

Facebook Censorship and the War on Free Speech



[Associated Press](#)

[by John Hayward](#)

Free speech is under assault — not only in repressive dictatorships suddenly able to influence global conversations through the Internet, but across the Western world, and even in the American bastion of free expression. Absolute protection for speech as an inalienable right has given way to bitter squabbling over how much free expression should be sacrificed for various, ostensibly noble goals, and who the censors will be.

Writing at the [Gatestone Institute](#), British journalist Douglas Murray looked at Facebook as a battleground in the war on free speech Friday, recalling a recent case in which the social media giant was “forced to back down [when caught](#) permitting anti-Israel postings, but censoring equivalent anti-Palestinian postings.”

To this, Murray adds the disturbing September incident in which German chancellor Angela Merkel was caught on an open mike, asking Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg if he would help suppress “anti-immigration” postings... and he replied that he was already working on it.

It’s clear enough that Merkel and the rest of her government believe the best way to handle the insane migrant disaster they’ve unleashed upon Europe is to forbid their citizens from complaining about it.

It’s also clear that Merkel, and every other censor around the world, can usually get Internet providers to play ball, either through ideological sympathy or intimidation. (Russia seems especially eager to play China’s

game of telling social media titans they need to either [get with the government program](#) or find themselves locked out of huge authoritarian markets.)

The ensuing months have given us an idea of what Zuckerberg told Merkel his company was working on, as described by Murray:

Last month, Facebook launched what it called an “[Initiative for civil courage online](#),” the aim of which, it claims, is to remove “hate speech” from Facebook — specifically by removing comments that “promote xenophobia.” Facebook is working with a unit of the publisher Bertelsmann, which aims to identify and then erase “racist” posts from the site. The work is intended particularly to focus on Facebook users in Germany.

At the launch of the new initiative, Facebook’s chief operating officer, Sheryl Sandberg, explained that, “Hate speech has no place in our society — not even on the internet.” She went to say that, “Facebook is not a place for the dissemination of hate speech or incitement to violence.”

Of course, Facebook can do what it likes on its own website. What is troubling is what this organization of effort and muddled thinking reveals about what is going on in Europe.

“The sinister thing about what Facebook is doing is that it is now removing speech that presumably almost everybody might consider racist — along with speech that only someone at Facebook decides is ‘racist,’” Murray writes. “And it just so happens to turn out that, lo and behold, this idea of ‘racist’ speech appears to include anything critical of the EU’s current catastrophic immigration policy.”

That would come as no surprise, and no great cause for concern, to American campus activists. The sacrifice of free speech *inexorably* slides into acceptance of totalitarianism, which doesn't just mean iron-fisted goose-stepping dictatorship.

Totalitarianism is the politicization and control of every aspect of life. It can easily be sugar-coated and sold with high-minded language. When it begins slipping in more sinister directions, the supporters of "benevolent totalitarianism" are willing to forgive its appetites, because they don't want to surrender their sense of idealism... and they really don't mind if people they *loathe* are oppressed.

Frankly, they think oppression against designated villain groups is impossible. They would laugh out loud at the notion that a "racist, xenophobic" purveyor of "hate speech" — with "privilege" dripping from his every pore — could complain about being oppressed. If those people comprise majority opinion, as the opponents of Merkel's migrant policies do... well, that's just proof society is dominated by mouth-breathers who must be tamed through the power of the State and its willing, enlightened partners. Social-media CEOs, for example.

What Murray describes at Facebook is but one example of a new mindset taking shape across the Western world — a view of free expression as a *liability*, a toxic agent of chaos to be contained. Countless stories from the last few years show us that free speech is now *negotiable*, and the negotiations take place along Marxist class-consciousness lines.

Designated victims must be protected from ideas that would hurt their feelings. The cost in liberty to "privileged" oppressors is a small price to pay.

Citizens must learn to weigh their words very carefully. That's a way of teaching them to weigh their very *thoughts* carefully, internally policing themselves, lest external social-justice police have to be called in. We are told to accept this new, constrained view of free expression because only "bad" thoughts will be suppressed, but as Murray demonstrates, the

definition of bad-thought becomes elastic very quickly, and the ability to write those definitions is a source of incredible power.

The new twist on this grim old formula is the rise of computerized communication, which makes it possible for ordinary people to share their thoughts as never before... but also gives a few corporate titans unprecedented power to both censor our communications, and conceal the censorship. Automated “hate speech” suppression systems keep human fingerprints off censorship decisions. Some of the most insidious social media censorship systems keep the targeted user from realizing he has been censored – he still sees his own post, but has no idea the system is hiding it from the outside world.

Murray warns that free speech provides a vital release for tensions, which can explode into violent unrest more easily in the “pressure cooker” created by censorship. As he puts it, looking back at the horrific experience of Germany between the World Wars, tensions rise when signals are sent to angry citizens that “the time for talking is over.”

A fair warning... and yet, the experience of the past decade suggests that totalitarians are getting better at controlling unruly populations. At the dawn of the Obama presidency, during Iran’s Green Revolution, there was euphoric speculation that the Internet would represent an evolutionary leap for freedom, the next step beyond the fax machines of China’s Tienanmen Square uprising, making totalitarianism all but impossible.

The opposite seems to have happened, as both Tienanmen Square and the Green Revolution were put down, and governments across the ideological spectrum have found the Internet a deep sea in which dissent can be drowned – more useful for organizing Social Justice Warrior mobs of vigilante speech police than for challenging the established order.

We are all totalitarians now. Anyone bothered by that reality had better speak up, loudly enough to be heard by billionaire CEOs, while they still can.

Read More Stories About:

[Tech](#), [Angela Merkel](#), [Censorship](#), [facebook](#), [free speech](#), [Mark Zuckerberg](#), [Social Media](#)