The Kind of World We All Want: MAYBE, JUST MAYBE, WE CAN STOP THE GREATEST PROPAGANDA MACHINE IN HISTORY

by Sasha Baron Cohen

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Video available here: https://youtu.be/ymaWq5yZIYM

Thank you, Jonathan, for your very kind words. Thank you, ADL, for this recognition and your work in fighting racism, hate and bigotry. And to be clear, when I say "racism, hate and bigotry" I'm not referring to the names of Stephen Miller's Labradoodles.

Now, I realize that some of you may be thinking, what the hell is a comedian doing speaking at a conference like this! I certainly am. I've spent most of the past two decades in character. In fact, this is the first time that I have ever stood up and given a speech as my least popular character, Sacha Baron Cohen. And I have to confess, it is terrifying.

I realize that my presence here may also be unexpected
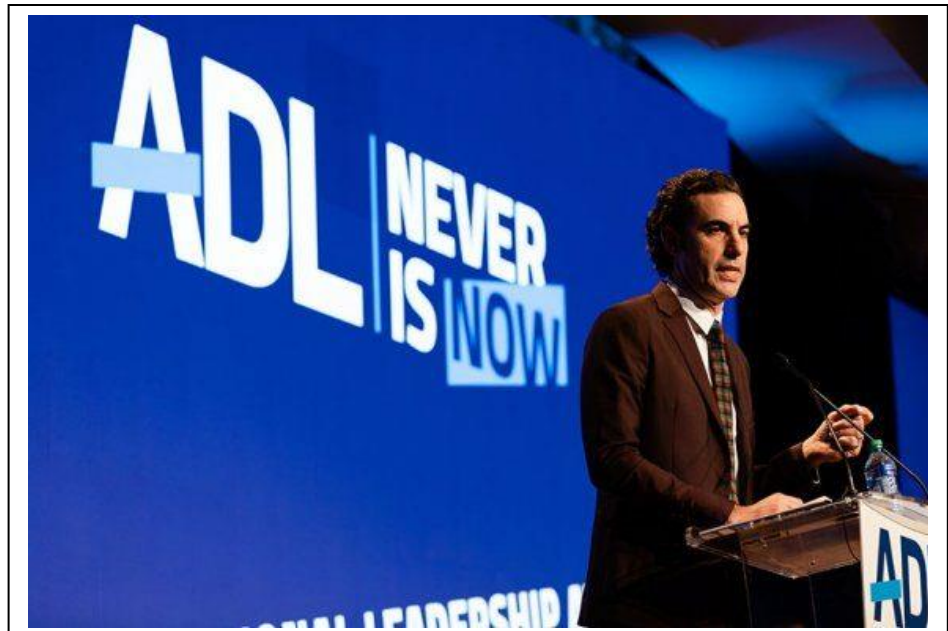
The speaker, Sasha Baron Cohen, delivers his speech at the **ADL's 2019 Never Is Now Summit on Anti-Semitism and Hate**

for another reason. At times, some critics have said my comedy risks reinforcing old stereotypes.

The truth is, I've been passionate about challenging bigotry and intolerance throughout my life. As a teenager in the UK, I marched against the fascist National Front and to abolish Apartheid. As an undergraduate, I traveled around America and wrote my thesis about the civil rights movement, with the help of the archives of the ADL. And as a comedian, I've tried to use my characters to get people to let down their guard and reveal what they actually believe, including their own prejudice.

Now, I'm not going to claim that everything I've done has been for a higher purpose. Yes, some of my comedy, OK probably half my comedy, has been absolutely juvenile and the other half completely puerile. I admit, there was nothing particularly enlightening about me—as Borat from Kazakhstan, the first fake news journalist—running through a conference of mortgage brokers when I was completely naked.

Watch the entire speech here: https://youtu.be/ymaWq5yZIYM

But when Borat was able to get an entire bar in Arizona to sing "Throw the Jew down the well," it did reveal people's indifference to anti-Semitism. When—as Bruno, the gay fashion reporter from Austria—I started kissing a man in a cage fight in Arkansas, nearly starting a riot, it showed the violent potential of homophobia. And when—disguised as an ultra-woke developer—I proposed building a mosque in one rural community, prompting a resident to proudly admit, "I am racist, against Muslims"—it showed the acceptance of Islamophobia.

