"With Facebook, you have a voice:" Neoliberalism and Activism in Mark Zuckerberg's Georgetown Address

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In October of 2019, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg streamed a speech from Georgetown University defending the company's practice of not regulating or rejecting blatantly false political advertisements placed on their site. The speech, part of his "transparency tour" to allay concerns about the growing social power and stunning irresponsibility of Facebook, presents a troubling articulation of "voice" along neoliberal lines that atomizes the individual, separates activism from communities, and conflates activity on Facebook with free expression. In this essay, we use rhetorical scholarship on voice to illuminate how Zuckerberg's speech both relies on and retrenches neoliberal rationality to flatten difference and resistance in the public sphere. Following that analysis, we highlight the broader implications for Zuckerberg's redefinition of voice for the study of rhetoric and democracy.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, Political Rhetoric, Facebook, Democracy, Public Sphere

Facebook and its billionaire founder Mark Zuckerberg have been embroiled in controversy since at least the 2016 election. Most recently, criticisms of Facebook concerned the platform's amplification of fake news, lax security for user data, and complicity in users' spread of hateful rhetoric tied to violence outside the United States.[1] Furthermore, widespread reporting in 2018 on the now defunct political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica confirmed a breach in data for over 87 million Facebook users without their knowledge. That breach led to Congressional hearings and highly visible criticism from both politicians and journalists. Though those hearings did not manifest in any tangible regulation of the social media company, Facebook embarked on yet another public campaign to burnish its image.[2]

Despite that campaign, Facebook found itself hurtling between controversies in 2019. Concerns about data security receded temporarily in light of Facebook's refusal to regulate or reject political advertising placed on the website that featured demonstrable and clear falsehoods.[3] This rejection of regulation, set against Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey's decision to remove all political

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[1] Steve Stecklow, "Why Facebook is Losing the War on Hatespeech in Myanmar," *Reuters,* August 15, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/myanmar-facebook-hate/.

[2] Alexandra Bruell, "Facebook to Boost Ad Spending as it Tries to Restore Reputation," *Wall Street Journal,* June 14, 2019, https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-to-boost-consumer-advertising-11560508201.

[3] Siva Vaidhyanathan, "The Real Reason Facebook Won't Factcheck Political Ads," *New York Times,* November 11, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/02/opinion/facebook-zuckerberg-political-ads.html.

advertising from the competing social media site, led to widespread calls to reign in Facebook's power and social influence. In addition to two separate Congressional hearings which nominally sought to hold Zuckerberg and the company accountable, high-profile politicians weighed in against the social media giant. In summer of 2019, then-presidential candidate Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) called for breaking up monopolies in the tech sector.[4] These calls were echoed by then-presidential candidate Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VA), who suggested tech companies' behavior may represent a threat to the American people.[5] Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO) went arguably the furthest when he sent a letter to Zuckerberg challenging him to defend the contributions Facebook makes to society.[6] Despite political grandstanding, however, no substantive regulatory actions have been taken to curtail Facebook's influence or profitability.

Facebook's triumph in avoiding accountability is not simply reducible to a lack of political will. Facebook's avoidance of regulation is both pre-figured and rhetorically justified under neoliberalism, as the company and the services it offers are both manifestations of, and modes of sustaining, a broader project of capital acquisition that reframes everything, including the public good, in terms of economic production and competitiveness.[7] Wendy Brown conceives of neoliberalism as a governing rationality, a "distinctive mode of reason, of the production of subjects, a 'conduct of conduct' and a scheme of valuation" that fetishizes the free market.[8] That rationality is not simply enforced by the structure of Facebook; it entails individual compliance, an "opting-in" that takes place against a broader criticism of the social media giant. As such, it is appropriate to examine the contours of Facebook's avoidance of regulation as illustrated by public facing rhetoric which allays fear, precludes government intervention, and promises a public good in exchange for a laissez-faire relationship.

One of the clearest examples of that public facing rhetoric happened on October 17th, 2019, when Mark Zuckerberg addressed students at Georgetown University. The speech offers insight into Zuckerberg's perception of Facebook's role and responsibility in American society, as it defends his company's actions while protesting against regulation and the need for changed behavior. In this essay, we argue Zuckerberg's protest is achieved via a neoliberal configuration of "voice" in the context of social media. Zuckerberg suggests that voice, a core building block of democracy,[9] is best understood through the lens of neoliberal rationality: mainly, that the power of individual voice granted through Facebook outweighs and solves the social ills of an unregulated and profit centered public sphere. This suggestion is achieved by positioning Facebook as the central enactment and protector of free speech, as evidenced by the multiplicity of voices empowered by the platform.

This (re)articulation of voice has serious consequences, both for society as a whole, and for the study of democracy and rhetoric. Facebook is complicit in any number of social ills as a consequence of avoiding regulation. The company allowed the spread of anti-Muslim messaging in

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[4] Matt Stevens, "Elizabeth Warren on Breaking Up Big Tech" *New York Times*, June 26, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/26/us/politics/elizabeth-warren-break-up-amazon-facebook.html.

[5] Christiano Lima, "Bernie Sanders: 'We should definitely take a look at' Breaking Up Google, Amazon, Apple," *Politico,* June 18, 2019, https://www.politico.com/story/2019/06/18/bernie-sanders-break-up-google-amazon-apple-1369255.

[6] Alexander Zaitchik, Is Josh Hawley for Real? *The New Republic,* July 25, 2019 Retrieved from https://newrepublic.com/article/154526/josh-hawley-real.

[7] Robert Asen, "Neoliberalism, the public sphere, and a public good," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 103, no. 4 (2017): 329-349.

[8] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution.* MIT Press, 2015: 21.

