Since the 2016 US presidential election, Facebook has announced and implemented an impressive array of what I refer to as “quality initiatives” in response to extensive allegations and evidence that it hosts and amplifies a significant amount of content and interaction that is harmful to democratic communication. However, these initiatives do not seem to respond to the political economy critique that there is a negative relationship between Facebook’s profit-driven, targeted-advertising business model and public sphere communication. In this paper I demonstrate, through a discourse theory–informed examination of Facebook’s own descriptions of its quality initiatives, how the initiatives do in fact strongly respond to this critique. However, they do not do so by altering Facebook’s political economy. As my examination shows, the initiatives respond ideologically to the political economy critique. They do this by staging compatibility between Facebook’s business model and public sphere communication, thus obscuring the political economy problem and blocking public consideration of regulatory responses that might inhibit the platform’s profit, growth, and market valuation. In conclusion, I point past the targeted-advertising model to the drive for profit and growth as the core factor behind Facebook’s negative relationship with the public sphere. Hence, I identify the democratization of digital social media intermediaries as necessary for the realization of high quality public sphere communication through such media.

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