

Can Mark Zuckerberg Fix Facebook Before It Breaks Democracy? | The New Yorker

By Evan Osnos

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Evan Osnos profiles Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg, detailing the history of the now-massive tech company from its origins in Zuckerberg's dorm room to its scandal-laden present. Osnos reflects on how Zuckerberg's personality, philosophy, and leadership inform Facebook's practices (and the implications this has for democracy), warning that "[t]he question is not whether Zuckerberg has the power to fix Facebook but whether he has the will."

In a series of conversations over the summer, I talked to Zuckerberg about Facebook's problems, and about his underlying views on technology and society. We spoke at his home, at his office, and by phone. I also interviewed four dozen people inside and outside the company about its culture, his performance, and his decision-making. I found Zuckerberg straining, not always coherently, to grasp problems for which he was plainly unprepared. These are not technical puzzles to be cracked in the middle of the night but some of the subtlest aspects of human affairs, including the meaning of truth, the limits of free speech, and the origins of violence.

[...]

In conversation, Zuckerberg is, unsurprisingly, highly analytical. When he encounters a theory that doesn't accord with his own, he finds a seam of disagreement—a fact, a methodology, a premise—and hammers at it. It's an effective technique for winning arguments, but one that makes it difficult to introduce new information. Over time, some former colleagues say, his deputies have begun to filter out bad news from presentations before it reaches him. A former Facebook official told me, "They only want to hear good news. They don't want people who are disagreeing with them. There is a culture of 'You go along to get along.' "

[...]

The caricature of Zuckerberg is that of an automaton with little regard for the human dimensions of his work. The truth is something else: he decided long ago that no historical change is painless. Like Augustus, he is at peace with his trade-offs. Between speech and truth, he chose speech. Between speed and perfection, he chose speed. Between scale and safety, he chose scale. His life thus far has convinced him that he can solve “problem after problem after problem,” no matter the howling from the public it may cause.

At a certain point, the habits of mind that served Zuckerberg well on his ascent will start to work against him. To avoid further crises, he will have to embrace the fact that he’s now a protector of the peace, not a disrupter of it. Facebook’s colossal power of persuasion has delivered fortune but also peril. Like it or not, Zuckerberg is a gatekeeper. The era when Facebook could learn by doing, and fix the mistakes later, is over. The costs are too high, and idealism is not a defense against negligence.

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