[9] Nick Couldry, *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics after Neoliberalism*, Sage publications, 2010.

Myanmar, with estimates suggesting that social media posts contributed to and inflamed ongoing sectarian and ethnic violence in which over 25,000 Rohingya people have lost their lives and over 700,000 have been displaced.[10] Facebook is further complicit in both breaches of data that threaten user security, and the spread of literal fake news over its platform. Beyond those problems, the use of voice in the Georgetown speech is deleterious to both democracy and the public good. Zuckerberg configures voice in a way that neutralizes its impact and justifies its exploitation for economic gain. Rather than conceive of voice as a unit of power in a democratic society defined by "political self rule by the people, whoever the people are,"[11] voice in the Georgetown speech is understood primarily as an atomized economic unit subject to the "rules" of neoliberal competition. This redefinition stymies local resistance and counterpublics' abilities to combat the encroachment of the neoliberal order and the deterioration of the public sphere.[12] Finally, atomizing speech collapses the capacity for meaningful pushback against mis- and dis-information while outsourcing the risk of that spread entirely onto individuals, rather than institutions. With these arguments in mind, the essay proceeds as follows. First, the theoretical intersections of neoliberalism and voice are introduced. Building from that framework, the essay turns to analysis of the Georgetown speech. Finally, the implications of the analysis are detailed.

Neoliberalism, Rhetoric, and Voice

It took less than fifty years for the political project of neoliberalism to succeed in (re)establishing the conditions for unbridled capital accumulation and the restoration of power to economic elites. As explained in "The Handbook of Neoliberalism", a compilation of work from over 50 leading authors on the subject, neoliberalism is "the extension of competitive markets into all areas of life, including the economy, politics, and society."[13] This portion of the essay establishes a working understanding of neoliberalism by evaluating its structure and governing rationality vis a vis its impact on rhetoric, looking specifically at the intersection of neoliberalism, the public sphere, and voice.

Broadly understood, neoliberalism is a configuration of policies and structures that emphasize the free market as a regime of governance. Neoliberalism is both a material political project and underlying ideology; it is an extensive process that (re)configures governments and societies by institutionalizing a conceptual framework of values and social practices within its subjects. Despite that reconfiguration, neoliberalism has no fixed or settled coordinates. There is temporal and geographic variety in its discourses and iterations, and its policy entailments and material practices can exist contradictory to each other.[14] This dynamism allows neoliberalism to absorb other varieties of capitalism and encompass them through destruction, rearticulation, or discursive repositioning, thus reconfiguring the global marketplace and society along its axes.[15] Neoliberal governance reconceptualizes all aspects of the state and the public to fit within an ontology defined

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[10] Julia Carrie Wong, "Overreacting to Failure': Facebook's New Myanmar Strategy Baffles Local Activists," *The Guardian,* February 7, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/feb/07/facebook-myanmar-genocide-violence-hate-speech.

[11] Brown, *Undoing the Demos,* 20.

[12] Asen, "Neoliberalism," 330.

[13] Simon Springer, Kean Birch, and Julie MacLeavy, eds, *Handbook of Neoliberalism*, Routledge, 2016.

[14] Brown, *Undoing the Demos,* 21.

[15] William Davies, "What Is "Neo" About Neoliberalism?" *The New Republic,* July 13, 2017, https://newrepublic.com/article/143849/neo-neoliberalism.

through market competition. Wendy Brown unifies the project and ideology by describing "neoliberal rationality", a philosophical and material move that "reconfigures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as homo-oeconomicus."[16] The ideal neoliberal subject, "homo-oeconomicus" is one who is driven and orientated only by economic concerns. Michel Foucault in his lectures referring to neoliberalism and subjectivity suggests that under a neoliberal regime "[c]itizens ceased to be subjected to the social but instead are commodified as economic subjects incentivized by money."[17] Neoliberalism is a "new programming of liberal governmentality" that alters the state's reasoning, self-representation and governing and thus fundamentally reconceptualizes all aspects of life. That programing represents possibilities for material harm; wanton austerity measures which neglect the basic needs of citizens, the flattening of difference and (in)equality in public calculations, and the fanatical insistence on the power of the individual over and at the expense of the collective. Crucially, neoliberalism achieves this rationality by (re)structuring elements of social and political life to preclude incompatible subjects or structures.

The reconfiguration of the public, and by extension networks of connectivity in the public sphere, suggests neoliberal rhetoric displaces norms to align the public with its governance. Brown suggests "discourses when they become dominant, always circulate a truth and become a kind of common sense,"[18] a sentiment expanded in recent work on the public sphere by Robert Asen. Asen outlines the ways neoliberalism reshapes the public sphere in its image, in part through redefining a "public good." The public good:

> constitutes a practice of articulating mutual standing and connection, recognizing that people can solve problems and achieve goals—and struggle for justice—through coordinated action. In a networked public sphere, there is no singular, universal public good, but multiple articulations of a public good.[19]

In the modern public sphere, relationships are constructed within and between groups thereby allowing for modes of resistance against neoliberal encroachment. By "explicitly or implicitly calling attention to relationships, constructing or reconstructing relationships, and drawing on these relationships as a force for public engagement," networked publics define themselves and their goals in relation and opposition to others.[20] Asen identifies the multiplicity of networked publics as a possible source of resistance against neoliberalism. Highlighting the dynamism and flexibility of networked publics, Asen concludes his essay by noting the potential for resistance "by enabling people to perceive connections to one another, maintaining a person's sense of self while building community, engendering judgments of productive and unproductive engagements with difference."[21] This multiplicity of public good(s) poses a direct threat to (and is therefore targeted for reshaping by) the neoliberal order. We suggest that one of the lynchpin strategies employed by neoliberalism to demobilize publics and flatten difference is the redefinition of voice, an underlying term implicit in the potential for networked publics to articulate themselves and their demands.

