

Mark Zuckerberg's Free Speech Charade

Mark Zuckerberg frequently touts his commitment to free speech and human rights. He has taken to portraying Facebook as a bulwark for democracy and a necessary counterweight to the Chinese model of the Internet. But that narrative is born out of naked opportunism and teeming with hypocrisy.

In reality, Zuckerberg spent years coddling authoritarian leaders in Beijing – from developing a censorship tool for the regime, to asking President Xi to name his unborn child – in hopes of gaining access to the Chinese market. Only after recognizing these desperate overtures were futile, and that anti-China sentiment was growing in Washington, did he pivot to casting them as his foil.

Even now, Facebook still earns more revenue from Chinese companies and state-backed entities than from any country besides the U.S. and does extensive business with other repressive regimes around the world, often suppressing dissent at their behest.

Mark Zuckerberg wants us to believe Facebook is a beacon for freedom of expression and human rights, and a necessary counterweight to China's digital authoritarianism...

- > [Zuckerberg, 10/17/19](#) "China is building its own internet focused on very different values, and is now exporting their vision of the internet to other countries. Until recently, the internet in almost every country outside China has been defined by American platforms with strong free expression values. There's no guarantee these values will win out. A decade ago, almost all of the major internet platforms were American. Today, six of the top ten are Chinese."
- > [Zuckerberg, 5/28/20](#) "China has just approached the internet very differently from the U.S. and even Europe and most other places. They have different values, and that's led to an internet framework that just prizes different things. And that's been very difficult, and it's certainly one of the reasons why we're not in China today and we don't offer our consumer services there."

...but Zuckerberg went to great lengths to try to gain access to China, including creating a censorship tool prototype, hiring China experts, and personally courting President Xi Jinping.

- > ["Facebook is Trying Everything to Re-enter China—and It's Not Working," WSJ, 1/30/17:](#) "Blocked on China's internet since 2009, Facebook has courted Chinese officials, made Chief Executive Mark Zuckerberg more visible in China, hired a well-connected China-policy chief and begun developing technology that could cull content the Communist Party deems unacceptable."
- + ["Facebook Boosts China Efforts with a New Appointment," Yahoo Finance, 9/11/17:](#) "Facebook Inc. has appointed an ex Chinese official William Shuai to a newly created post to bolster its China efforts... Shuai's extensive experience in dealing with the Chinese government should come in handy for Facebook, which, for long, has been trying to break the China Wall but to no avail."

- > **Facebook Spokesperson, 11/22/16:** "We have long said that we are interested in China, and are spending time understanding and learning more about the country."



ZUCKERBERG POSTS A PICTURE JOGGING THROUGH TIANANMEN SQUARE, 12/27/16

- > **"Facebook Said to Create Censorship Tool to Get Back Into China," NYT, 11/22/16:** "The social network has quietly developed software to suppress posts from appearing in people's news feeds in specific geographic areas, according to three current and former Facebook employees, who asked for anonymity because the tool is confidential. The feature was created to help Facebook get into China, a market where the social network has been blocked, these people said. Mr. Zuckerberg has supported and defended the effort, the people added."

+ **Vaughan Smith, Facebook's Vice President for Corporate Development who led efforts to design the censorship tool, 6/2/14:** "These businesses [in China] are using VPN to access our tools and use our product, and even though it is a little challenging, because the results that they're getting are so exciting, we are seeing rapid growth and we are very excited about this business opportunity for us to help China grow faster and create economic wealth."

- > **Zuckerberg, 2015:** "Obviously you can't have a mission of wanting to connect everyone in the world and leave out the biggest country. Over the long term, that is a situation we will need to figure out a way forward on."

We plan to continue expanding our operations abroad where we have limited operating experience and may be subject to increased business and economic risks that could affect our financial results.

