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The Internet of One

By Anne McElvoy

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Abraham Lincoln took under 300 words to deliver the Gettysburg address. Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg deployed just under 6,000 to explain his mission as a defender of globalisation, and mark an official shift in his career plan from tech titan to political aspirant. His company is presented as a symbol of globalised openness, taking responsibility for helping us understand each other – and more: “Developing the social infrastructure for community – for supporting us, for keeping us safe, for informing us, for civic engagement, and for inclusion of all”.

The big question Zuckerberg does not nail in his latest peroration is how vast news platforms driven by clicks, advertising dollars and an appetite for users to have more can credibly be a solution to filter bubbles and the many different facets of fake news. Or to what his fellow digital entrepreneur Eli Pariser dubs the “internet of one”, in which all the bold claims of pluralism boil down to our searches being so customised that balancing or challenging or correcting material gets left out or downplayed.

Still, at least Zuckerberg is having a go at a subject beyond the comfort zone of philanthropic endeavours. And whether or not one warms to the thought of smart-suited east coast elites being replaced on the stump by Silicon Valley sorts in washed-out T-shirts, it is perfectly possible that the next generation of serious political challengers to populism will come from or via media tech companies. They have the money and means of communication to mount a challenge. They will, however, succeed only if they can acquire the self-knowledge and restraint needed to curb egomania – and avoid annoying the electorate even more than the party-machine candidates who are taking a beating in the US and Europe.

Zuckerberg, once a young disciple of Gates, has become a competitor for precedence. Both sponsor philanthropic work centred on illness curing or prevention. But Zuckerberg has more imperial aims and a different approach to politics. Unlike Gates, he wants to be a player, rather than just a shaper of policy outcomes. His commitment that Facebook will “keep us safe” by using more artificial intelligence to tell the difference between people writing about terrorism and potential terrorists, raises more questions than it answers.

Political observers may also be amused by how traditional the playbook is. Zuckerberg’s Christmas Day message and admission that, as a professed atheist, he now believes religion to

be “very important”, looks like good old-fashioned God-bothering to enhance appeal to believers. He also intends to embark on a tour of all the US states, a mission begun by FDR, and ever since garlanded with the aura of presidential ambition.

Our nascent candidate channels inclusivity and openness, but is unconvincing when detailing why Facebook makes questionable calls in what content it does and doesn't allow: “These mistakes are almost never because we hold ideological positions at odds with the community, but instead are operational scaling issues,” Zuckerberg says. Unlikely, that one, to rank as a killer argument.

Businesspeople who enter the political arena need to do something that does not come easily. They need to look at themselves and their creations not just as their fans or shareholders see them, but from the viewpoint of what they threaten – and how that can be changed. A striking omission in Zuckerberg's letter is acknowledgment that the dominance of new media tech platforms is a structural threat to smaller publishers – not just niche ones, but players from the BBC to the Guardian, on both sides of the Atlantic. Traditional campaigners for “media pluralism” focus inordinately on newspapers, and far too little on Facebook, Google and Apple.

Where does public-interest journalism figure in their model and what is their view on how to support it? That will require him and other masters of the tech universe to think anew about how the public discourse is to be enriched and sustained by what they offer. And if the Facebook emperor is to launch into real-life politics, a lesson from the past still holds good: keep the pitch plain and simply said, for the benefit of the mere mortals you might one day need to vote for you.

Anne McElvoy is Senior Editor at *The Economist* and head of *Economist Radio*.