**What’s Behind Meta’s Makeover Ahead of Trump’s Second Term?**

* Kevin Roose, *The New York Times*, Jan. 8, 2025

For years, Mark Zuckerberg tried to keep his social networks above the fray of partisan politics.

And why not? Meta’s flagship apps — Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp — were rowdy nation-states unto themselves, with billions of users, fragile internal politics, skittish advertisers, perpetually aggrieved influencers and a sprawling, uneven enforcement regime (known as “content moderation”) that was supposed to keep the peace.

Given the headaches associated with running his quasi-governments, the last thing Mr. Zuckerberg wanted was to become too enmeshed with *actual* governments — the kind that could use the force of law to demand that he censor certain voices, thumb the scale on politically sensitive topics or threaten to throw Meta executives in jail for noncompliance.

But that was then. Now, on the eve of a second Trump term, Mr. Zuckerberg is giving his company a full MAGA makeover.

In the process, he is also revealing that Meta — a shape-shifting company that has thrown itself at every major tech trend of the last decade, from crypto to the metaverse to generative A.I. to wearable computing — has a fundamental hollowness at its core. It is not quite sure what it is, or where its next phase of growth will come from. But in the meantime, it will adopt whatever values Mr. Zuckerberg thinks it needs to survive.

The most recent changes started before the election, when Mr. Zuckerberg — whose contributions to election integrity efforts in 2020 had led President Donald J. Trump to [threaten him with lifetime imprisonment](https://www.politico.com/news/2024/08/28/trump-zuckerberg-election-book-00176639) — called [Mr. Trump’s recovery](https://fortune.com/2024/07/19/mark-zuckerberg-donald-trump-badass/) from an assassination attempt “badass.” But they have accelerated in recent weeks, after Mr. Trump and Mr. Zuckerberg [met at Mar-a-Lago](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/27/us/politics/mark-zuckerberg-trump-meeting.html) to mend fences.

Last week, Meta’s global policy chief, Nick Clegg — a former British deputy prime minister who was chosen for his centrist bona fides — was replaced by Joel Kaplan, a [longtime Republican operative](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/07/business/joel-kaplan-meta.html) who has acted for years as Mr. Zuckerberg’s liaison to the pro-Trump right.

On Monday, Meta announced the appointment of [three new board members](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/06/technology/dana-white-meta-board-ufc.html), including Dana White, the chief executive of the Ultimate Fighting Championship and a close friend and political ally of Mr. Trump’s.

And on Tuesday, Mr. Zuckerberg — wearing a [$900,000 wristwatch](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-01-07/zuckerberg-wears-900k-watch-to-announce-end-of-meta-fact-checks) and an air of strained enthusiasm — announced in an Instagram Reel that Meta was [replacing its fact-checking program](https://www.nytimes.com/live/2025/01/07/business/meta-fact-checking) with an X-style “community notes” feature. The company is also revising its rules to allow more criticism of certain groups, including immigrants and [transgender people](https://www.nytimes.com/live/2025/01/07/business/meta-fact-checking#meta-lgbtq-hate-speech), letting users see more “civic content” in their feeds and moving its content review operations from California to Texas to avoid, he said, the appearance of political bias.

Mr. Zuckerberg’s stated reason for these changes — that Meta had realized that its old rules had resulted in too much censorship and that it should return to its roots as a platform for free expression — was nonsense. (For starters: Which roots? Facebook was inspired by a hot-or-not website for Harvard students, not a Cato Institute white paper.)

In reality, Mr. Zuckerberg changed his views on speech many times, [usually in the direction](https://www.nytimes.com/live/2025/01/07/business/meta-fact-checking/mark-zuckerbergs-history-of-moving-meta-toward-where-the-political-wind-blows?smid=url-share) of the prevailing political winds. And the details of the latest changes (a laundry list of right-wing speech demands) as well as the method of delivery (Mr. Kaplan [went on “Fox & Friends”](https://www.foxnews.com/video/6366768224112) to announce them) made it clear what the real purpose was.

