Facebook is losing control of the narrative — and maybe the platform

The longer you consider Facebook's Cambridge Analytica scandal, the stranger it seems. The basic details of the story, in which a researcher improperly gave away data to the company that became Donald Trump's data operations team in 2016, have been known for two years. The effectiveness of Cambridge Analytica's psychographic targeting, which attempted to influence voters by mapping out their Facebook Likes, is highly suspect and likely overstated. The eye-popping number of Facebook profiles said to be involved — 50 million — may turn out to be marketing hype for a company that excels at it.

And yet, revelations from this weekend's stories in *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* continue to batter the company. A bipartisan group of US senators called upon CEO Mark Zuckerberg to testify about how Cambridge Analytica came into possession of so much user data. British authorities promised to investigate the incident as well. On Monday, the company's stock fell more than 10 percent from the all-time high it set on February 1st. On Tuesday morning, *Bloomberg* reported that the Federal Trade Commission is investigating the company over its use of personal data.

Cambridge Analytica's data misuse may ultimately have had little effect in influencing elections here or abroad. But the way Cambridge Analytica obtained its data, and reports that the company held on to the data, despite telling Facebook it had deleted it, have renewed concerns about data privacy on the world's biggest social network. After learning that data

from a researcher's personality quiz app had improperly been shared with Cambridge Analytica, Facebook took the company at its word that it had purged user profiles: "That to me was the most astonishing thing," former employee Christopher Wylie told *The Guardian*. "They waited two years and did absolutely nothing to check that the data was deleted. All they asked me to do was tick a box on a form and post it back."

Facebook's lack of enforcement in the face of bad actors, coupled with misuse of its platform on a grand scale, have drawn outrage around the globe. And while Cambridge Analytica is among the most prominent examples to date of how Facebook can be misused, it belongs to a long and growing list. In March alone:

Taken together, these incidents paint a picture of a platform on which crises are developing faster than its minders can address them. A year and a half after Donald Trump's election sparked a cultural reckoning over social media, Facebook has struggled to contain the fallout. A series of steps taken to remove terrorist propaganda more quickly, and tamp down on the spread of fake news, have produced some encouraging results. But those steps have done little to stop the daily drumbeat of articles about ways in which Facebook is misused around the world, often with disturbing results.

Facebook has typically been quick to apologize when confronted with misuse of the platform, promising it will do better in the future. But the company has taken a defensive posture over the Cambridge Analytica stories, saying that the issue was resolved years ago. But while the company plays defense, a growing number of lawmakers and regulators around the world are promising to investigate the company. This scandal really is different.

The company said Monday that it had hired a forensics team to investigate the company, with Cambridge Analytica's permission. But before Facebook could complete its audit, the

United Kingdom Information Commissioner’s Office ordered that they stop while the office pursues a warrant to mount its own investigation.

It was a dramatic real-world standoff in a case that has until now played out mostly online. And yet the standoff also had an undeniable symbolism: Facebook, attempting to fix its mistakes by itself, found itself at last restrained by the government. As Tuesday began, neither Zuckerberg nor his chief operating officer, Sheryl Sandberg, had made a statement about the Cambridge Analytica revelations. In the brutal months since the election, Facebook has typically been quick to apologize. But after an overwhelming March, it appears that its top executives are speechless.

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