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[16] Brown, *Undoing the Demos,* 31.
[17] Michel, Foucault, Arnold I. Davidson, and Graham Burchell. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, Springer, 2008.
[18] Brown, *Undoing the Demos,* 117.
[19] Asen, "Neoliberalism," 331.
[20] *Ibid,* 332.
[21] *Ibid,* 344.

In rhetorical studies, voice is conceived of simultaneously as a form of agency and a physical possibility, what occurs when "one announces one's idiosyncratic presence in the world."[22] Eric King Watts' foundational work illustrates how the idiosyncrasy of voice can threaten the neoliberal order. Watts conceives of voice as "a relational phenomenon occurring in discourse" not reducible necessarily to agency, nor endless possibility of speech. Rather, Watts and others[23] envision voice along an ethical dimension wherein participation in community can both disrupt frameworks of marginality and "jar[] us from the illusion of sameness and continuity that results from conformity and mindlessness in society."[24] Voice allows individuals to situate themselves as different while seeking and forming community, a capacity central to the networked public sphere. Nick Couldry positions voice as an answer to the encroachment of neoliberalism, as voice can be understood as a process of enunciation and a value enshrining the importance of community, participation, and negotiation.[25]

The neoliberal order is threatened by voice because of the project's reliance on the sameness of subject. Homo-oeconomicus has no need for voice, outside of as a unit of economic productivity. The uniformity of goal under neoliberal rationality denies, through both discipline and discourse, alternative modes of relationships. As voice is a mode of establishing community, describing and identifying difference, and legitimating non-dominant discourses, neoliberalism is threatened by its proliferation by and within networked publics.[26] As a result of this threat, public facing rhetorics defending the neoliberal project have a vested interest in resisting and redefining voice. In the coming section, we isolate how voice is (re)defined by Zuckerberg in the service of Facebook, and by extension the neoliberal project. That redefinition neutralizes the threat voice poses to neoliberalism generally, and Facebook specifically, by flattening the differences afforded by voice in the pursuit of change.

Voice through Facebook in the Georgetown Speech.

On October 17th, 2019, Mark Zuckerberg streamed a speech from Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy. Zuckerberg's speech came at the end of what Vox reporter Rani Molla called his "transparency tour" to burnish his and his company's public image.[27] Prior to the speech, unflattering internal discussions at Facebook concerning privacy and accountability had been leaked, and Zuckerberg had received criticism for hosting a private dinner with conservative pundits immediately following Facebook's decision to allow political ads featuring demonstrably false information. Zuckerberg's speech is worthy of study for two reasons. First, rhetoric originating from Facebook and Zuckerberg presents a vision of the company that compels compliance and

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[22] Eric King Watts, ""Voice" and "voicelessness" in rhetorical studies." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 87, no. 2 (2001): 181.

[23] See Couldry, *Why Voice Matters;* Ananda Mitra and Eric Watts, "Theorizing cyberspace: the idea of voice applied to the internet discourse," *New Media & Society* 4, no. 4 (2002): 479-498; and Josh Gunn. "Speech is dead; Long live speech." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94, no. 3 (2008): 343-364.

[24] Watts, ""Voice" and "voicelessness,"" 181.

[25] Couldry, *Why Voice Matters,* 10.

[26] Asen, "Neoliberalism;" Mitra and Watts, "Theorizing cyberspace."

[27] Rami Molla, "Mark Zuckerberg Said a Lot of Nothing in His Big Speech." *Vox*, October 17, 2019, https://www.vox.com/2019/10/17/20919505/mark-zuckerberg-georgetown-free-speech-facebook.

participation, depoliticizing the tech giant and thereby allowing it to amass both political and material capital.[28] Second, Facebook is not just any company; with over two and half billion users and an enormous impact of the flow of information between and across countries and publics, the corresponding stakes of their public facing rhetoric are significantly higher.

The Georgetown speech features three rhetorical moves which employ and retrench neoliberal rationality to avoid regulation and divest Facebook of responsibility. First, voice is (re)articulated in neoliberal terms, as an economic unit afforded exclusively through participation in Facebook. That articulation strips voice of agency and denies the capacity for difference, two elements crucial for community formation and localized resistance. This articulation allows, second, for a vision of activism that is atomized and individualistic, stemming not from collective power but instead seemingly organic engagement within a marketplace of ideas defined by volume and virality. Finally, the hypothetical efficacy of activism through Facebook is mobilized to position the platform as a preferred mode of voice to preclude accountability, as that activism would be hindered by regulation.

Defining Voice Through Facebook

Early in the Georgetown speech, Zuckerberg presents voice as a mode of expression defined by the availability of the platform. He opens with a vignette about the foundation of Facebook at the height of the US occupation of Iraq. An early version of Facbook began as an invite-only online space for Harvard University students to rate each other's attractiveness. This less than dignified beginning is recast as a space for expression on controversial topics. Zuckerberg suggests, in light of the war, "The mood on campus was disbelief. It felt like we were acting without hearing a lot of important perspectives. The toll on soldiers, families and our national psyche was severe, and most of us felt powerless to stop it."[29] This felt powerlessness was solved accordingly by Facebook. Zuckerberg expands "I remember feeling that if more people had a voice to share their experiences, maybe things would have gone differently. Those early years shaped my belief that giving everyone a voice empowers the powerless and pushes society to be better."[30] Rather than conceive of voice as a mode of expression inextricable from agency, Zuckerberg allows for a slippage from *amplifying* voice to *giving* voice, suggesting voice does not exist absent a platform for its broadcast. Watts suggests at the core of some studies of voice is the presupposition that voice can be reclaimed, having been previously silenced by some external force.[31] Zuckerberg's use of 'give' precludes reclamation, instead abstracting voice to its visibility as measured through his platform. This abstraction empowers a sleight of hand wherein voice is rendered binary; either one has it (via Facebook), or one does not. This binary characterization of voice does not suggest voice is hampered by (lack of) spread, (less) impactful based on reach. Rather, Zuckerberg's initial telling of student activity via Facebook insists the medium is what empowers self-definition: "When students got to express who they were and what mattered to them, they organized more social events, started more businesses, and even challenged some established ways of doing things on

