

Meetup.com's Refreshing Astroturf Admission

Popular social-networking companies have long fallen under suspicion of liberal bias, most notably in the managing of their public content. Until this past election, most of the evidence had been anecdotal, with prominent conservatives and conservative institutions describing limited social-media exposure, and a seeming lack of interest in dealing with over-the-top harassment (including death threats) when conservative users are the target.



Last May, however, the website Gizmodo gave credence to the accusations with an attention-grabbing report of Facebook employees being instructed to suppress stories and messaging that were of interest to conservatives, while artificially bolstering the reach of other stories.

“In other words,” Gizmodo’s Michael Nunez wrote, “Facebook’s news section operates like a traditional newsroom, reflecting the biases of its workers and the institutional imperatives of the corporation.”

Twitter has faced similar claims of conservative suppression and the selective addressing of politically-charged online abusers.

Both companies have denied charges of operational biases. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg went a step further, launching an internal probe into the matter, and meeting with notably conservative commentators to address their concerns.

It was a smart public relations move by Zuckerberg, but it's important to understand that Facebook (along with every other social media outlet) isn't obligated by legal or even ethical standards to be politically fair or balanced. As Clay Calvert wrote in a piece for *Fortune*, they are business operations "first and foremost," driven by numbers and "not from serving some larger or more noble greater good".

"Were we really so naïve as to think that Facebook was somehow miraculously a bias-free news source?" Calvert asks.

He's right. Social networking services aren't bound by the journalistic standards that we should expect or demand from legitimate news organizations. They can be as biased as they want, and if users don't like it, they don't have to keep using those services. If advertisement revenue suffers from fewer users, then it will be in the best interest of these companies to change their ways.

Another popular social-networking site, *Meetup*, took a unique position on this topic earlier this week. The company came right out and actually *admitted* its political bias.

In an email sent out to all of its users, Meetup (which is privately owned) officially announced its endorsement and active support of the #Resist movement, which is committed to opposing President Donald Trump and his perceived agenda:

Meetup has always served as an organizing platform for a wide range of political views, welcoming everyone from the Howard Deaniacs to the Tea Party. Meetup will always welcome people with different beliefs.

But after the recent executive order aimed to block people on the basis of nationality and religion, a line was crossed. At a time when core democratic ideals feel under attack, we feel a duty to spark more civic participation.

Last week, we created 1,000+ #Resist Meetup Groups to act as

local hubs for actions on behalf of democracy, equality, human rights, social justice, and sustainability. Already 50,000+ people have joined.

These #Resist Meetups are open to anyone who want to create a bright future that's rich with opportunity and freedom for all.

Meetup exists to connect people so they create opportunity and make the world they want. We hope members take these Meetups forward to be powerful together.

This goes well beyond simple bias. This is sheer political activism. Meetup is not only supporting and facilitating political opposition to our president. It's taking an openly active role in *organizing and promoting* that opposition.

Normally, such involvement would be considered *astroturfing* – the practice of organizations masking their sponsorship of supposed grassroots groups. But in this case, that sponsorship is open and unapologetic. This takes some guts, being that the company runs the risk of alienating the more than 46% of American voters (and potential customers) that supported Trump in the November election.

This may well turn out to be a very dumb business move by Meetup, but at least the company isn't concealing its operational bias. Its taking ownership of that bias and letting consumers serve as its judge, jury, and possible executioners.

Imagine if news organizations and were so transparent.

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