

# The cost of censorship on Facebook

Sacha Baron Cohen's comparison of Mark Zuckerberg's realm to a restaurant serving Nazis resonated. But bad guys won't be the only ones paying the price for that rule.

By Jonathan S. Tobin

(JNS) There's little question that for most observers of the debate about the future of social media, Borat got the best of Zuckerberg.

That was the general reaction after actor Sacha Baron Cohen—still best known for his satirical 2006 film about a fictional journalist from Kazakhstan touring the United States—argued that Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg's claim to be defending freedom of speech by refusing to censor Nazis was bogus.

Cohen [tweeted](#): "If he owned a fancy restaurant and 4 neo-Nazis came goose-stepping into the dining room and were talking loudly about wanting to kill "Jewish scum", would he serve them an elegant eight course meal? Or would tell them to get the f\*\*k out of his restaurant? It's the same thing."

Cohen isn't wrong about what would happen if such a thing did occur. And he's also right that Zuckerberg's sudden interest in freedom of speech after his site has been arbitrarily censoring selected accounts for a long time isn't sincere. Facebook is, as Cohen points out, "not the government" and not strictly speaking bound to allow anyone to use its platform. Nor are Zuckerberg's motives quite as high-minded as he claims them to be when he argued earlier this month in a [speech](#) at Georgetown University that Facebook's pose as a principled defender of free expression was blatantly insincere. Zuckerberg is doubtlessly far more worried about the potential costs involved in setting up a system to weed out hate speech. He also understands that any such system would be—as is the case with the faceless algorithms and community-standard enforcers currently employed by social-media giants—endlessly second-guessed, creating more controversies than they avert.

But the context for this exchange wasn't an abstract debate about free speech in the new virtual public square.

At a time when a rising tide of anti-Semitism is spreading around the globe in no small measure because the Internet amplifies the voices of otherwise isolated and scattered small pockets of extremists. The manner in which the Internet and social media can give anyone with a following—and not just the gatekeepers that run the mass media—a disproportionate impact on public discourse is both remarkably democratic and downright frightening.

It's also true that many people feel that the 2016 election was influenced by the way bot accounts spread Russian disinformation, which helped President Donald Trump even though it's not clear that their illegal actions did much to alter an outcome that was decided by the faults and strengths of the candidates. They fear that the same thing will somehow prevent the Democrats from defeating him in 2020.

But while Cohen's analogy has some merit, and we should all worry about the way these platforms are impacting society, those who really care about free speech should be extremely wary about advocating the censorship of a medium that has become the primary way billions of people access news.

Moreover, we already know that there is no such thing as a perfectly objective fact-checking service or arbiter of hate speech.

In the last decade, numerous publications have created columns that seek to separate fact from fiction in political debates. But these articles have only sown further division, rather than bring people together behind a common set of facts. Inevitably, editorial bias seeps into any such effort. Liberals are always reluctant to call out fellow liberals as liars, and the same is true of conservatives. In an age of hyperpartisanship, Daniel Patrick Moynihan's adage about each of us not being entitled to our own set of facts has been replaced by a journalistic world in which no sources are universally trusted by reasonable people on both sides of the aisle.

That's why the president's trolling of the media and his opponents—made possible by the fact that Twitter gives him a platform where he can directly address the public without the filter provided by a news media—is so popular with his supporters. It's not just that they like him; they know that

liberal journalists feel that they are justified in discarding objectivity for open partisan opposition.

This is why those who echo Cohen's arguments also want Facebook to reject political ads from people they oppose, as they think their arguments are false. But in the world of politics, such judgments are never entirely objective.

Already there have been instances when conservatives feel Internet giants run by those who oppose their positions are judging their work by a double standard. PragerU, an educational outfit run by longtime talk-show host and Jewish thinker Dennis Prager, has had its informational videos put on a "restricted" status by YouTube. Whether or not you agree with its content, we should all be scared by the prospect of such arbitrary and partisan gatekeepers.

As much as any other group, Jews have an interest in keeping a lid on hate. That's why the Anti-Defamation League has supported greater limits in accepting material on social media. But what happens when the same system winds up censoring Zionist advocacy because some on the left, which has great influence in the Silicon Valley boardrooms where such decisions are made, accept the canard that Zionism is racism.

At a moment in history when such entities have disproportionate influence, I'm more worried about Zuckerberg deciding which political arguments are legitimate than I am about whether the lunatic fringe, which the overwhelming majority of people ignore anyway, is being excluded. And allowing the government or the courts to make such decisions would be even more problematic.

It ought to be simple to construct a social-media universe that can weed out Nazis while leaving plenty of room for leeway when it comes to even the most controversial arguments. The problem is that it isn't. Once we start down the slippery slope of censorship, there's no telling where it will stop. And that is a dilemma that will neither assure the security of the Jewish community or that of any other group.

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