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[28] Anna Lauren Hoffmann, Nicholas Proferes, and Michael Zimmer. ""Making the world more open and connected": Mark Zuckerberg and the discursive construction of Facebook and its users." *New Media & Society* 20, no. 1 (2018): 199-218.

[29] Tony Romm, "Zuckerberg: Standing For Voice and Free Expression," *Washington Post,* October 17, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/10/17/zuckerberg-standing-voice-free-expression/, para. 3.

[30] *Ibid*, para. 3.

[31] Watts, ""Voice" and "voicelessness,"" 192.

campus."[32] Facebook, in this context, is not about amplification or reclamation, but about definition, a definition not possible absent the medium. Zuckerberg's selective history does not acknowledge that anti-war protest definitionally had voice in the lead-up to the Iraq War. The anti-war voice was merely ineffective as a consequence of social, media, and political environments that demonized those voices as unpatriotic. That implied ineffectiveness is taken as a signal that no voice existed, that activists were quite literally incapable of articulation. By indicating Facebook was a crucial platform not for *broadcasting* but for *affording* voice, Zuckerberg shifts away from an individualized and immutable voice to one that relies on, and is defined by, the infrastructure of Facebook.

This notion of "giving voice" externalizes voice from the individual, in direct contravention of Watts' and Gunn's visions of the term.[33] Watts theorizes voice as communal, a relationality steeped in ethics and capable of resisting oppressive ideologies. In a similar vein, Josh Gunn's discussion of philosophies of speech traces what he calls "vocal fundamentalism" that suggests "human speech is the token of our uniqueness as animals and the most fundamental element of social being, biologically, psychologically, and culturally."[34] Compare these theories of voice to Zuckerberg's conception of the term. His is devoid of ethics, community building, or power intrinsic to the individual. From the onset, voice-through-Facebook is separated from the individual, instead stemming entirely from the medium of transmission.

After summarizing the small-scale success of Facebook on Harvard's campus, Zuckerberg contends: "Since then, I've focused on building services to do two things: give people voice, and bring people together."[35] Giving, in this context, implies an absence, a zero-state only rectified by technology, as Zuckerberg implies perspectives existed, but they weren't being expressed. The notion that Zuckerberg is "bringing people together" furthers this logic, implying that societal fracture (the absence of togetherness) was the norm prior to Facebook. Anne Hoffman and colleagues suggest that Zuckerberg has routinely retold the foundational story of Facebook to frame connectivity between college students as not only equivalent to broader societal togetherness, but the *essence* of that togetherness. Zuckerberg's telling, here and otherwise, "abstracts to 'people' broadly, casting the Facebook/user relationship as not one of students connecting online but, rather, people that now have the power to share and change the world through their use of Facebook."[36] The abstraction is powerful because it takes a universal human trait in voice and couples it directly to Facebook.

This articulation of voice and togetherness draws from and serves the broader function of a neoliberal governance. This notion that ineffective voice is not voice at all imports an outcome orientation on discourse, driven by effect rather than expression. Rather than thinking of voice as a defining element of humanity or a feature of a text, Zuckerberg commodifies and atomizes voice as something "given" by Facebook, a product allowing for competition within a marketplace of ideas. In this context, the focus on voice that "works" is a way of discussing the *mode* of making it work: namely, Facebook. By moving away from understanding the effect of voice as contingent in its impact but intrinsic to the self, towards a binary state of voice/voiceless, Zuckerberg flattens difference. Brown suggests "as [neoliberalism] promulgates a market emphasis on 'what works,' it eliminates from discussion politically, ethically, or otherwise normatively inflected dimensions

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[32] Romm, "Zuckerberg," para. 4.
[33] Watts, ""Voice" and "voicelessness;"" Gunn "Speech is dead."
[34] Gunn "Speech is dead," 383.
[35] *Ibid*, para. 5.
[36] Hoffman et al, "Making the world," 206.

of policy, aiming to supersede politics with practical, technical approaches to problems."[37] This emphasis has two implications. First, it enmeshes effect into an understanding of voice that is outcome oriented, independent of non-medium or non-market elements which may have precluded the effect or spread of that voice. This understanding obfuscates elements beyond Facebook that impact the proliferation of discourses, emphasizing instead the capacity for voice to be spread via Facebook, and Facebook alone. Second, the focus establishes voice as an item, a unit, traceable by its expression through Facebook and therefore measurable in its impact. This emphasis on outcome reduces voice to something quantifiable, locatable within a market of discourses afforded, controlled, and ultimately sustained by Facebook.