We plan to continue the international expansion of our business operations and the translation of our products. We currently make Facebook available in more than 70 different languages, and we have offices or data centers in more than 20 different countries. We may enter new international markets where we have limited or no experience in marketing, selling, and deploying our products. For example, we continue to evaluate entering China. However, this market has substantial legal and regulatory complexities that have prevented our entry into China to date. If we fail to deploy or manage our operations in international markets successfully, our business may suffer. In addition, we are subject to a variety of risks inherent in doing business internationally, including:

FACEBOOK S-1 REGISTRATION STATEMENT WITH SEC, [2/1/12](#)

> **"Xi Refuses Mark Zuckerberg's Baby Naming Request," Bloomberg, 10/5/15:**

"At a White House dinner last week, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg reportedly asked President Xi to give his unborn baby an honorary Chinese name. President Xi refused, saying it was too much responsibility. Zuckerberg tried to use his baby's name to ease tension – Facebook has been blocked in China since 2009 when the social site was allegedly used to organize anti-government riots. Zuckerberg would love to crack China's 600 million internet users."

> **"Mark Zuckerberg, Speaking Mandarin, Tries to Win Over China for Facebook," NYT, 10/23/14:**

"Facebook's social network is almost completely blocked in China, but maybe Mark Zuckerberg hopes to charm his way past the government's censors — by speaking to them in their own language. On Wednesday, Mr. Zuckerberg, Facebook's chief executive, impressed a Chinese audience by speaking in Mandarin...for about half an hour at a forum at Tsinghua University in Beijing. He discussed his thoughts on innovation in China, Facebook's presence in the country and of course, why he learned Chinese...he diplomatically avoided any mention of social media's role in the Hong Kong protests or of the government's longtime censorship of Facebook."

> **"Warm West Coast Reception for China's Web Czar (Chillier in Washington)," NYT, 12/8/14:**

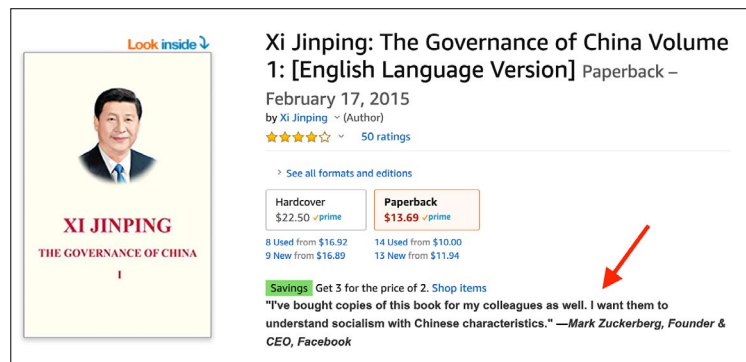
"At least one thing caught the eye of China's Internet czar during his trip to the United States last week: a book written by and about the president of China on the desk of Mark Zuckerberg...Mr. Lu, as China's new Internet czar, holds the key for American Internet companies to the enormous Chinese market. He is also the ambassador of an assertive new policy in which China claims the right to block websites, censor content and track users within its border."



ZUCKERBERG POSTS A PICTURE AFTER MEETING WITH PRESIDENT XI JINPING, 9/23/15



ZUCKERBERG MEETS WITH LU WEI, CHINA'S TOP INTERNET REGULATOR IN A PHOTO POSTED ON THE STATE-RUN CHINA NETWORK AGENCY, 12/14



ZUCKERBERG PROVIDES A BLURB FOR PRESIDENT XI JINPING'S BOOK, 2/17/15

Even now, despite talking a big game about free expression, Facebook earns billions in advertising revenue from Chinese companies and state-backed entities, more than it earns in any country besides the U.S.

