

Peter Menzies: Cautious Optimism on Meta's Move to Uphold Freedom of Speech

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Mark Zuckerberg talks about the Orion AR glasses during the Meta Connect conference in Menlo Park, Calif., on Sept. 25, 2024. Godofredo A. Vásquez/AP Photo



By Peter Menzies

1/8/2025

Updated: 1/8/2025

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Commentary

The pendulum moderating speech on social media is swinging back in favour of freedom.

That's a good thing if the motivation for Meta Platforms chairman Mark Zuckerberg's stunning shift towards liberty is what he says it is—a return to core beliefs—and not merely kowtowing to a new American administration.

Zuckerberg announced Jan. 7 that, going forward, Meta's platforms—Facebook, Instagram, and Threads—will default to protecting freedom of expression by reducing the number of “fact-checkers” and relying more heavily on the sort of “community notes” used by Elon Musk's X, formerly known as Twitter.

“We want to undo the mission creep that has made our rules too restrictive and too prone to over-enforcement,” the company's Chief Global Affairs Officer, Joel Kaplan, stated on Facebook's [website](#).

“We're getting rid of a number of restrictions on topics like immigration, gender identity and gender that are the subject of frequent political discourse and debate. It's not right that things can be said on TV or the floor of Congress, but not on our platforms. These policy changes may take a few weeks to be fully implemented.”

Zuckerberg said in a video [statement](#) that the company, which is moving its safety team from California to Texas, found fact-checkers were too frequently prone to bias in their assessment of content and that the community notes format is proving to be a more effective way for platform users to counter blatant misrepresentations of facts. This means that while in recent years Facebook has been downgrading political and news content, contentious discussions are going to make a comeback.

At first glance, this appears to contradict what Meta has been saying for years—that users don't like news—as it worked to distance itself from the idea promoted by publishers that governments should force Facebook to pay them for content they post on the platform for free.

Canada produced the Online News Act, which prompted Facebook and Instagram to prevent people from posting news links beginning in August 2023.

Kaplan admitted that was the case, but said “this was a pretty blunt approach. We are going to start phasing this back into Facebook, Instagram and Threads with a more personalized approach so that people who want to see more political content in their feeds can.”

That’s a relief. Many of us have been enjoying the less political atmosphere on Facebook, which is a lot more fun when you are exchanging pictures of family, minor hockey heroics, and vacations than it is when you are fighting with strangers over the use of pronouns. And with no end in sight for the Online News Act, Canadians are likely to see less news than will Americans and others on their feeds.

So, provided people are able to freely pick and choose their preferences, all fans of democracy should be pleased that Meta is moving to make freedom of speech its default position while still keeping a stern eye on efforts by the nefarious to use its platforms for evil deeds such as promotion of terrorism and child exploitation.

What they should worry about is that, by its own admission, Meta’s previous policies were influenced by “societal and political pressure to moderate content.” In his statement, Kaplan admits that was an approach that went too far.

“As well-intentioned as many of these efforts have been, they have expanded over time to the point where we are making too many mistakes, frustrating our users and too often getting in the way of the free expression we set out to enable,” he said. “Too much harmless content gets censored, too many people find themselves wrongly locked up in “Facebook jail,” and we are often too slow to respond when they do.”

This swing of the pendulum is surely every bit as well-intentioned as the last one. And, much as leaning towards more liberty is more to my

liking than the Biden-Trudeau-UK preference for censorship, a couple of cautions are required.

Musk's X and Zuckerberg's platforms must, like any media, work to maintain the public's trust. And that means I need to know that responses to my posts are not being manipulated by some Russian bot factory. Or by who sits in the Oval Office, as there is little question Meta is switching from an approach smiled upon by the Biden administration to one that is definitely going to find favour with the incoming Trump administration. Who knows? Maybe it will even distract the administration from its interest in annexing Canada for a few minutes.

Zuckerberg is doing the right thing, but I worry that it's for the wrong reasons. Watching the powerful bow before the even more powerful rarely makes anyone feel liberated.

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Peter Menzies

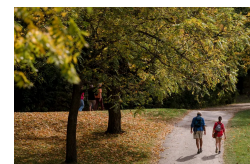
Author

Peter Menzies is a senior fellow with the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, an award winning journalist, and former vice-chair of the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission.

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