Activism and Facebook Voice

Having established voice as a quality afforded by and stemming from Facebook, Zuckerberg uses that articulation of voice to convey a mode of activism that is atomized, divorced from both structures of power and a broader collectivity. By conceiving of voice as emanating from the tech company, the lack of change in different spheres can be explained by the lack of Facebook. Following from the logic that the platform affords voice, "when people are finally able to speak, they often call for change."[38] This positioning suggests Facebook empowers, but is not responsible for, forms of social activism. That empowerment is a necessary step, as "our ability to call out things we felt were wrong also used to be much more restricted."[39] This articulation of change is distinctly neoliberal in its emphasis on the individual person, devoid of participation in or responsibility to a community. In the past, Zuckerberg's use of "sharing" has served a similar depoliticizing function wherein connection and community are commodified and atomized.[40] Past scholarship on voice suggests community and voice are inextricably linked; at times, voice is a mode of building and maintaining a community, where in other moments community is a mode of amplifying voice.[41] An effect of conceiving of voice through the medium, then, is the severance of voice from community. Watts theorizes voice as one that is *explicitly* about community; voice is "the enunciation and the acknowledgement of the obligations and anxieties of living in community with others."[42] Watts suggests voice is often treated as an emancipatory mode of resisting oppression where discourse moves beyond the physically bound capability of an individual towards the articulation of community, identity, or an alternative mode of being. The centrality of community to voice (and voice to community), and the resulting ethical commitments that stem from that centrality, are erased when the medium alone affords voice.

Having previously established voice as atomized, Zuckerberg positions voice through Facebook as a preferential mode of activism. He casts past activism achieved through offline organizing generally in terms of emancipation: "Throughout history, we've seen how being able to use your voice helps people come together. We've seen this in the civil rights movement."[43] In the same way that Zuckerberg rhetorically slips from amplifying voice to giving voice, however, the activ-

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[37] Brown, "*Undoing the Demos*," 130.
[38] Romm, "Zuckerberg," para. 8.
[39] *Ibid*, para. 10
[40] Robert Payne, "Frictionless sharing and digital promiscuity," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (2014): 85-102.
[41] Watts, ""Voice" and "voicelessness;""; Mitra and Watts, "Theorizing cyberspace."
[42] Watts, ""Voice" and "voicelessness;""; 180.
[43] Romm, "Zuckerberg," para. 7.

ism of the past is moved from possibility to impossibility. The emancipatory voice of non-Facebook social movements is quickly encompassed and overshadowed by voice afforded by Facebook. Zuckerberg suggests, though there was activism before Facebook, the new power afforded by the platform was a dramatic expansion of possibility:

> We now have significantly broader power to call out things we feel are unjust and share our own personal experiences. Movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo went viral on Facebook — the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was actually first used on Facebook — and this just wouldn't have been possible in the same way before. 100 years back, many of the stories people have shared would have been against the law to even write down. […] With Facebook, more than 2 billion people now have a greater opportunity to express themselves and help others.[44]

Zuckerberg demotes alternative modes of activism achieved through non-Facebook voice. That demotion is achieved by highlighting the power of "traditional gatekeepers in politics or media," and suggesting Facebook circumvents those frameworks by putting power in the hands of the individual. Prior movements, though capable of achieving change through solidarity, were limited because of entities opposed to community organizing. Those same entities, it is implied, are unable to corral the sheer volume of individual voices on Facebook. Zuckerberg extolls the power of individuals who have "end[ed] multiple long-running dictatorships in Northern Africa"[45] and the capacity for people to position themselves as "a Fifth Estate alongside the other power structures of society"[46] Activism in the modern day is achieving gains in "the fight for democracy worldwide," and expanding to "voices in those countries that had been excluded just because they were women, or they believed in democracy."[47] Though great gains were made through offline emancipatory movements, Facebook's affordance of voice has allowed for an expansion of previously unheard-of change.

This expansion, according to Zuckerberg, was not feasible prior to Facebook affording voice. Zuckerberg suggests "One clear difference is that a lot more people now have a voice — almost half the world."[48] This new, stronger form of activism is possible because of power stemming from the social media company: namely, voice that cannot be stymied by otherwise oppressive structures. In this context, pro-social changes from expanding access to civil rights to demobilizing systems of oppression are achieved through Facebook, thereby cementing voice-through-Facebook as a preferential mode of activism. That preferential mode is not just achieved through an outcome or scale orientation; rather, part of what makes Facebook preferable is the demotion of the collective for the ascension of the individual. Zuckerberg suggests "While it's easy to focus on major social movements, it's important to remember that most progress happens in our everyday lives." It is not social movements that make progress; rather, it is the individual, as "progress and social cohesion come from billions of stories like this around the world."[49] That emphasis casts activism as an individual action, one stemming from the choice of an unencumbered, empowered subject. That individual is the building block for an ideal neoliberal subject. Once given agency

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[44] *Ibid,* para. 11.
[45] *Ibid*, para. 8.
[46] *Ibid*, para. 13.
[47] *Ibid*, para. 8.
[48] *Ibid*, para. 22.
[49] *Ibid*, para. 12.

through the neoliberal order, the subject can overcome or ignore structures of inequality or power relations. Though Facebook clearly affords a *capacity* for activism, it is distinctly a-political in character; voice, in this context, is merely a quality of an individual actor made real by the tech giant.

This depoliticization of movements in favor of the individual employs and retrenches a neoliberal understanding of activism. Brown suggests neoliberal governance will distance its own actions from the political in the service of the economic, even though the distancing is itself a political action.[50] In the context of Facebook, what matters is the outcome of the movement; voice is more visible, and therefore tangible, affording ambivalence to the actual outcome of activism. This ambivalence is made clear in the middle of the speech, as Zuckerberg transitions to criticisms of Facebook. Zuckerberg contends "inevitably some people will use their voice to organize violence, undermine elections or hurt others, and we have a responsibility to address these risks. When you're serving billions of people, even if a very small percent cause harm, that can still be a lot of harm."[51] Casting the problem as a "small percent" who engage in problematic actions removes Facebook from the equation; they provide the tool but aren't responsible for what individual actors do. This removal depoliticizes the voice afforded by Facebook by suggesting the platform is benign, valanced only in its use.