> ["How Facebook's Tiny China Sales Floor Helps Generate Big Ad Money," NYT, 2/7/19:](#)

"In total, Facebook's revenue from Chinese-based advertisers reached an estimated \$5 billion in 2018, or about 10 percent of its total sales, according to Pivotal Research Group. That would be enough to rank Facebook somewhere around the seventh-largest listed internet company in China."

possible that government authorities could take action that impairs our ability to sell advertising, including in countries where access to our consumer-facing products may be blocked or restricted. For example, we generate meaningful revenue from a limited number of resellers representing advertisers based in China, and it is possible that the Chinese government could take action that reduces or eliminates our China-based advertising revenue, whether as a result of the trade dispute with the United States, in response to content issues, or otherwise, or take other action against us, such as imposing taxes or other penalties, which could adversely affect our financial results. In the event that content shown on Facebook or our other products is subject to censorship, access to our products is restricted, in whole or in part, in one or more countries, or other restrictions are imposed on our products, or our competitors are able to successfully penetrate new geographic markets or capture a greater share of existing geographic markets that we cannot access or

FACEBOOK FROM 10-K, [1/29/20](#)

> ["Facebook Makes a New Ad Sales Push in China After Zuckerberg Criticizes the Country,"](#)

[CNBC, 1/7/20:](#) "Facebook is setting up a new engineering team in Singapore to focus on its lucrative China advertising business, according to three people familiar with the effort, even as chief executive Mark Zuckerberg ramps up criticism of a country that blocks the social network."

+ ["These New Facebook Ads From Chinese State Media Want You To Believe Xinjiang's Muslim Internment Camps Are Just Great," BuzzFeed, 8/20/19:](#)

"Extending the reach of its propaganda beyond its borders, Chinese state-owned media is running ads on Facebook seemingly designed to cast doubt on human rights violations occurring under the government's mass incarceration of Muslim minorities in the country's northwest Xinjiang region."

The latest example of Zuckerberg's free speech charade in China: He now portrays TikTok as a threat to democracy. But first, he tried to buy it.

> [Zuckerberg, 10/17/19:](#) "While our services, like WhatsApp, are used by protesters and activists everywhere due to strong encryption and privacy protections, on TikTok, the Chinese app growing quickly around the world, mentions of these protests are censored, even in the US."

> **"Before Mark Zuckerberg Tried To Kill TikTok, He Wanted To Own It," BuzzFeed, 11/12/19:** "Zuckerberg wanted Musical.ly, a Chinese lip-synching app that was popular among American teens and, according to three people familiar with the conversations, Facebook spent much of the second half of 2016 trying to make that happen...Sources said the talks were serious, though a deal never materialized. Some 14 months later, Chinese conglomerate ByteDance acquired Musical.ly for around \$800 million. It later merged the app with the already existent TikTok to form the popular video platform that Zuckerberg has recently been demonizing as a threat to Western tech supremacy."



ZUCKERBERG CRITICIZING THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT AND TIKTOK IN A PUBLIC ADDRESS AT GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY, 10/17/19

> **"Here's the real reason Mark Zuckerberg is so afraid of TikTok," Mashable, 1/16/20:** "Mark Zuckerberg has already made it clear he has no love for TikTok, but we now have an even clearer look at just why he's so concerned about the Chinese rival. In short: the app is growing like crazy, even by Facebook standards."

+ **Zuckerberg, leaked audio, 10/1/2019:** "TikTok, which is built by this company Beijing ByteDance, is really the first consumer internet product built by one of the Chinese tech giants that is doing quite well around the world. It's starting to do well in the US, especially with young folks. It's growing really quickly in India. I think it's past Instagram now in India in terms of scale. So yeah, it's a very interesting phenomenon."

+ **Techcrunch, 10/1/2019:** "Facebook's copycat Lasso has been installed just 425,000 times since it launched in November, while TikTok has 640 million installs in the same period outside of China. Oh, and TikTok has 1.4 billion total installs beyond China to date."

+ **Zuckerberg, 7/27/16, Facebook Q2 Earnings Call:** "So overall people are spending more and more time on mobile and that means that there are always more services that people use, whether it's YouTube or there's some really interesting ones with younger folks especially like Musical.ly [later merged with TikTok] and Lively that I think are pretty interesting as well."

