How Congress missed another chance to hold big tech accountable



From time to time the entire technology press corps gets together on Twitter, spends several hours live-tweeting the same event, and then writes a series of blog posts about how nothing important happened. This event is known as a Congressional hearing, and today we witnessed our final one of the year.

After months of polite deferrals, Sundar Pichai finally went before Congress on Tuesday, and over the course of three and a half hours, said as little as possible. The hearing before the House Judiciary Committee was defined, as had been the Facebook hearings before it, by the widespread befuddlement of our lawmakers.

There was, for example, the question from Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-CA) about why a picture of Donald Trump comes up when you Google “idiot.” Adi Robertson has the correct answer, for the record:

> *News outlets reported on the Trump "idiot" results earlier this year. If you search the term now, in fact, you'll mostly get pictures from stories explaining why it happened. It appeared to be the result of outside parties gaming Google's search results, a well-known tactic known as "Google bombing."*
>
> *Trump isn't the first president to get Google-bombed: in the mid-2000s, searches for "miserable failure" famously returned results about President George W. Bush. It can be a politicized (or just funny) extension of normal search engine optimization tactics. In this case, it's convincing Google that a Trump picture is what most people want when they search for "idiot," by upvoting or linking to posts with that combination of words and images.*

Then there was the moment that Rep. Steve King (R-IA) asked Pichai — the CEO, we repeat, of Google — to explain why his daughter's iPhone was behaving strangely:

"I have a seven-year-old granddaughter who picked up her phone during the election, and she's playing a little game, the kind of game a kid would play," King told Pichai. "And up on there pops a picture of her grandfather. And I'm not going to say into the record what kind of language was used around that picture of her grandfather, but I'd ask you: how does that show up on a seven-year-old's iPhone, who's playing a kid's game?"

Adi Robertson took a crack at that one, too:

> *It's not clear what King was referring to, but it's possible his granddaughter's iPhone (or possibly Android phone) was displaying a notification card about a news story. The language around his photo may forever remain a mystery, but during campaign season, there was no shortage of writers with strong feelings about King's numerous racist and anti-immigrant statements, or his endorsement of a Canadian white*

> *nationalist mayoral candidate. In any case, during the hearing, King also suggested that Congress should check Google employees' social media profiles to monitor their political leanings – so some confusing troubleshooting requests were probably the least of Pichai's worries.*

But before we write off Congress entirely, it's worth noting that they did attempt to get to the bottom of the Project Dragonfly situation. Is Google building a censored search engine for China – the subject of much internal dissent – or is it not? Here's Ryan Gallagher in *The Intercept*.

> *Pichai repeatedly insisted that Dragonfly was an "internal effort" and the Google currently had "no plans to launch a search service in China." Asked to confirm that the company would not launch "a tool for surveillance and censorship in China," Pichai declined to answer, instead saying that he was committed to "providing users with information, and so we always – we think it's ideal to explore possibilities. … We'll be very thoughtful, and we will engage widely as we make progress."*
>
> *Pichai's claim that the company does not have a plan to launch the search engine in China contradicted a leaked transcript from a private meeting inside the company. In the transcript, the company's search chief Ben Gomes discussed an aim to roll out the service between January and April 2019. For Pichai's statement to Congress to be truthful, there is only one possibility: that the company has put the brakes on Dragonfly since The Intercept first exposed the project in August.*

Despite lawmakers' efforts to follow up, they didn't break much new ground. (Though in a follow-up interview with the *Washington Post*, Pichai seemed to suggest Project Dragonfly might wind up being something other than search: "Can we explore and serve users in China, in areas like education and

healthcare?" he said. "We may not end up doing search. We're trying to understand a market.")

Why did reporters have better luck with Pichai today than Congress did? Shira Ovide, reading my mind, lays the blame with the bizarre structure of these hearings, which gives maximum opportunity for witnesses to wriggle out of questioning:

> *Pichai repeatedly fell back to saying that this China project is "exploratory" and that Google will be transparent if it moves ahead. That's not a good enough answer. He needs to say how many employees are working on this project, what Google's criteria are for returning web search to China and whether Google will build tools that will enable the Chinese government to surveil its own citizens without their knowledge.*
>
> *To be clear, I don't want to repeat the false idea that members of Congress are old luddites who aren't able or willing to understand how tech companies work. Some members of Congress asked great questions on Tuesday. Some of them did not. This format, however, does not feel like a good way to decide public policy. [1] The thorny topic of the power of big technology companies deserves much better than this from all sides.*

What would help? Lawmakers demonstrating basic platform literacy; anticipating the non-answers that tech CEOs have prepared for them; scripting more penetrating follow-up questions; coordinating avenues of attack with their fellow representatives. Lawmakers might also try to debate their proposed solutions with CEO — bringing real policy questions to the table, instead of simple gotcha-oriented soundbites.