Facebook is further depoliticized when Zuckerberg couples the foundational and communal components of American values to the company, thereby naturalizing Facebook's framework of voice. Zuckerberg suggests "Our values at Facebook are inspired by the American tradition, which is more supportive of free expression than anywhere else."[52] Paradoxically, the invocation of the foundational moments of American history depoliticizes Facebook by naturalizing its neoliberal character in the fabric of American society. The implicit argument is that free expression- read: unregulated expression, through the medium of Facebook- is consistent with the American Tradition. As presented by Zuckerberg, that desire transcends party or ideology as a universally accepted good. Calvin Coker argues in a study of Tea Party Movement (TPM) discourse the foundational myths of America have already been incorporated into the broader project of neoliberalism to make unobjectionable austerity measures and brutal market politics. The comparatively narrow nativism and extreme financial conservatism of the TPM are smuggled into the political mainstream by a unifying appeal to founding mythos, a mythos that is simultaneously at the core of American politics while appearing to be apolitical.[53]

Voice and the Individual

Having established an a-political, atomized activism empowered by voice-through-Facebook, Zuckerberg wields those notions as neoliberal rationality to absolve Facebook of responsibility for wrongdoing and negate the possibility of future regulation. If Facebook affords voice, and voice-through-Facebook is the most effective mode of social change, regulation of Facebook presents a problem as understood through both pro-social frameworks and neoliberal rationality. Under the logic of the Georgetown speech, asking Facebook to moderate content would constitute a violation of an otherwise effective free market. If one assumes that voice-through-Facebook is the least

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[50] Brown, "*Undoing the Demos*," 130.

[51] Romm, "Zuckerberg," para. 22.

[52] *Ibid*, para. 19.

[53] Calvin R. Coker, "Recasting the Founding Fathers: The Tea Party Movement, Neoliberalism, and American Myth," *Speaker & Gavel* 54, no. 1 (2017): 52–70.

encumbered, most effective means of achieving change, regulating the medium is the same as censoring voice. This effectiveness is predicated on, and reinforced by, a neoliberal rationality that presumes the power of the individual can overcome, in a marketplace of ideas, any obstacle. As such holding Facebook accountable is unnecessary in light of the capacity for individuals to use voice to prevent social ills.

To justify his inaction and preclude future regulation, Zuckerberg frames the criticisms of Facebook as mere disagreements about the role of free expression and voice. The center of the disagreement, according to Zuckerberg, is the natural result of the expansion of voice via Facebook:

> we have big disagreements. Maybe more now than at any time in recent history. But part of that is because we're getting our issues out on the table — issues that for a long time weren't talked about. More people from more parts of our society have a voice than ever before, and it will take time to hear these voices and knit them together into a coherent narrative.[54]

Disagreement is naturalized as a part of voice, and as part of using Facebook. That naturalization casts the problems resulting from Facebook's negligence and business model as outgrowths of a worthwhile system, a cost and result of the multiplicity of voices brought together on social media. Zuckerberg rearticulates disagreement in a fashion reminiscent of Habermas' public sphere; a space where disagreement is the result of myriad voices, and consensus ("a coherent narrative") is possible because folks are participating. Asen, citing a litany of scholars critical of Habermas' utopian vision of the public sphere, suggests that neoliberalism (re)articulates publics, the public good, and the public sphere along lines that flatten differences in the broader service of capital accumulation.[55] In this context, all objections to Facebook are treated as equal against the supposed benefits of the company. This flattening is achieved in part by treating disagreement and "getting issues out on the table" as an apolitical process, despite that disagreement being filtered through, and therefore impacted by, Facebook. In the Georgetown speech Facebook, both the company and the service, recede from view in favor of a universalized view of free expression.[56]

This universality frames regulation of Facebook as antithetical to free expression. Before pivoting to the segment of the speech defending Facebook's decisions, Zuckerberg uses voice-through-Facebook to equate the company with free expression, to create a binary choice between regulation and voice. Zuckerberg argues "the future depends on all of us. Whether you like Facebook or not, we need to recognize what is at stake and come together to stand for free expression at this critical moment."[57] In light of this positioning of voice, the difference between free expression and expression on Facebook is non-existent. Brown's analysis of the Supreme Court decision in *Citizen's United* clarifies the way neoliberalism flattens, and thereby co-opts, the power of voice and speech. Brown suggests under neoliberalism, "there is only speech, all of which has the same right, the same capacity to enrich the marketplace of ideas, the same capacity to be judged by the

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[54] Romm, "Zuckerberg," para. 61.

[55] To reconstruct the argument in full, consider the following: Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1992), 122–28; Catherine R. Squires, "Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres*," Communication Theory* 12 (2002): 446-468; Daniel C. Brouwer, "Communication as Counterpublic," in *Communication as ... Perspectives on Theory*, eds. Gregory J. Shepherd, Jeffrey St. John, and Ted Striphas (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006).

[56] Hoffman et al, "Making the world."

[57] Romm, "Zuckerberg," para. 62.

citizenry, and the same vulnerability to restriction or repression."[58] The end goal of that flattening is, as in *Citizen's United*, the nullification of frameworks capable of reducing the power of capital to flood the field and establish (un)equal terms. In the context of Facebook, the micro-level goal of circumventing regulation serves the broader neoliberal end of creating a perceptually neutral, but ideologically saturated, public sphere controlled by economic elites.

