

Facebook is out of control. If it were a country it would be North Korea

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If the combined might of brands like Unilever and Coca-Cola don't scare Mark Zuckerberg, who can hold the social media platform to account?

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▲ Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg. Photograph: Drew Angerer/Getty Images

There is no power on this earth that is capable of holding Facebook to account. No legislature, no law enforcement agency, no regulator. Congress has failed. The EU has failed. When the Federal Trade Commission fined it a record \$5bn for its role in the Cambridge Analytica scandal, its stock price actually went up.

Which is what makes this moment so interesting and, possibly, epochal. If the boycott of Facebook by some of the world's biggest brands - Unilever, Coca-Cola, Starbucks - succeeds, it will be because it has targeted the only thing that Facebook understands: its bottom line. And if it fails, that will be another sort of landmark.

Because this is a company that **facilitated an attack on a US election by a foreign power**, that **live-streamed a massacre then broadcast it to millions** around the world, and **helped incite a genocide**.

I'll say that again. It helped incite a genocide. A United Nations report says the use of Facebook played a **"determining role"** in inciting hate and violence against Myanmar's Rohingya, which has seen tens of thousands die and hundreds of thousands flee for their lives.

Facebook is not a mirror. It's a gun. Unlicensed, out of control, in the hands of 2.6 billion people across the planet

I often think about that report. When I watch documentaries showing Facebook employees playing ping-pong inside their Menlo Park safe space. When I took a jaunt to the suburban Silicon Valley town earlier this year and strolled down the "normal" street where Mark Zuckerberg lives his totally normal life as the sole decision-maker in a company the like of which the world has never seen before. When I heard that **Maria Ressa, the Filipino journalist who has done so much to warn of Facebook's harms**, had been sentenced to jail. When I read the Orwellian defence that our former deputy prime minister **Nick Clegg wrote last week**. **"Platforms like Facebook hold a mirror up to society," he said.**

Facebook is not a mirror. It's a gun. Unlicensed - it is not subject to laws or control - it is in the hands and homes of 2.6 billion people, infiltrated by covert agents acting for nation states, a laboratory for groups who praise the cleansing effects of the Holocaust and believe 5G will fry our brainwaves in our sleep.

People sometimes say that if Facebook was a country, it would be bigger than China. But this is the wrong analogy. If Facebook was a country, it would be a rogue state. It would be North Korea. And it isn't a gun. It's a nuclear weapon.

Because this isn't a company so much as an autocracy, a dictatorship, a global empire controlled by a single man. Who - even as the evidence of harm has become undeniable, indisputable, overwhelming - has simply chosen to ignore its critics across the world.

Instead, it has continued to **pump out relentless, unbelievable, increasingly preposterous propaganda** even as it controls the main news distribution channels. And just as the citizens of North Korea are unable to operate outside the state, it feels almost impossible to be alive today and live a life untouched by Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram.

The #StopHateForProfit campaign is focused on hate speech. It's what has united six American civil rights organisations in the US to lobby advertisers to "pause" their ads for July, a campaign precipitated by Facebook's decision not to remove a post by Donald Trump threatening violence against Black Lives Matter protesters: "When the looting starts, the shooting starts."

But this is so much bigger than Facebook's problem with hate. And it goes far far beyond the US, though the role it will play in the US election is pivotal (and it's worth noting that #StopHateForProfit's demands don't extend to stopping lies in political ads, a crucial necessity). Facebook's harms are global. Its threat to democracy is existential.

Is it a coincidence that the three countries that have dealt with coronavirus worst are those with populist leaders whose campaigns exploited Facebook's ability to spread lies at scale? Trump, Bolsonaro, Johnson. Perhaps. Perhaps not.



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And if you don't care about democracy, think for a moment about coronavirus. If and when a vaccine comes along, will enough people want to have it?

Facebook is riddled with anti-vaxxing like it's infected by antisemitism. If that's a mirror, Nick, you might want to take a long, cold, hard look in it.

Zuckerberg is not Kim Jong-un. He's much, much more powerful. "My guess is that all these advertisers will be back on the platform soon enough," he is reported to have told employees last week. And although 500 companies have now joined the boycott, the *Wall Street Journal* reports this represents only a 5% dip in profits. It may turn out that Facebook isn't just bigger than China. It's bigger than capitalism.

It comes, in the end, down to us and our wallets and what we say to these brands. Because the world has to realise that there's no one and no thing coming to the rescue. Trump and Zuckerberg have formed an unspoken, almost certainly unstated, strategic alliance. Only the US has the power to clip Facebook's wings. And only Facebook has the power to stop Trump spreading lies.

Sometimes you don't realise the pivotal moments in history until it's too late. And sometimes you do. It's not quite yet too late. Just almost.