After failing to gain access to the Chinese market, Zuckerberg now talks tough on China to help distract from Facebook's work in other authoritarian countries...

...like helping governments in Russia, Thailand, and Vietnam censor dissent and suppress claims of corruption.

> **"Facebook Agreed to Censor Posts After Vietnam Slowed Traffic," Reuters, 4/21/20:**

"Facebook's local servers in Vietnam were taken offline early this year, slowing local traffic to a crawl until it agreed to significantly increase the censorship of 'anti-state' posts for local users."

+ **Amnesty International:** "The revelation that Facebook is caving to Viet Nam's far-reaching demands for censorship is a devastating turning point for freedom of expression in Vietnam and beyond."

+ **Human Rights Watch:** "It's hard to see how Facebook can live up to its human rights obligations when it's helping Vietnam censor free speech."

> **"Instagram Submits to Russia Censor's Demands," BBC, 2/15/18:**

"Instagram has blocked posts in Russia relating to corruption claims made by the country's most prominent opposition leader. It follows a demand by the country's internet censor that the Facebook-owned service restrict access to posts on its platform connected to allegations made by Alexei Navalny. Its response contrasts with that of Google's YouTube service. It had been ordered to block several clips before the end of Wednesday. But it has taken no such action."

+ Meanwhile... **"Facebook Doesn't Care': Activists Say Accounts Removed Despite Zuckerberg's Free-Speech Stance," NBC News, 6/15/20:** "Dozens of Tunisian, Syrian and Palestinian activists and journalists, many of whom use the platform to document human rights abuses in the region, say their Facebook accounts have been deactivated over the last few months. Civil liberties and human rights groups have argued this shows that Facebook appeals to free speech principles only when they are politically advantageous."

> **"Facebook is Censoring Posts in Thailand that the Government has Deemed Unsuitable," TechCrunch 1/11/17:**

"[I]n Thailand...Facebook is blocking content from a number of users following an apparent request from the government. Thailand's lèse-majesté law prevents criticism of the country's royal family, and it looks like it is being used to suppress postings from a number of high-profile users who are writing about the transition to a new king, including journalist Andrew MacGregor Marshall."

> **"Facebook is Censoring Some Posts on Indian Kashmir," The Washington Post, 7/27/16:**

"Film makers, activists and journalists accused Facebook of blocking their accounts this week after they posted messages and images related to the violence in the trouble-torn province of Kashmir."

+ ["Social Media Censorship in India has Increased Over Five Fold since 2016," Quartz India, 11/21/19:](#) "The Indian government has ramped up the use of an internet censorship law to block users and posts on social media. Prime minister Narendra Modi's administration ordered social media platforms to take down 3,433 URLs between January and October this year...This is more than a five-fold rise since 2016. The ministry did not specify which platforms comprised "social media," but in earlier official notes it has included Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. The URLs removed could have been of specific posts or user profiles."

...and building data centers in countries with a track record of violating free speech and privacy rights, despite Zuckerberg explicitly committing not to.

> [Zuckerberg, 6/27/19:](#) "We're very sensitive on the privacy side not to store people's data in countries that we think aren't going to respect people's human rights... Putting data in a place could really cause real-world harm where the government goes after people and imprisons them or hurts them or their family. So that's a clear line that we don't cross, and that I would encourage more folks in the industry to kinda uphold as a red line as well."



ZUCKERBERG BOASTED ABOUT THE DATA CENTER'S ABILITY TO OPERATE ON 100% RENEWABLE ENERGY WHILE OFFERING NO COMMENT ON SINGAPORE'S TRACK RECORD OF VIOLATING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, [9/7/18](#)

> [Zuckerberg, 9/6/18:](#)

"We just announced we're building our newest data center in Singapore."

> [Human Rights Watch:](#) "Singapore's political environment is stifling. Citizens face severe restrictions on their basic rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly through overly broad criminal laws and regulations."

