

Seeking Responsible Social Media: The Facebook Case

Thomas W. Miller and Noah Gift

Revised 24 August 2020

Abstract The authors encourage Facebook to stop spreading hate speech and misinformation on its social media platforms.

Keywords Boycott · Data provenance · Facebook · Hate speech · Misinformation

1 Opinion

The advertisers' boycott of Facebook during the summer of 2020 asked the social media giant to stop spreading hate speech and misinformation. The boycott was supported by more than 700 companies worldwide, including Unilever, Verizon, Microsoft, Honda, REI, Reebok, Coca-Cola, Pepsi, and many other respected companies. We applaud the efforts of these companies. And we call on Facebook to transform itself and act responsibly, eliminating hate speech and misinformation from its social media platforms.

Facebook's problems flow from the top. Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook founder and CEO, says it is difficult to ferret out sources of hate speech and conspiracy theories. Do not believe him. Facebook engineers can use machine learning methods to identify hate speech and misinformation. Facebook engineers can use graph databases and social network analysis to locate malicious software robots and bad actors. To fix its problems, Facebook needs only to use methods that we teach our data science students to use every day.

Providers of social media need to do more than maintain open channels of communication. Social media firms should assume publishing and editing roles, ensuring that speech is free but not abusive or hurtful to others. First Amendment rights are central to our democracy. To preserve these rights, companies need to use them judiciously.

It is not hard to imagine a Facebook-free world, given the many alternatives for digital marketing, advertising, and sales promotion. Just as companies involved with the advertisers' boycott find other ways to promote their products and brands, users of Facebook-based social media can find other ways to communicate with one another.

Many media companies offer platforms on which misinformation and hate speech are rare or nonexistent. Consider LinkedIn, Slack, and Signal for social media and collaboration. Disney+, a paid subscriber service, approves content providers before allowing them to post on its platform.

Community curation models, such as those employed by Wikipedia and Reddit, suggest that responsible, scalable publishing is possible in the digital age. On Wikipedia, an open platform available for anyone to edit, unverified knowledge claims are flagged for review or deletion. Extensive documentation is provided for most articles. Hate speech is not permitted. Self-promotion and product promotion are discouraged.

While the loss of a single Facebook, Instagram, or WhatsApp user may have little effect on Facebook's bottom line, a grassroots movement involving millions of users could have a substantial impact.

As educators, we have an ethical responsibility to our students and the community. Using Facebook's software or services indirectly condones the company's unethical behavior. Facebook should not tolerate malignant user communities. Facebook should not permit the distribution of hate speech, lies, and conspiracy theories. These behaviors violate fundamental human rights and must stop.

Some say Facebook is a monopoly that cannot be toppled. Not so. In a world with cloud computing, there are no significant barriers to entry for firms offering social media services. Substitute products exist for everything Facebook does, from communication to artificial intelligence.

Facebook's power exists only because business professionals allow it. Software developers, data scientists, contractors, and Facebook employees need to speak up in opposition to the harm that Facebook causes.

Facebook's approach to social discourse poses a threat to civil society and democratic processes. Most importantly for United States citizens, the company needs to fix its approach to hate speech and misinformation, lest it pose a threat to free and fair elections in the future.

2 About the Authors

Thomas W. Miller is faculty director of the data science program at Northwestern University, author of six books about data science, and owner of Research Publishers LLC.

Noah Gift is an adjunct professor at Duke University, Northwestern University, UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UNC, and UTK, author of multiple books on data science, and founder of Pragmatic AI Labs.