See the clip here (caution: contains anti-Semitic language)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vKphIxuPiEE

That's why I appreciate the opportunity to be here with you. Today around the world, demagogues appeal to our worst instincts. Conspiracy theories once confined to the fringe are going mainstream. It's as if the Age of Reason—the era of evidential argument—is ending, and now knowledge is delegitimized and scientific consensus is dismissed. Democracy, which depends on shared truths, is in retreat, and autocracy, which depends on shared lies, is on the march. Hate crimes are surging, as are murderous attacks on religious and ethnic minorities.

What do all these dangerous trends have in common? I'm just a comedian and an actor, not a scholar. But one thing is pretty clear to me. All this hate and violence is being

facilitated by a handful of internet companies that amount to the greatest propaganda machine in history.

The greatest propaganda machine in history.

Think about it. Facebook, YouTube and Google, Twitter and others—they reach billions of people. The algorithms these platforms depend on deliberately amplify the type of content that keeps users engaged—stories that appeal to our baser instincts and that trigger outrage and fear. It's why YouTube recommended videos by the conspiracist Alex Jones billions of times. It's why fake news outperforms real news, because studies show that lies spread faster than truth. And it's no surprise that the greatest propaganda machine in history has spread the oldest conspiracy theory in history—the lie that Jews are somehow dangerous. As one headline put it, "Just Think What Goebbels Could Have Done with Facebook."

On the internet, everything can appear equally legitimate. Breitbart resembles the BBC. The fictitious Protocols of the Elders of Zion look as valid as an ADL report. And the rantings of a lunatic seem as credible as the findings of a Nobel Prize winner. We have lost, it seems, a shared sense of the basic facts upon which democracy depends.

When I, as the wanna-be-gansta Ali G, asked the astronaut Buzz Aldrin "what woz it like to walk on de sun?" the joke worked, because we, the audience, shared the same facts. If you believe the moon landing was a hoax, the joke was not funny.

See the clip here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwARY7Kk8ek

When Borat got that bar in Arizona to agree that "Jews control everybody's money and never give it back," the joke worked because the audience shared the fact that the depiction of Jews as miserly is a conspiracy theory originating in the Middle Ages.

But when, thanks to social media, conspiracies take hold, it's easier for hate groups to recruit, easier for foreign intelligence agencies to interfere in our elections, and easier for a country like Myanmar to commit genocide against the Rohingya.

It's actually quite shocking how easy it is to turn conspiracy thinking into violence. In my last show Who is America?, I found an educated, normal guy who had held down a good job, but who, on social media, repeated many of the conspiracy theories that President Trump, using Twitter, has spread more than 1,700 times to his 67 million followers. The President even tweeted that he was considering designating Antifa—anti-fascists who march against the far right—as a terror organization.

So, disguised as an Israel anti-terrorism expert, Colonel Erran Morad, I told my interviewee that, at the Women's March in San Francisco, Antifa were plotting to put hormones into babies' diapers in order to "make them transgender." And he believed it.

I instructed him to plant small devices on three innocent people at the march and explained that when he pushed a button, he'd trigger an explosion that would kill them all. They weren't real explosives, of course, but he thought they were. I wanted to see—would he actually do it?

The answer was yes. He pushed the button and thought he had actually killed three human beings. Voltaire was right, "those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities." And social media lets authoritarians push absurdities to billions of people.

In their defense, these social media companies have taken some steps to reduce hate and conspiracies on their platforms, but these steps have been mostly superficial.

