophizing**. You could be forgiven for concluding that it doesn't really mean anything, except that Facebook has found a clever new way to answer the question of what it is without making any particular commitments. But we can glean a little more than that if we try.

By choosing "infrastructure" as the noun, Zuckerberg shows that he still views Facebook as a technology—a set of tools—rather than a media company responsible for creating or curating published content. This is consistent with Facebook's past attempts to define itself, including that **widely mocked 2012 TV ad** in which the company **compared itself to chairs**. It implies that Facebook will continue to shun political controversy and disclaim responsibility for the content that its users post and share, at least in cases where doing so would run counter to the company's interests.

Chairs Are Like Facebook - Original Ad.

On the other hand, Zuckerberg's manifesto makes it clear that he no longer views Facebook as fully neutral. He recognizes—at last?—that his technology molds how its billion-plus users read, communicate, organize themselves, and form ideas about themselves and the world. And he no longer views openness and connectedness as ends in themselves.

“Social infrastructure,” then, must mean something different from mere “communications infrastructure.” It means that Facebook sees its purpose as facilitating certain kinds of interactions and social arrangements. Namely, Zuckerberg sees Facebook's purpose as building communities with five particular characteristics: supportive, safe, informed, civically engaged, and inclusive.

Zuckerberg also states repeatedly that he wants to build a Advertisement community that is “global.” As the *New York Times*' Mike Isaac notes, this places Facebook in **surprisingly explicit opposition** to the tides of nationalism and isolationism that have swept the likes of Donald Trump and Theresa May into power.

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That pointed exception aside, Zuckerberg's goals for Facebook's communities sound relatively anodyne. Who but a misanthrope could dispute the value of safety, civic engagement, or inclusion?

## of safety, civic engagement, or inclusion?

The rub, however, is essentially the same as it has always been with Zuckerberg: He's trying to have it both ways. He wants Facebook to play a more active role in shaping conversations and communities for the better. Yet he still wants to call it infrastructure.

Sure, infrastructure can shape conversations and communities. Highways, irrigation systems, cellular data service: They all affect how societies organize themselves, in one way or another. But the key questions of how and where to deploy infrastructure, for whose benefit and at what cost, are inherently political. A highway that makes some people feel included can leave others feeling isolated. An irrigation system can secure one community's water supply while depriving another. And a Facebook post that makes some people feel civically engaged could make others feel unsafe. In all cases, there are tradeoffs—a concept Facebook and Zuckerberg have always been loath to acknowledge.

The manifesto does provide some clues as to how Facebook will Advertisement adjudicate conflicting claims among its users. It states that Facebook will “try to reflect the cultural norms of our community,” while also giving individual users the power to control their own experience, where possible. Those are both fine principles. But implementing them will necessarily involve a level of political decision-making on Facebook's part that Zuckerberg's letter does not fully reckon with.

Making the world more open and connected was a radical idea, and a substantive one—and, ultimately, a dangerous one. On one level, it implied a strong bias toward freedom of expression and against provincialism and repression. At the same time, it implied that it was none of Facebook's business exactly what kinds of ideas and speech flourished on its platform. Paradoxically, then, a bias toward freedom of expression could conceivably end up empowering those who would quash it.

## Technology is at its most dangerous when it is created

Facebook's new manifesto is either far less radical or far less substantive than its famous mission statement, depending on how you read it—but not necessarily any less dangerous. If, as some critics

**thoughtlessly.**

allege, it's largely pabulum designed to appease the company's collective conscience without

committing it to any particular ideals, then it's less substantive. On the other hand, if it's really about strengthening distinct communities and upholding existing cultural norms, it's substantive, but also deeply conservative. It implies, for instance, a bias in favor of free speech and against repression only in cultural contexts where those biases are already present. That's not making the world a better place. It's entrenching the status quo.

To be clear: Zuckerberg and Facebook thinking seriously about their impact on the world is a good thing. Technology is at its most dangerous when it is created thoughtlessly, for its own sake or for the sake of profit. It's at its most manageable when its political agenda is transparent and explicit, because then it can be openly debated, supported, or opposed. Zuckerberg's manifesto makes it clear that he does care about Facebook's role in society. Yet as a statement of values, it is compromised by the undefined jargon, the unacknowledged conflicts, and the uncritical optimism about Facebook's ability to meet the needs and desires of all of its users at once.

I've argued before, in a different context, that **Facebook is biased, and it needs to admit it.** This manifesto might seem like a step in that direction. But it doesn't go nearly far enough.

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