Why Does Facebook Think I'm 'Political'?

By Yoram Hazony, August 28, 2018

The robots at Facebook always send me messages suggesting I "boost my post." This sounds kinky, but it's just Zuckerspeak for buying advertising. I've avoided these offers because I'm no computer genius. For me, high-tech is writing down my password somewhere.

But ads for Yossi Klein Halevi's new book *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor* kept appearing in my feed. I had a book coming out called *The Virtue of Nationalism*, and like a knucklehead I figured that if Yossi could boost his post, so could I.

I pressed "Boost Post." Within days, thousands of people were seeing my ad, I was psychotically checking my link-clicks every four minutes, and Facebook's robots were delighted. "You're ad is doing better than most promotions on Facebook," they flattered me. I was like Fast Eddie playing big-time pool. How could I lose?

This lasted two weeks. Then everything changed. A red announcement appeared: "Your ad was not approved because your Page has not been authorized to run ads with political content." My boosted post was now stamped with a verdict in red letters: "Rejected."

I found a window for submitting appeals. "My book is concerned with the historical development of the nation-state and the case for preferring it to imperialism," I groveled. I offered to send the robots a copy of *The Virtue of Nationalism* so they could see for themselves.

Facebook's community-oriented sentient programs don't wear dark glasses or have names like Agent Smith. The response came from an algorithm called "Veronica":

"The text and/or imagery you're using qualifies as political, based on the definition we're using for enforcement," it said. "You must authorize your page to run political ads."

Me? Run political ads? I scoured Facebook's definitions, which said "political content" is support for candidates, ballot initiatives, or legislation.

"Dear Veronica," I pleaded. "I don't see anything in the ad that qualifies as 'political' based Facebook's definition. Could you specify which aspects of the ad qualify as 'political'?"

A sentient program called "Sol" replied: "The text and/or imagery you're using qualifies as political."

A friend put me in touch with a Morpheus-like figure working to liberate mankind from Facebook. "You're not alone," he said. "Even major media like the *New York Times* and small businesses that aren't political are being told to register."

I figured that if the *New York Times* could register, so could I. For days I answered the robots' questions and sent them personal documents. Finally, they mailed me a letter on paper with a secret code (to demonstrate they can operate in daylight, I believe). I entered the code and the robots were pleased: "You're all set. When the Page admin has completed the next step you'll be able to run ads."

Who was "the Page admin"? What "next step" was it contemplating? I recruited a computer-genius friend to help. He spent days hacking through

the Zuckerspeak. After a dozen runs, the robots issued a green check-mark saying I'd "linked my ad accounts" (to the mother ship, I believe) and could run political ads.

I was in. I brought up the ad and clicked "Boost Post."

The robots replied: "Your ad was not approved because your Page has not been authorized to run ads with political content." A sentient program called "Lync" explained: "The text and/or imagery you're using qualifies as political."

After ten weeks, I have no ads. But I'm left with a question, like a splinter in my mind, driving me mad:

Did Facebook get their "political ads" policy from Monty Python, while outsourcing customer services to HAL from *2001*?

Or are they just unwilling to advertise a book about *The Virtue of Nationalism?*

A version of this essay appeared in the Wall Street Journal on July 25, 2018. You can read the original [here].