+ [U.S. State Department, 2019:](#) "Significant human rights issues [in Singapore] included: preventive detention by the government under various laws that dispense with regular judicial due process; monitoring private electronic or telephone conversations without a warrant; significant restrictions on the press and internet, including criminal libel laws; significant legal and regulatory limitations on the rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of association."

> ["Facebook Setting Up New Team in Singapore to Grow China Advertising Business," The Straits Times, 1/8/20:](#) "But Facebook remains eager to expand its China ad business, which boasts customers in industries including fashion, social media and gaming. With Beijing aware its businesses must operate beyond the Great Firewall to grow, Facebook is positioning itself as the conduit for them to reach global audiences."

...and failing to act (and even [actively helping](#)) when the platform has been used by authoritarians to fuel genocide and violate human rights.

> [“A Genocide Incited on Facebook, With Posts From Myanmar’s Military,” NYT, 10/15/18:](#)

“Members of the Myanmar military were the prime operatives behind a systematic campaign on Facebook that stretched back half a decade and that targeted the country’s mostly Muslim Rohingya minority group, [sources] said. The military exploited Facebook’s wide reach in Myanmar, where it is so broadly used that many of the country’s 18 million internet users confuse the Silicon Valley social media platform with the internet. Human rights groups blame the anti-Rohingya propaganda for inciting murders, rapes and the largest forced human migration in recent history.”

+ [“Facebook Was Used in Myanmar to Stoke Ethnic Violence. It Could’ve Done More to Stop It, Study Says,” Los Angeles Times, 11/6/18:](#) “The findings [of the human rights report] underscore how the world’s largest social network is often ill-equipped to fight rumor-mongering, hate speech and calls for mob violence, especially in unstable societies still developing digital literacy.”

> [“How Duterte Used Facebook To Fuel The Philippine Drug War,” BuzzFeed, 9/4/18:](#)

“If you want to know what happens to a country that has opened itself entirely to Facebook, look to the Philippines. What happened there — what continues to happen there — is both an origin story for the weaponization of social media and a peek at its dystopian future. It’s a society where, increasingly, the truth no longer matters, propaganda is ubiquitous, and lives are wrecked and people die as a result — half a world away from the Silicon Valley engineers who’d promised to connect their world.”

+ [Now-jailed investigative journalist Maria Ressa:](#) “I said, ‘Mark, 97 percent of Filipinos on the internet are on Facebook.’ I invited him to come to the Philippines because he had to see the impact of this. You have to understand the impact ... He was frowning while I was saying that. I said, ‘Why, why?’ He said, ‘Oh well. What are the other 3 percent doing, Maria?’

+ [“Jailed Philippine Journalist says Facebook is Partly Responsible for Her Predicament,” WaPo, 2/25/19:](#) “The arrest this month of Philippine journalist Maria Ressa, which experts say is a retaliatory move for exposing violence-inciting fake accounts on Facebook linked to President Rodrigo Duterte’s administration, raises the question of the company’s culpability for her dangerous predicament. The United Nations special rapporteur for human rights said last week that Facebook bears some responsibility, because it failed to follow its policies and remove false and violence-inciting accounts in a timely manner.”

> **"Where Countries Are Tinderboxes and Facebook Is a Match," NYT, 4/21/18:**

"Facebook's newsfeed played a central role in nearly every step from rumor to killing. Facebook officials, [Sri Lankans] say, ignored repeated warnings of the potential for violence, resisting pressure to hire moderators or establish emergency points of contact."

+ **"Sri Lanka: Facebook Apologises for Role in 2018 Anti-Muslim Riots," Al Jazeera, 5/13/20:** "The consultants [Article One] suggested that before the unrest, Facebook had failed to take down [Islamophobic] content, which 'resulted in hate speech and other forms of harassment remaining and even spreading' on the platform. Article One said one civil society organisation had tried to engage with the company on the misuse of Facebook as far back as 2009."