That flattening is made all the more possible by the insistence that voice and activism through Facebook is politically neutral and must be protected. Early in the speech Zuckerberg claims of his critics:

> Some people believe giving more people a voice is driving division rather than bringing us together. More people across the spectrum believe that achieving the political outcomes they think matter is more important than every person having a voice. I think that's dangerous. Today I want to talk about why, and some important choices we face around free expression.[59]

Disagreements are framed as objections to the expansion of voice, rather than the expansion of a problematic medium. At the time of the Georgetown speech, damning criticisms of Facebook's practices were being levied by politicians and journalists. It was evident that the company was complicit in not only the proliferation of mis/disinformation, but also hate speech that indirectly contributed to violence.[60] The utility of voice-through-Facebook, then, is that Zuckerberg can suggest that criticisms of Facebook are, in fact, objections to voice:

> giving people a voice and broader inclusion go hand in hand, and the trend has been towards greater voice over time. But there's also a counter-trend. In times of social turmoil, our impulse is often to pull back on free expression. We want the progress that comes from free expression, but not the tension.[61]

Zuckerberg's invocation of tension as a byproduct of expression serves two neoliberal ends. First, "tension" is a euphemism in the same way that "creative destruction" is employed by economists; progress comes with (un)intended consequences which have a distinct and direct human cost. More importantly, this insistence that tension is the natural result of voice positions Facebook as uninvolved, in effect the ideal enactment of neoliberal law. Brown suggests "neoliberal law is the opposite of planning. It facilitates the economic game, but does not direct or contain it,"[62] a facilitation made evident by voice through Facebook.

Flattening discursive difference was the first of a two-part rhetorical move to avoid regulation and accountability. The second is suggesting that individual actors, empowered through Facebook, are actually the most effective means of societal change. Zuckerberg suggests regulation poses a far greater threat than any possible wrongdoing or ill resultant from voice-through-Facebook. He frames the stasis point of the debate as centralized control versus the ability of the individual: "I understand the concerns about how tech platforms have centralized power, but I actually believe the much bigger story is how much these platforms have decentralized power by putting it directly into people's hands."[63] Zuckerberg claims that those who wish to curtail the power of bad actors

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[58] Brown, "*Undoing the Demos*," 162.
[59] Romm, "Zuckerberg," para. 6.
[60] Wong, "'Overreacting to failure.'"
[61] Romm, "Zuckerberg," para. 14.
[62] Brown, "*Undoing the Demos*," 67.
[63] Romm, "Zuckerberg," para. 13.

who use Facebook to spread hateful rhetoric or disinformation are themselves a greater risk to the public good. Preventing those actors from inciting violence or misleading the public is in fact:

> more dangerous for democracy over the long term than almost any speech. Democracy depends on the idea that we hold each others' right to express ourselves and be heard above our own desire to always get the outcomes we want.[64]

In light of the power of the individual, the solution to societal ills is deregulation; voice through Facebook can solve, if left to its own devices. The folks who wish to regulate Facebook lack faith in their fellow citizens, as "Some hold the view that since the stakes are so high, they can no longer trust their fellow citizens with the power to communicate and decide what to believe for themselves."[65] In these moments of the speech, Facebook and the neoliberal project palpably converge.

The individual and the power of the free market is positioned as the only way to expose individuals to preferable modes of thinking, thereby solving societal harm. Zuckerberg suggests, for example, that societal values like tolerance cannot be imposed "top down." Rather, tolerance "has to come from people opening up, sharing experiences, and developing a shared story for society that we all feel we're a part of. That's how we make progress together."[66] This trust is further strengthened by reference back to the values at the center of Facebook, values which Facebook embodies in the type of voice they afford to people:

> Someone once told me our founding fathers thought free expression was like air. You don't miss it until it's gone. When people don't feel they can express themselves, they lose faith in democracy and they're more likely to support populist parties that prioritize specific policy goals over the health of our democratic norms.[67]

To regulate Facebook is to regulate free expression; a threat to Facebook is a threat to expression everywhere, as it would violate the central norms of American (neoliberal) society.

Zuckerberg closes the speech by emphasizing the capacity for the neoliberal public sphere, owned and operated by his company, to solve societal ills. Having been afforded this power from Facebook, citizens will surely operate in their own interests, and in the interest of the public good. Compared to those who believe that neoliberalism generally, and Facebook specifically, is impoverishing voice, Zuckerberg is: "a little more optimistic. I don't think we need to lose our freedom of expression to realize how important it is. I think people understand and appreciate the voice they have now."[68] Though that voice is entirely reliant on Facebook, a company with unbridled and unimaginable power over the spread of information, it is assumed that folks will be fine with Zuckerberg at the helm. He can be trusted, as he "believe[s] in giving people a voice because, at the end of the day, I believe in people."[69]

Implications

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[64] *Ibid*, para. 57.
[65] *Ibid*, para. 56.
[66] *Ibid*, para. 56.
[67] *Ibid*, para. 57.
[68] *Ibid*, para. 59.
[69] *Ibid*, para. 63.

The preceding analysis suggests that Mark Zuckerberg's speech at Georgetown rearticulates voice along neoliberal lines to depoliticize Facebook and skirt regulation. Beyond the programmatic purpose of the speech as part of a "transparency tour," Zuckerberg's conceptions of voice and activism have two troubling implications when taken to their logical conclusion. First, voice in the Georgetown speech collapses the ethical consideration of who should (not) be given an amplified mouthpiece, thereby hampering responses to mis/disinformation and hate speech. Second, this understanding voice through Facebook outsources the risk of the public sphere onto the individual, without any corresponding protection for participation. That risk entails a threat to democracy writ large.