I'm speaking up today because I believe that our pluralistic democracies are on a precipice and that the next twelve months, and the role of social media, could be determinant. British voters will go to the polls while online conspiracists promote the despicable theory of "great replacement" that white Christians are being deliberately replaced by Muslim immigrants. Americans will vote for president while trolls and bots perpetuate the disgusting lie of a "Hispanic invasion." And after years of YouTube videos calling climate change a "hoax," the United States is on track, a year from now, to formally withdraw from the Paris Accords. A sewer of bigotry and vile conspiracy theories that threatens democracy and our planet—this cannot possibly be what the creators of the internet had in mind.

I believe it's time for a fundamental rethink of social media and how it spreads hate, conspiracies and lies. Last month, however, Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook delivered a major speech that, not surprisingly, warned against new laws and regulations on companies like his. Well, some of these arguments are simply absurd. Let's count the ways.

First, Zuckerberg tried to portray this whole issue as "choices...around free expression." That is ludicrous. This is not about limiting anyone's free speech. This is about giving people, including some of the most reprehensible people on earth, the biggest platform in history to reach a third of the planet. Freedom of speech is not freedom of reach. Sadly, there will always be racists, misogynists, anti-Semites and child abusers. But I think we could all agree that we should not be giving bigots and pedophiles a free platform to amplify their views and target their victims.

Second, Zuckerberg claimed that new limits on what's posted on social media would be to "pull back on free expression." This is utter nonsense. The First Amendment says that "Congress shall make no law" abridging freedom of speech, however, this does not apply to private businesses like Facebook. We're not asking these companies to

determine the boundaries of free speech across society. We just want them to be responsible on their platforms.

If a neo-Nazi comes goose-stepping into a restaurant and starts threatening other customers and saying he wants kill Jews, would the owner of the restaurant be required to serve him an elegant eight-course meal? Of course not! The restaurant owner has every legal right and a moral obligation to kick the Nazi out, and so do these internet companies.

Third, Zuckerberg seemed to equate regulation of companies like his to the actions of "the most repressive societies." Incredible. This, from one of the six people who decide what information so much of the world sees. Zuckerberg at Facebook, Sundar Pichai at Google, at its parent company Alphabet, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, Brin's ex-sister-in-law, Susan Wojcicki at YouTube and Jack Dorsey at Twitter.

The Silicon Six—all billionaires, all Americans—who care more about boosting their share price than about protecting democracy. This is ideological imperialism—six unelected individuals in Silicon Valley imposing their vision on the rest of the world, unaccountable to any government and acting like they're above the reach of law. It's like we're living in the Roman Empire, and Mark Zuckerberg is Caesar. At least that would explain his haircut.

Here's an idea. Instead of letting the Silicon Six decide the fate of the world, let our elected representatives, voted for by the people, of every democracy in the world, have at least some say.

Fourth, Zuckerberg speaks of welcoming a "diversity of ideas," and last year he gave us an example. He said that he found posts denying the Holocaust "deeply offensive," but he didn't think Facebook should take them down "because I think there are things that different people get wrong." At this very moment, there are still Holocaust deniers on Facebook, and Google still takes you to the most repulsive Holocaust denial sites with a simple click. One of the heads of Google once told me, incredibly, that these sites just show "both sides" of the issue. This is madness.

To quote Edward R. Murrow, one "cannot accept that there are, on every story, two equal and logical sides to an argument." We have millions of pieces of evidence for the Holocaust—it is an historical fact. And denying it is not some random opinion. Those who deny the Holocaust aim to encourage another one.

Still, Zuckerberg says that "people should decide what is credible, not tech companies." But at a time when two-thirds of millennials say they haven't even heard of Auschwitz, how are they supposed to know what's "credible?" How are they supposed to know that the lie is a lie?

There is such a thing as objective truth. Facts do exist. And if these internet companies really want to make a difference, they should hire enough monitors to actually monitor,

work closely with groups like the ADL, insist on facts and purge these lies and conspiracies from their platforms.

Fifth, when discussing the difficulty of removing content, Zuckerberg asked "where do you draw the line?" Yes, drawing the line can be difficult. But here's what he's really saying: removing more of these lies and conspiracies is just too expensive.

