

Mark Zuckerberg's speech: a political statement about the future of Facebook?

Evelyn Walls explores how Facebook may navigate Chinese free speech restrictions as it seeks to enter the market.



In October 2014 [Mark Zuckerberg](#), the founder of Facebook, [gave a speech in Mandarin](#) at Tsinghua University, a top-ranking Chinese university in Beijing. This speech went viral on the internet and was widely applauded by Chinese netizens both in China and abroad. It became the headline topic on all social media available in China, including Wechat, Weibo and Xiaonei, but not Facebook – Facebook itself has been banned in the country since July 2008. The popularity of Mark Zuckerberg's speech among the Chinese, therefore, reflects a great irony: a country that has no access to Facebook has shown its love for the founder of this social media platform in what appears to be a kind of political satire.

What is the deal, and for whom?

There is certainly a lot of business manoeuvring involved in this speech tailored for its Chinese

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audience. The first and perhaps most obvious point worth noting relates to the business strategy behind Zuckerberg's speech. Tsinghua University, famous for its technology studies, is often considered to be China's equivalent of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Choosing Tsinghua made Zuckerberg's visit an engagement of the brilliant technological minds of the country, an intellectual encounter in addition to a political one. Zuckerberg was also nominated as [an advisory member of Tsinghua's School of Economics and Management](#). Other top executives at the event included IBM chief executive Virginia Rometty and Anheuser-Busch InBev CEO Carlos Brito.

During the visit, Zuckerberg stated that he would push for more cooperation with Tsinghua. [Doug Young from Forbes](#) predicted that Facebook could be considering entering China through a partnership with Tsinghua, which has shown a penchant for doing business with foreign firms. The university was one of China's early tech manufacturing leaders with its Tongfang Group. More recently [it has emerged as a consolidator for China's high-tech microchip industry](#) through its purchase of US-listed smartphone chipmakers RDA Microelectronics and Spreadtrum. It later merged those companies into a single microchip maker, and sold 20 per cent of it to Intel in 2015.

Despite the fact that Facebook's main site was blocked by Beijing in 2008, Zuckerberg has stated repeatedly since then that he wants Facebook to enter the market. He has made frequent trips to China, often traveling as a private citizen rather than a company executive. Three years ago he reportedly met with a number of executives from major internet firms, including internet search engine leader Baidu, to discuss a potential joint venture. But nothing ever came from those talks. China has had an entrepreneurship boom – homegrown internet giants like Alibaba, Tencent and Baidu have convinced a generation of young professionals that passion, focus and risk-taking can yield massive rewards.

This brings us to a more sensitive issue, namely what kind of vehicle Facebook might use to finally enter China. Zuckerberg's meetings with successful online media and business models that are intrinsically Chinese suggests that he is still searching for a direction. This could be alarming from a free speech perspective, as it suggests a higher risk of Facebook's entry into China being compromised and manipulated by interested parties. Already, a [Twitter office has been opened in Hong Kong](#) – could such tentative easing into the region be a strategy that Facebook might emulate?

The Tsinghua partnership

Tsinghua University is one of the high-ranking universities in China, and it is particularly famous for training top party leaders (including the current president, Xi Jinping). Choosing Tsinghua to visit and deliver his speech was no accident but a business strategy that was carefully planned prior to his visit to Beijing.

Doug Young observed that Apple CEO Tim Cook's frequent visits to China have been quite official

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and included many stops at government and company offices, whereas Zuckerberg has been far more low-key in his equally regular visits, due to Facebook's lack of official presence in the country where it is formally banned. But of course Zuckerberg desperately wants to find a way to enter the market. Young also suspected that Beijing might welcome the world's biggest social networking company in the current climate. Such a move would help to deflect the criticism that China is hostile to foreign companies, amid the antitrust probes against mostly major multinationals. Allowing Facebook to enter would also help to deflect the criticism levelled by foreigners who say China's strict censorship policies are aimed at quashing free speech. Those strict censorship policies are believed to be the main reason why Facebook's global website has been blocked in China for the last five years.

The power of social media in a global age

Despite all the speculation regarding this speech, it is an undeniable fact that online social media has a defining influence in today's world. In November 2014, China hosted an internet conference in Wuzhen, a historical town located about halfway between Shanghai and Hangzhou, and the headquarters of e-commerce juggernaut Alibaba. Media including [CNN](#) reported that Chinese officials punched a hole in the "Great Firewall" for the inaugural World Internet Conference, allowing more than 1,000 attendees to access parts of the internet that are off limits to the 1.3 billion Chinese people. The concession underlines the dilemma facing non-Chinese tech firms as they try to reconcile the country's enormous potential with its heavy-handed approach to censorship and market access. [The conference drew the ire of Amnesty International](#), which said China's internet model is one of "extreme control and suppression." [William Nee, a researcher at the human rights group, told CNN](#): "China appears eager to promote its own domestic internet rules as a model for global regulation, this should send a chill down the spine of anyone that values online freedom."

Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells argues that the internet has become "[the fabric of our lives](#)", and amounts to a form of power in the information age based on the management of communication networks, profoundly changing political processes and social movements, for instance the misinformation of the American public on the Iraq War, the control of information in China and Russia and internet-based political campaigns. If conscious communication is the distinctive feature of humans, it is logical that it is in this realm that society has been most profoundly modified. As China's new generation of "[digital natives](#)" grow up with more choices and connections to the outside world, they are well adapted into this world of technologies despite the official bans of certain sites. It remains to be seen what they will make of the new era of social networks and how Facebook may change, or adapt to, the existing free speech landscape.

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