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Keynote Address

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Articles

*Symposium
Cybersecurity, Fake News & Policy:
Dis- and Mis-Information*

Keynote Address
University of California Hastings
College of the Law
February 23, 2018

JUSTINE ISOLA*

Good morning. Thank you so much for inviting me. Today's program sounds really exciting and topical. It's really my privilege to help kick things off. As Alex said, I'm a public policy manager at Facebook. I'm on our product policy team, which is the team that's responsible for developing rules for how people can use Facebook. This includes our policies for what speech is and isn't allowed on the platform, ads policies, platform policies, and so on.

These policies cover everything from bullying and harassment to extremist content and hate speech. My team also advises product teams directly as they are developing policies that are specific to product experiences. I specifically work with our Newsfeed team, which is obviously a big central part of the Facebook experience. I'm honored to be here today to share a little bit more about how Facebook is thinking about news and the broader digital information ecosystem.

At the end of this past January, we announced that we have 2.2 billion monthly active users on Facebook. I think what a lot of people don't always know is that more than 85% of those people are outside of the U.S. It's something we really think about as we're developing policies

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and products is that global community. People are using Facebook to communicate across cultures and countries and in dozens of languages. This means our greatest challenges as a company like countering terrorism, improving authenticity on the platform, rooting out hate, are truly global, so too are our greatest opportunities.

People use Facebook to exchange ideas, build friendships, raise money for causes they care about, connect with organizations, and collaborate in ways that weren't previously possible. Something that's been really meaningful to me as I've been at the company now for two years is seeing the diversity of ways in which people use the platform. I'm someone who tends just to share very basic photos of my friends, but hearing that people raised \$50 million in the last year through fundraisers on Facebook is really meaningful. It really speaks to how this technology is changing lives.

The strength of this community depends on authentic communication. It's important that people know who they are connecting with and can hold each other accountable. This is true of all activity on Facebook, whether it's distribution of news content, conversations between friends, or any connections that advertisers are building with their target audiences. Authenticity is and always has been the cornerstone of our community. It's one of the values that drives what you see in Newsfeed.

We regularly survey people on Facebook, and one of the things we hear time and time again is the importance of authentic stories. People are most interested in stories that are genuine, not misleading, sensational, or spammy. We take authenticity into account when ranking content in Newsfeed. For example, one of the ways we do this is categorizing Facebook pages to identify whether or not they're posting spam or trying to game the system by doing things like asking for likes or comments or shares.

Another way we know a page may not be authentic is if the posts it shares are regularly being hidden by people to signal to us. We'll use posts from these kinds of pages to train models to help us determine the authenticity of posts that are shared on Facebook.

This year we've announced a couple of ways in which we're going further. In addition to authentic content, we are going to be prioritizing news from publications our community rates as trustworthy, news that people find informative, and news relevant to people's local communities. I'll take these each quickly, one at a time.

With regard to trustworthy content, we struggled with how to determine what news sources are trusted broadly across a world where there's so much division and difference of opinion. We thought about making the decision ourselves, but that's not something we are

comfortable doing. We know it's not something people really want us to do. We also considered asking outside experts. That would take the decision out of our hands but it wouldn't ensure objectivity. Obviously, experts also have their own biases and perspectives.

Ultimately, we decided to look to our community to help us determine the trustworthiness of news sources. I'm glad to speak more to this in the Q&A. The way we go about understanding what people find informative is similar. We talked to people and asked them how we can improve what they see when they use Facebook. This is something we call our Feed Quality Program. This includes global crowdsourced surveys of tens of thousands of people a day, as well as people who answer more detailed questions about what they like seeing in their news feeds.

We asked people through this program to rate their experience on a scale of one to five. One is really not informative content they're seeing, and five is really informative. Generally, we found people find stories informative if they're related to their interests, if they engage people in broader discussions, and if they contain news about the world around them.

This could be anything from recipes to local news to news about global current events. Then this information feeds our models and helps us predict what other people might find informative. The third priority for this year is local news.

One of the things our CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, has talked about as he reflected on some of the conversations he had over the past year, largely traveling around the US, is the frequency with which people told him that there's far more that unites us than divides us. People told Mark that if we could turn down the temperature on the more divisive issues and instead focus on concrete local issues, we'd make more progress together as a society. In News Feed, we're going to be showing more stories from new sources in people's local towns and communities.

I've touched on the kind of news that we're really aiming to promote but we also know social media helps us spread information faster than ever before, which presents new challenges. When information is sensational or false, we know social media can exacerbate and amplify misinformation. We don't take this lightly. We want to promote information integrity and contribute to a healthy digital ecosystem.