These are the richest companies in the world, and they have the best engineers in the world. They could fix these problems if they wanted to. Twitter could deploy an algorithm to remove more white supremacist hate speech, but they reportedly haven't because it would eject some very prominent politicians from their platform. Maybe that's not a bad thing! The truth is, these companies won't fundamentally change because their entire business model relies on generating more engagement, and nothing generates more engagement than lies, fear and outrage.

It's time to finally call these companies what they really are—the largest publishers in history. And here's an idea for them: abide by basic standards and practices just like newspapers, magazines and TV news do every day. We have standards and practices in television and the movies; there are certain things we cannot say or do. In England, I was told that Ali G could not curse when he appeared before 9pm. Here in the U.S., the Motion Picture Association of America regulates and rates what we see. I've had scenes in my movies cut or reduced to abide by those standards. If there are standards and practices for what cinemas and television channels can show, then surely companies that publish material to billions of people should have to abide by basic standards and practices too.

Take the issue of political ads. Fortunately, Twitter finally banned them, and Google is making changes, too. But if you pay them, Facebook will run any "political" ad you want, even if it's a lie. And they'll even help you micro-target those lies to their users for maximum effect. Under this twisted logic, if Facebook were around in the 1930s, it would have allowed Hitler to post 30-second ads on his "solution" to the "Jewish problem." So here's a good standard and practice: Facebook, start fact-checking political ads before you run them, stop micro-targeted lies immediately, and when the ads are false, give back the money and don't publish them.

Here's another good practice: slow down. Every single post doesn't need to be published immediately. Oscar Wilde once said that "we live in an age when unnecessary things are our only necessities." But is having every thought or video posted instantly online, even if it is racist or criminal or murderous, really a necessity? Of course not!

The shooter who massacred Muslims in New Zealand live streamed his atrocity on Facebook where it then spread across the internet and was viewed likely millions of times. It was a snuff film, brought to you by social media. Why can't we have more of a delay so this trauma-inducing filth can be caught and stopped before it's posted in the first place?

Finally, Zuckerberg said that social media companies should "live up to their responsibilities," but he's totally silent about what should happen when they don't. By now it's pretty clear, they cannot be trusted to regulate themselves. As with the Industrial Revolution, it's time for regulation and legislation to curb the greed of these high-tech robber barons.

In every other industry, a company can be held liable when their product is defective. When engines explode or seatbelts malfunction, car companies recall tens of thousands of vehicles, at a cost of billions of dollars. It only seems fair to say to Facebook, YouTube and Twitter: your product is defective, you are obliged to fix it, no matter how much it costs and no matter how many moderators you need to employ.

In every other industry, you can be sued for the harm you cause. Publishers can be sued for libel, people can be sued for defamation. I've been sued many times! I'm being sued right now by someone whose name I won't mention because he might sue me again! But social media companies are largely protected from liability for the content their users post—no matter how indecent it is—by Section 230 of, get ready for it, the Communications Decency Act. Absurd!

Fortunately, Internet companies can now be held responsible for pedophiles who use their sites to target children. I say, let's also hold these companies responsible for those who use their sites to advocate for the mass murder of children because of their race or religion. And maybe fines are not enough. Maybe it's time to tell Mark Zuckerberg and the CEOs of these companies: you already allowed one foreign power to interfere in our elections, you already facilitated one genocide in Myanmar, do it again and you go to jail.

In the end, it all comes down to what kind of world we want. In his speech, Zuckerberg said that one of his main goals is to "uphold as wide a definition of freedom of expression as possible." Yet our freedoms are not only an end in themselves, they're also the means to another end—as you say here in the U.S., the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But today these rights are threatened by hate, conspiracies and lies.

Allow me to leave you with a suggestion for a different aim for society. The ultimate aim of society should be to make sure that people are not targeted, not harassed and not murdered because of who they are, where they come from, who they love or how they pray

If we make that our aim—if we prioritize truth over lies, tolerance over prejudice, empathy over indifference and experts over ignoramuses—then maybe, just maybe, we can stop the greatest propaganda machine in history, we can save democracy, we can still have a place for free speech and free expression, and, most importantly, my jokes will still work.

Thank you all very much.