

Facebook civil rights audit: 'Serious setbacks' mar progress

July 8 2020, by Barbara Ortutay



In this Sept. 5, 2018, file photo, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg testifies before the Senate Intelligence Committee hearing on "Foreign Influence Operations and Their Use of Social Media Platforms," on Capitol Hill in Washington. Sandberg and Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg met with civil rights leaders Tuesday, July 7, 2020, including the organizers of a widespread advertising boycott of the social network over hate speech on its platform, in an effort to convince critics that it is doing everything it can to rid its service of hate, abuse and misinformation. (AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana, File)

A two-year audit of Facebook's civil rights record found "serious setbacks" that have marred the social network's progress on matters such as hate speech, misinformation and bias.

Facebook hired the [audit](#)'s leader, former American Civil Liberties Union executive Laura Murphy, in May 2018 to assess its performance on vital social issues. Its 100-page report released Wednesday outlines a "seesaw of progress and setbacks" at the company on everything from bias in Facebook's algorithms to its content moderation, advertising practices and treatment of voter suppression.

The audit recommends that Facebook build a "civil rights infrastructure" into every aspect of the company, as well as a "stronger interpretation" of existing voter suppression policies and more concrete action on algorithmic bias. Those suggestions are not binding, and there is no formal system in place to hold Facebook accountable for any of the audit's findings.

"While the audit process has been meaningful, and has led to some significant improvements in the platform, we have also watched the company make painful decisions over the last nine months with real world consequences that are serious setbacks for civil rights," the audit report states.



In this Jan. 13, 2015, file photo, Laura Murphy, director, ACLU Legislative Office, speaks at the President's Task Force on 21 Century Policing at the Newseum in Washington. A two-year audit of Facebook's civil rights record found "serious setbacks" that have marred the social network's progress on matters such as hate speech, misinformation and bias. Facebook hired the audit's leader, former American Civil Liberties Union executive Laura Murphy, in May 2018 to assess its performance on vital social issues. Its 100-page report released

Wednesday outlines a "seesaw of progress and setbacks" at the company on everything from bias in Facebook's algorithms to its content moderation, advertising practices and treatment of voter suppression. (AP Photo/Cliff Owen, File)

Those include Facebook's decision to exempt politicians from fact-checking, even when President Donald Trump posted false information about voting by mail. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has cited a commitment to [free speech](#) as a reason for allowing such posts to remain on the platform, even though the company has rules in place against voter suppression it could have used to take down—or at least add warning labels to—Trump's posts.

Last month, Facebook announced it would begin labeling rule-breaking posts—even from politicians—going forward. But it is not clear if Trump's previous controversial posts would have gotten the alert. The problem, critics have long said, is not so much about Facebook's rules as how it enforces them.

"When you elevate free expression as your highest value, other values take a back seat," Murphy told The Associated Press. The politician exemption, she said, "elevates the speech of people who are already powerful and disadvantages people who are not."



In this Oct. 25, 2019, file photo, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg speaks at the Paley Center in New York. Zuckerberg and Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg met with civil rights leaders Tuesday, July 7, 2020, including the organizers of a widespread advertising boycott of the social network over hate speech on its platform, in an effort to convince critics that it is doing everything it can to rid its service of hate, abuse and misinformation. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan)



In this Thursday, Dec. 12, 2019, file photo, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People President Derrick Johnson faces reporters during a news conference in Boston. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg and Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg met with civil rights leaders, Tuesday, July 7, 2020, including the organizers of a widespread advertising boycott of the social network over hate speech on its platform. Johnson, who was present on the Zoom meeting, said Facebook's executives only delivered cheap talk, filled with little commitment to new rules or actions that would curb racism and misinformation. (AP Photo/Steven Senne, File)

More than 900 companies have joined an advertising boycott of Facebook to protest its handling of [hate speech](#) and misinformation.

Civil rights leaders who met virtually with Zuckerberg and other

Facebook leaders Tuesday expressed skepticism that recommendations from the audit would ever be implemented, noting that past suggestions in previous reports had gone overlooked.

"What we get is recommendations that they end up not implementing," said Rashad Robinson, the executive director of Color for Change, one of several civil rights nonprofits leading an organized boycott of Facebook advertising.

Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's [chief operating officer](#), said in a Facebook newsroom post that the company has a long way to go, but is making progress.

"This audit has been a deep analysis of how we can strengthen and advance [civil rights](#) at every level of our company—but it is the beginning of the journey, not the end," she wrote. "What has become increasingly clear is that we have a long way to go. As hard as it has been to have our shortcomings exposed by experts, it has undoubtedly been a really important process for our [company](#)."

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