

Global standards on Big Tech are sorely needed

Mark Zuckerberg's suggestions on regulation are still too tame

THE EDITORIAL BOARD



Mark Zuckerberg has acknowledged that social media has become a vehicle for political interference © AFP

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Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg [has called](#) for the global regulation of social media companies. Given his [lack of enthusiasm for attending](#) government committees on these subjects, scepticism over the strength of his conversion is warranted. Mr Zuckerberg's support is welcome but does not go far enough. The Big Tech platform companies must do more than take implicit responsibility for the content they host. Mr Zuckerberg and others should be pushed to follow through with meaningful changes.

Mr Zuckerberg's weekend blog post and op-ed, Four Ideas to Regulate the Internet, at least acknowledged that social media has become a vehicle for political interference. This is a volte-face from his [position](#) shortly after the 2016 US presidential election. Some of his suggestions — such as creating an independent third-party body to set standards on what counts as harmful content — are useful. As Mr Zuckerberg himself acknowledges, there are serious risks when social media companies are the arbiters of acceptability. This is heightened when each company has separate, [often opaque](#), standards.

Yet the Facebook boss gives few details on exactly how such controls would be implemented. He merely declares that companies “should be accountable for enforcing standards on harmful content”. Both Facebook and YouTube struggled to [impose their own standards](#) around harmful content as videos of the Christchurch shooting proliferated online last month. It is hard to see

content as traces of the censorship showing prominent online hot moments. It is hard to see why external standards would be more effective without additional coercion.

One idea often put forward on how to ensure stricter content moderation is to revoke Section 230 of the US Communications Decency Act, which classifies internet companies as platforms rather than publishers. (In practice, social media sites are treated as hybrids, held responsible as publishers in specific cases such as child pornography). However, such a move would probably have sweeping negative consequences. Reclassifying platforms as publishers could lead to removal of much non-corporate content, given the difficulty of ensuring every item is not libellous. That could limit the democratising aspect of social media.

Global regulations should be more nuanced. Creating one-size-fits-all standards is both unnecessary and unworkable. Instead, they should be the basis for national or regional variants, similar to the EU's [General Data Protection Regulation](#). New regulations should also be open to changes, with a permanent and open debate between social media firms, governments, civil society and academics.

Regulation to make social media platforms more responsible and responsive to posted content is long overdue. The lack of consensus is driving governments to take matters into their own hands. Australia is considering making it a [criminal offence](#) for platforms to fail to remove violent content quickly enough, with jail time for executives or severe fines. Such measures increase the risk of a further Balkanisation of the internet, already splintered by [autocrats](#) and [technology companies](#) themselves.

No amount of debate is likely to halt the fragmentation, but it may create global standards for social media companies. A unified front between governments and pro-regulation groups is also the best way to ensure that tech titans take more responsibility for content moderation. Silicon Valley libertarianism has run its course: social media companies must work with others to forge a consensus on how to regulate the internet — or risk having more draconian rules imposed on them.

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