

Zuckerberg's 'new rules' for the internet must move from words to actions

Written by Andrew Quodling, Doctoral researcher investigating governance of social media platforms, Queensland University of Technology

After years of rejecting calls for increased regulatory oversight of Facebook, [founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg](#) has now [called for](#) more cooperation with government in dealing with problems posed by internet platforms and emergent internet technologies.

But the social media giant needs to do more than just talk about a solution. What we're waiting for now are some clear indications that Zuckerberg will take a role in making change real.

It's important that Facebook, an online platform with [more than two billion users](#), navigates the complexities of platform governance by engaging users, governments and civil society groups in that process.

Read more: [***Anxieties over livestreams can help us design better Facebook and YouTube content moderation***](#)

Zuckerberg's article followed [criticism](#) regarding how the social media platform is used by some for [political interference](#), or to spread harmful material, such as the [age from the alleged gunman who live-streamed his attack](#) [foot](#) on two New Zealand mosques.

In an opinion piece [in the Washington Post](#) over the weekend (and available on [his Facebook page](#)),
Zuckerberg wrote:

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Every day, we make decisions about what speech is harmful, what constitutes political advertising, and how to prevent sophisticated cyberattacks.

But he says companies alone should not be the ones to set up rules on what is acceptable.

I believe we need a more active role for governments and regulators. By updating the rules for the Internet, we can preserve what's best about it — the freedom for people to express themselves and for entrepreneurs to build new things — while also protecting society from broader harms.

Four steps for change

Zuckerberg argues that four areas warrant deeper cooperation:

- harmful content
- election integrity
- privacy
- data portability.

To tackle harmful content, he suggests the creation of an independent body to review Facebook's content moderation decisions. He also wants the formation of a set of standardised rules for harmful content.

For election integrity, he bemoans the inconsistency and inadequacy of existing laws for electoral advertising and media.

As for privacy, he points to the [European Union's General Data Protection Regulation](#) as a useful starting point.

Finally, and perhaps most surprisingly [given Facebook's history](#), Zuckerberg argues

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legislation should establish and protect data portability rights. This would empower users with access to their data, and give them the ability to choose to take that data to other platforms.

Zuckerberg wrote:

I believe Facebook has a responsibility to help address these issues, and I'm looking forward to discussing them with lawmakers around the world. We've built advanced systems for finding harmful content, stopping election interference and making ads more transparent.

But people shouldn't have to rely on individual companies addressing these issues by themselves. We should have a broader debate about what we want as a society and how regulation can help. These four areas are important, but, of course, there's more to discuss.

While there's certainly more to say about each of the issues that Zuckerberg has highlighted, for now, let's consider the prospect of increased cooperation, and the pursuit of better online governance.

Worth seeking, even if it's difficult

It's welcome to see a new enthusiasm from Zuckerberg regarding engagement with government.

His opinion article demonstrates some optimism for unification and standardisation for governance and policing of issues like harmful content and privacy.

This is likely because a global unification of standards poses a significantly lower cost to Facebook for conforming to a standardised regulatory approach, rather than dealing with a patchwork of regulatory frameworks from dozens of countries and regulatory agencies.

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That said, we should hope Zuckerberg stays true to this commitment to increased cooperation, even in the absence of international agreement or standardisation.

Whether it is convenient to Facebook or not, it has a duty to its users to operate responsibly. That responsibility should not be abrogated just because international regulatory compliance is difficult.

While Zuckerberg has discussed the notion of greater cooperation with governments and regulatory agencies, it's important this cooperation doesn't stop at the offices of government and regulatory bodies.

Governments may be the arbiters of what is *legal* in a country or territory, but the legislative demands that are made of Facebook and other internet platforms may not necessarily be *just* or *fair* to the people affected by those laws.

As an example, I suspect neither Facebook nor its developers particularly want their platform to be used as a tool for the oppression of LGBTQIA+ people [in countries where homosexuality is criminalised](#).

I've noted previously that the responsibilities to balance free expression with socio-cultural norms, personal desires, and local regulatory regimes is a [particularly complex task](#). Unfortunately for Facebook, deeper cooperation with government will not make this any easier.

We must consider: when should we expect Facebook to follow the law? And when could we expect Facebook to defy what it considers unjust laws?

As a balance to the demands of government, Facebook should also look to engage with civil society organisations like as the [Electronic Frontiers Foundation](#) or the [American Civil Liberties Union](#), as

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well as academic researchers to weigh the requests of government against appropriate criticism and discourse.

Time to 'update the rules'

Zuckerberg's key argument here is that the current rules governing the internet have allowed a generation of entrepreneurs to "build services that changed the world".

Read more: [*Becoming more like WhatsApp won't solve Facebook's woes – here's why*](#)

This, he writes, has created a lot of value in people's lives, but now it's time for reform:

It's time to update these rules to define clear responsibilities for people, companies and governments going forward."

It's equally important that we hold Facebook's feet to the fires of responsibility, reform, and regulation — to ensure that these latest commitments are more than just hot air.

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