The most popular theory about Mr. Zuckerberg’s motives is that he is just doing the politically expedient thing: cozying up to the incoming Trump administration, the way [many Silicon Valley tycoons have](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/07/technology/trump-tech-ceos.html), in hopes of getting better deals for himself and Meta while Mr. Trump is in office.

A different theory — one supported by conversations I’ve had with several friends and associates of Mr. Zuckerberg’s in recent months — is that the billionaire’s personal politics have shifted sharply to the right since 2020, and that his embrace of Mr. Trump may stem less from cynical opportunism than real enthusiasm.

I can’t prove or disprove this theory. Mr. Zuckerberg, unlike Elon Musk, doesn’t broadcast his unfiltered political opinions dozens of times a day. But I find it plausible. I’ve spent a lot of time studying the right-wing conversion narratives of disaffected liberals, and Mr. Zuckerberg’s recent arc fills the bill surprisingly well: A wealthy 40-year-old man with a sullied public reputation starts listening to [Joe Rogan](https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/26/tech/mark-zuckerberg-joe-rogan-interview/index.html) and develops an interest in mixed martial arts and other hypermasculine hobbies, grows annoyed by the woke left and angry at the mainstream media, [rebrands himself](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/07/business/mark-zuckerberg-meta-free-speech.html) as a bad boy, and [adopts the label](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/24/technology/mark-zuckerberg-trump-politics.html) of a “classical liberal” while quietly supporting most of the tenets of MAGA conservatism.

If nothing else, Mr. Zuckerberg has clearly been studying Mr. Musk’s playbook. In his video this week announcing Meta’s changes, he spoke with dripping disdain about the “legacy media” — a favored phrase of Mr. Musk’s — and accused his California-based employees of political bias, as Mr. Musk did when he took over Twitter.

Whatever the cause, these changes amount to Meta’s biggest political realignment since 2016, when it responded to rampant misinformation on Facebook and widespread criticism over its role in Mr. Trump’s election by revamping its rules and investing billions of dollars in content moderation.

The list of people hurt by Meta’s new rules may be long: immigrants, transgender people, victims of online bullying and harassment, the targets of future QAnon-style conspiracy theories, and Facebook and Instagram users who want to see reliable information when they log on.

But the most unexpected casualty may be Mr. Zuckerberg himself, who has always strained to avoid being painted into a corner by political pressure, and will now (at least for the next four years, or until the winds shift again) be judged by his willingness to [surrender to the right](https://www.platformer.news/meta-fact-checking-free-speech-surrender/) on issues of speech.

He may find that his new allies on the right make more censorship demands of him, and are less forgiving of his mistakes, than the left ever was. (Already, some right-wing media outlets are urging Mr. Trump and his allies [not to trust Mr. Zuckerberg’s change of heart](https://nypost.com/2025/01/05/opinion/dont-fall-for-the-censorship-industrial-complexs-superficial-makeover/).) And the benefits he envisions from cozying up to Mr. Trump may not materialize as fully as he hopes. (One complicating factor: Mr. Musk, the president-elect’s top technology adviser, is [no fan of his](https://www.cnbc.com/2018/03/26/tesla-ceo-elon-musk-tweets-why-he-doesnt-like-facebook.html).)

Meta’s real problem, though, is that the company still doesn’t know what it is. Is it a purveyor of aging (though still profitable) social media apps? A champion of [open-source A.I. development](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/29/technology/mark-zuckerberg-meta-ai.html)? A creator of next-generation [augmented-reality hardware](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/25/technology/meta-products-artificial-intelligence.html)? A way for people to connect with their families and friends? A TikTok-style algorithmic feed, filled with a mix of professional influencers and [A.I. slop](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/11/style/ai-search-slop.html)? A builder of immersive virtual worlds? Some other, weirder thing?

A political reset might buy Mr. Zuckerberg some time to answer these questions. But in order for Meta to thrive beyond the Trump years, he’ll have to do more than bend the knee.