But we have to be careful in how we approach this problem and the solutions we arrive at. There's not always a clear line between hoax, satire, and opinion. Some examples here, very basic. If someone says, "the minister is corrupt." Is that, that person's opinion? Is that a statement based on fact? They've done research. Is it a joke offhand comment? Another one is that statement, "climate change is a myth." Is

that a hoax? Is that an opinion? We have researchers who, obviously, disagree on the nuances of what's happening with our climate.

How do you establish the definitive facts? When it comes to the veracity of content, we at Facebook don't have policies in place that require people to tell the truth. It's something we feel we can't do reliably in specific cases and certainly not at scale, when we think about the two-plus billion people making claims every day on the platform. Even if we could, we know that there are significant valid concerns about a private company being the arbiter of truth.

We also recognize there's no silver bullet solution when it comes to false and inaccurate information. We're working to build a more informed community, both by promoting the good, so those trustworthy informative local principles I spoke to, and by focusing on four different strategies to address the bad, the misinformation out there. I'll just go through these quickly. They are strengthening enforcement of our authenticity policies, finding cross-industry, cross-society solutions, disrupting the economic incentives to share false news, and my favorite, which is building new products.

On strengthening the enforcement of our authenticity policies, this really builds on the work that I just referenced. We're investing very heavily in new technology and also hiring thousands more people to tackle issues like inauthenticity on the platform. What we've seen is that fake accounts are often associated with sharing false news and we think this is an area where we can really have impact, curbing the spread of false news. On collaborating with others to find industry solutions and sort of all of society's solutions. This is really important especially when we think about this problem at a global scale.

Danah Boyd, who is the founder of Data & Society and a principal researcher at Microsoft, has said, "We need everyone including companies to be focused on grappling with the underlying dynamics that are mirrored and magnified by technology." Danah is right. All of us—tech companies, media companies, newsrooms, classrooms—really do need to work together to find these industry society solutions to strengthen the online news ecosystem and also our own digital literacy. That's why we're really trying to collaborate with others in this space.

Two things we've done here. One, a year ago we announced the Facebook Journalism Project, which is an initiative that seeks to establish stronger ties between Facebook and the news industry. That project is focused on developing news products, providing training and tools for journalists. We are also working with publishers and educators on how we can equip people to have the knowledge they need to be informed readers in the digital age. We have met with more than 2600 publishers

around the world to better understand how they use our products and how we can make improvements to better support their needs.

The third part of our four-pronged new strategy is disrupting economic incentives. When it comes to fighting false news, we've found a lot of it is financially motivated. One of the most effective approaches is removing those economic incentives for people who traffic inaccurate information. We've done things like block ads from pages that repeatedly share false news. Also, significantly, we've limited the distribution of web pages that deliver low-quality web experiences. I can go into the details on what that involves in Q&A if people are curious.

On new products, we believe it's important to amplify the good effects of social media and mitigate the bad. This is the best way to contribute to the diversity of ideas, information, viewpoints, while also strengthening a common understanding. Two of the products we've launched. One, a third-party fact checking tool. I think this has gotten a lot of press. I think people have heard about this, I hope. The motivation here is that giving people more context can help them decide what to trust and what to share.

The program we've developed uses reports from people on Facebook, from our community, and other signals to send stories to independent third-party fact checkers. If those fact checkers write articles providing more information, like a debunking article, you'll see that in your news feed under the original article. Stories that our fact checking partners have rated false will also appear lower in news feeds so they get less distribution, reducing the chance you'll see this content and reducing the spread of the viral hoaxes.

What we found in our own internal analysis is that a false rating from one of our fact checking partners reduces future impressions on Facebook of that article by eighty percent. One other product I'll mention briefly that we're testing is called Article Context. This is another way of giving people more information about the material they're reading on Facebook. Since we launched this test, some of the articles that you see in News Feed will feature a little icon that allows you to access more information at the top of a button.

The information we surface is pulled from across the internet and includes things like the publisher's Wikipedia entry, so what's said about the publisher on Wikipedia, related articles about the topic, and also information about how that article is being shared on Facebook. In some cases where information is not available, there is no Wikipedia page, we also make that clear because that can be a helpful context that maybe a publisher is new, we don't know their reputation yet.

This is an important time at Facebook. It's an important time for our society. I think many of us are reflecting on how we can have the most positive impact.

Last year Facebook announced a new mission, "give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together." Bringing the world closer together depends in large part on building an informed community. We've made significant progress in this arena and we also know there's a lot more work to do. We're committed to improving not just through partnerships or tools, but also in the way we communicate about our choices and the changes we're making. That's why I'm so glad to be here today to share with you what we're doing and also to hear feedback from you and how we might continue to improve. Thank you so much, again, for having me.