Arguably the first line of defense against problematic actors engaged in mis/disinformation or hate speech is to remove them from a platform, thereby mitigating the damage possible by widespread transmission of their discourse. For example, lawsuits forced Goop, Gwyneth Paltrow's health company, to remove language espousing suspicious and spurious health benefits from products sold on their website.[70] Banning individuals from a platform like Twitter or Facebook for inflammatory, hateful, or otherwise dangerous speech appears to be in the service of a broader public good. However, when that process is viewed through the lens of the Georgetown speech, a conundrum arises when companies or individuals move against problematic speech. There is no capacity, according to Zuckerberg, for society to effectively regulate or limit out free expression that is normatively problematic. Suggesting that voice is afforded by Facebook, and any regulation constitutes a violation of free expression, Zuckerberg flattens voice to a process devoid of ethics and incapable of crowding bad actors out of the public sphere. Consider individuals like Milo Yiannopolis, who were eventually banned from platforms but used that ban as evidence of their victimhood. Yiannopoulos, an outspoken proponent of the "alt right" in 2016 (a self-chosen moniker by a loose coalition of individuals espousing a hyper nationalist, xenophobic ideology through websites like *Breitbart*), has been banned from platforms like YouTube and Facebook because of past statements seeming to condone pedophilia, alongside misogyny, racism, and xenophobia.[71] A robust conception of voice explains why deplatforming Yiannopolis constitutes a defense of the public good; though Yiannopolis ought to not face state sanction for his repugnant discourse, an ethically situated conception of voice would acknowledge the risk posed to both marginalized communities and society writ large in amplifying his voice. When platforms are synonymous with voice, however, removing individuals espousing hatred or damaging misinformation constitutes a violation of most sacred rights. The conception of voice presented in the Georgetown speech precludes meaningful social response to damaging discourse in the name of the free market and empowers a rhetorical victimhood for those who suffer any degree of consequences for their problematic speech. Conservative commentators have routinely decried instances of progressive "censorship" wherein individuals espousing socially problematic ideas faced some form of social censure. Criticism of these circumstances have an amount of social currency, despite their tenuous relationship to the law. As noted by a cadre of scholars,[72] conservative victimhood is an increasingly effective rhetorical strategy for retrenching liberalized policies and positioning a hegemonic

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[70] Bill Bostock, "Gwyneth Paltrow's Goop settles $145,000 lawsuit over baseless vaginal eggs health claims." *Buisiness Insider,* September 5, 2018, https://www.businessinsider.com/gwyneth-platrows-goop-lawsuit-vaginal-egg-claims-2018-9

[71] Peter Beinart, "The rise of the violent left," *The Atlantic,* September 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/the-rise-of-the-violent-left/534192/

[72] See Calvin R. Coker "From exemptions to censorship: religious liberty and victimhood in Obergefell v. Hodges," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 15, no. 1 (2018): 35-52; Paul Elliott Johnson, "The art of masculine victimhood: Donald Trump's demagoguery," *Women's Studies in Communication* 40, no. 3 (2017): 229-

group as beset. Zuckerberg's conception of voice in the Georgetown speech collapses a consideration of ethics of speech, thereby empowering bad-faith actors to cry victim when attempts at deplatforming surface.

Second, both Asen and Brown suggest neoliberalism poses a direct threat to both a networked public sphere, and democracy writ large, by rendering all activity in terms of economic productivity. Brown suggests that under neoliberal rationality, "liberty itself is narrowed to market conduct, divested of association with mastering the conditions of life, existential freedom, or securing the rule of the demos."[73] Perhaps the largest threat to democracy concerns the way Facebook divests itself of responsibility and foists risk onto the individuals who use its platform. This divestment of responsibility from Facebook negates, first, any attempt to hold the company accountable for privileging economically valuable, but socially damaging, discourse such as propaganda, fabricated news, or misleading political advertising. The original impetus for the transparency tour, Facebook's refusal to remove political advertising with demonstrably false information, suggests the possible ramifications of the Georgetown speech: further spread of information deleterious to a public good, and inability to hold accountable the one institution capable of stemming the tide. Given Facebook's questionable practices concerning the promotion of paid content without notifying users and the inflation of market measures to further monopolize the online sphere, the threat posed to the public good is evident.

Furthermore, the conception of voice presented in the Georgetown speech is a realization of a neoliberal goal in entirely outsourcing risk onto the individual. When voice is afforded by Facebook, we are responsible for our own capital, to be used by others, but we have "no guarantee of security, protection, or even survival."[74] In the Georgetown speech, all voice is on the same level, afforded and made neutral by Facebook. As such, when ideas fail to spread or communities suffer, the blame for those circumstances lies on the individual. If only the idea had been more compelling, the community more interesting, the content more viral and the ad money freer flowing. This conception of voice obscures structural contributions to violence or the proliferation of discourse and blames set upon populations like the Rohingya in Myanmar for their own troubles. In the same way that a neoliberal subject can be blamed entirely for their failure within a brutal and rigged economy, those who suffer as a consequence of Facebook are understood as disposable subjects who failed to grasp the power of their voice.

Mark Zuckerberg's Georgetown speech is public facing rhetoric designed, as part of a "transparency tour," to allay concerns about the growing and substantial power held by Facebook in its control over the networked public sphere. In that speech, Zuckerberg reconceives of voice as stemming totally from the platform, thereby flattening difference and nullifying activism which takes place outside of Facebook. This conception of voice relies on, and retrenches, a neoliberal rationality that portends the possibility of future violence, mis/disinformation, and alienation absent moves towards regulation.

250; Casey Ryan Kelly, "The wounded man: Foxcatcher and the incoherence of White masculine victimhood," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 15, no. 2 (2018): 161-178; and Eric King Watts, "Postracial Fantasies, Blackness, and Zombies," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 14, no. 4 (2017): 317–33.

[73] Brown, "*Undoing the Demos*," 41.

[74] *Ibid*, 37