Glasnost! Nine ways Facebook can make itself a better forum for free speech and democracy

Free Speech Debate co-authors an Oxford-Stanford report on Facebook.

Read our Oxford-Stanford report on Facebook, free speech and democracy **here**.

With a network of 2.2 billion active monthly users, Facebook has found itself at the centre of public discussion over the impact of technology and social media on democracy, particularly in relation to free speech. Recent controversies surrounding Facebook's role in political events such as the US-Presidential elections of 2016 and inter-ethnic violence in Myanmar have led to increasing public distrust and calls for systematic regulation and transparency over the platform's activities. Indeed, governmental regulation has already been introduced through Germany's NetzDG (commonly known as the 'Facebook Law') and the EU's General Data Protection Regulation. In response, Facebook has cautiously entered an era of 'glasnost', inviting academics, journalists, policy-makers and civil society activists to investigate its operations, understand how the platform operates and provide suggestions to develop much-needed forms of self-regulation and governance.

Responding to this 'glasnost', the director of Free Speech Debate, Professor Timothy Garton Ash, has collaborated with researchers at the University of Oxford and Stanford University, Robert Gorwa and Danaë Metaxa, to produce a report outlining how Facebook can make itself a better forum for free speech and democracy. The report focuses on three main areas of Facebook's operation: its 'content policy', ie the mechanisms by which rules surrounding speech are developed and implemented, the 'News feed', ie the algorithms which mediate information to its users, and its 'Goverance', ie the internal structures of the corporation and its accountability to users. Assessing the measures Facebook has already taken to address these issues, the report outlines nine ways in which the platform could incrementally improve itself:

1. Tighten Community Standard wording on hate speech
2. Hire more and contextually expert content reviewers
3. Increase 'decisional transparency'
4. Expand and improve the appeals process
5. Provide meaningful News Feed controls for users
6. Expand context and fact checking facilities
7. Establish regular auditing mechanisms
8. Create an external content policy advisory group
9. Establish an external appeals body

This Oxford-Stanford report has been prepared by the Dahrendorf Programme for the Study of Freedom, St. Antony's College, Oxford, in partnership with the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, the Project on Democracy and the Internet, Stanford University, and the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

Professor Timothy Garton Ash is Professor of European Studies at the University of Oxford, Isaiah Berlin Professorial Fellow a St Antony's College, Oxford, and a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. Robert Gorwa is a DPhil candidate in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Oxford. Danaë Metaxa is a PhD candidate in Computer Science and McCoy Center for Ethics in Society fellow at Stanford University.

Published on:January 17, 2019