

Hey, Mark Zuckerberg: My Democracy Isn't Your Laboratory

By STEVAN DOJCINOVIC

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Credit Dale Edwin Murray

BELGRADE, Serbia — My country, Serbia, has become an unwilling laboratory for Facebook's experiments on user behavior — and the independent, nonprofit investigative journalism organization where I am the editor in chief is one of the unfortunate lab rats.

Last month, I noticed that our stories had stopped appearing on Facebook as usual. I was stunned. Our largest single source of traffic, accounting for more than half of our monthly page views, had been crippled.

Surely, I thought, it was a glitch. It wasn't.

Facebook had made a small but devastating change. Posts made by “pages” — including those of organizations like mine — had been removed from the regular News Feed, the default screen users see when they log on to the social media site. They were now segregated into a separate section called Explore Feed that users have to select before they can see our stories. (Unsurprisingly, this didn’t apply to paid posts.)

It wasn’t just in Serbia that Facebook decided to try this experiment with keeping pages off the News Feed. Other small countries that seldom appear in Western headlines — Guatemala, Slovakia, Bolivia and Cambodia — were also [chosen by Facebook for the trial](#).

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Some tech sites have reported that this feature might eventually be rolled out to Facebook users in the rest of the world, too. But of course no one really has any way of knowing what the social media company is up to. And we don’t have any way to hold it accountable, either, aside from calling it out publicly. Maybe that’s why it has chosen to experiment with this new feature in small countries far removed from the concerns of most Americans.

But for us, changes like this can be disastrous. Attracting viewers to a story relies, above all, on making the process as simple as possible. Even one extra click can make a world of difference. This is an existential threat, not only to my organization and others like it but also to the ability of citizens in all of the countries subject to Facebook’s experimentation to discover the truth about their societies and their leaders.

Serbia is a perfect example of why the political context of Facebook's experimentation matters. Serbia escaped the dictatorship of Slobodan Milosevic in 2000, but [it hasn't developed into a fully functioning democracy](#). One party, led by President Aleksandar Vucic, controls not only the Parliament but also [the whole political system](#). Our country has no tradition of checks and balances. Mr. Vucic now presents himself as progressive and pro-European, but as minister of information in the Milosevic government, he was responsible for censoring news coverage.

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Today, censorship in Serbia takes a softer form. Pliant outlets loyal to the government receive preferential treatment and better funding from local and central budgets. Those that stray out of line find themselves receiving unexpected visits from the tax inspectors.

This isn't an easy place to be an independent journalist. Since 2015, [my investigative nonprofit, KRIK](#), has covered stories the mainstream media won't touch. In return, we have been spied on and threatened, and have had lurid fabrications about our private lives [splashed on the front page of national tabloids](#).

Last year, [KRIK published an investigation](#) showing that when he was a young surgeon, Zlatibor Loncar, who is now minister of health, had been contracted by a gang to kill one of its enemies, according to court testimony by protected witnesses. You'd think the story of a future minister administering poison through an IV would make a splash — but the mainstream outlets ignored it.

Going to KRIK's website is the only way Serbian citizens could learn the truth about that story and many others like it. And until last month, most of our readers went to our site via Facebook.

Facebook allowed us to bypass mainstream channels and bring our stories to hundreds of thousands of readers. But now, even as the social network claims to be cracking down on “fake news,” it is on the verge of ruining us.

That’s why Mark Zuckerberg’s arbitrary experiments are so dangerous. The major TV channels, mainstream newspapers and organized-crime-run outlets will have no trouble buying Facebook ads or finding other ways to reach their audiences. It’s small, alternative organizations like mine that will suffer.

We journalists bear some responsibility for this, too. Using Facebook to reach our readers has always been convenient, so we invested time and effort in building our presence there, helping it become the monster it is today.

But what’s done is done — a private company, accountable to no one, has taken over the world’s media ecosystem. It is now responsible for what happens there. By picking small countries with shaky democratic institutions to be experimental subjects, it is showing a cynical lack of concern for how its decisions affect the most vulnerable.

Now that we’ve seen what Facebook does with its power, we have to figure out how to put it in check. Twitter is Serbia’s second-most-used platform (though [a very distant second](#)). We’ll probably start relying on it more. It may also be time to consider other, [more decentralized platforms](#).

I’ve always been attracted to alternative scenes. In the 1990s, I ran a small, independent punk magazine. Now, as an investigative editor and reporter, I want to get at the stories the big, timid outlets won’t cover. In a country like Serbia,

independent sites like mine, and the few others that survive, are the only places people can learn the truth.

Facebook could be a tool for such alternative spaces to thrive. Instead — at least in Serbia — it risks becoming just another playground for the powerful.