For their part, tech CEOs could do better answering the spirit of lawmakers' questions, even when those lawmakers get the details wrong. It's usually apparent what a lawmaker is

concerned about, even if it's not entirely clear how they have been led to their often bizarre and conspiratorial conclusions. Pichai, for example, could have spent more time talking about why Google has a strong financial incentive to keep search results free of political bias, rather than simply asserting, over and over again, that it does so.

Maybe next year.

Democracy

Russia fines Google for not complying with search results law: TASS

Russia has issued what may be the smallest fine ever issued against Google, Reuters reported:

> *Russia fined Google 500,000 roubles ($7,530) on Tuesday for failing to comply with a legal requirement to remove certain entries from its search results, Russia's communications watchdog was quoted as saying by TASS news agency.*
>
> *Russia said last month that it had opened a civil case against Google as it had not joined a state registry that lists banned websites that Moscow believes contain illegal information and was therefore not compliant with the law.*

Leaked Audio Reveals Google's Efforts to Woo Conservatives

Nitasha Tiku gets a hold of leaked audio from March in which Googlers describe their efforts to win over conservatives:

> *In February, The New York Times Magazine published a cover story urging regulators to break up Google because the company abuses its dominance in search to crush promising competitors. The next day, representatives from two conservative think tanks published blog posts defending Google and attacking the article's call for antitrust*

> *enforcement. Both think tanks have received funding from Google. Both blog posts referenced studies by a professor who has received funding from Google. In one post, the study referenced was published in a quarterly journal owned by third think tank, which has also received funding from Google.*
>
> *In a company-wide meeting a couple of weeks later, on March 1, Google's public policy team described the blog posts as the fruit of Google's efforts to build deeper relationships with conservatives, according to an audio recording of the meeting reviewed by WIRED. The recording of a contentious hour-long meeting offers a window into how Google thinks about its relationships in Washington, DC, its sensitivity to claims of political bias, and how executives explain to employees actions that some view as at odds with Google's values.*

Political tweets, "infowars" and a Russia: how a fake news row went mainstream

Was a row about an anti-disinformation think tank part of a Russian influence campaign? Labour and the Foreign Office disagree

LinkedIn co-founder backs $35 million voter data project in 'existential threat' to Democratic Party

LinkedIn co-founder Reid Hoffman plans to spend $35 million a definitive voter database for Democrats, raising the possibility that some good will have come from building LinkedIn:

> *With tens of millions of dollars at their disposal, the people behind Hoffman-backed project could eventually create their own voter file, making the Democratic Party's file less valuable. That process, however, would likely take several years and would be nearly impossible to complete by the 2020*

> *election.*
>
> *As a result, DNC officials say the committee is open to collaborating with Hoffman, or perhaps joining forces with him.*

Elsewhere

Hateful conspiracies thrive on YouTube, despite pledge to clean up ‘problematic’ videos

Craig Timberg, Elizabeth Dwoskin, Tony Romm, and Andrew Ba Tran have a fresh entry in the genre of content that involves searching YouTube for terrible things and then writing about what you find:

> *YouTube is particularly valuable to users of Gab.ai and 4chan, social media sites that are popular among hate groups but have scant video capacity of their own. Users on these sites link to YouTube more than to any other website, thousands of times a day, according to the recent work of Data and Society and the Network Contagion Research Institute, both of which track the spread of hate speech.*
>
> *The platform routinely serves videos espousing neo-Nazi propaganda, phony reports portraying dark-skinned people as violent savages and conspiracy theories claiming that large numbers of leading politicians and celebrities molested children. Critics say that even though YouTube removes millions of videos on average each month, it is slow to identify troubling content and, when it does, is too permissive in what it allows to remain.*

PewDiePie gives shout out to hateful, anti-Semitic YouTube channel

YouTube’s most popular creator, the man known as PewDiePie,

has a history of bad behavior. Most recently he promoted a channel known for its hateful content, Julia Alexander reports:

> *E;R's videos are disturbing. They often use the guise of film, anime, or cartoon criticism to convey anti-Semitic and hateful thoughts or imagery. This is particularly disturbing when linked to Kjellberg, who dealt with his own controversy after showing men holding up a sign reading "Death to All Jews" in 2017.*

Facebook is hiring engineers and researchers for its blockchain team

Does the current bear market in cryptocurrency make it easier or harder for Facebook to hire for its blockchain team? Please reply if you know!

> *Facebook wants to add a data scientist, a data engineer, and a couple of software engineers to its growing blockchain team, according to its careers page (via SludgeFeed).*
>
> *"The blockchain team is a startup within Facebook, with a vision to make blockchain technology work at Facebook scale," the ads say. "It's a small, fast-growing, but talented group of people who are passionate about changing the world. "*

Social media outpaces print newspapers in the U.S. as news source

One in five Americans say they get their news via social media "often," according to new Pew data, slightly higher than the 16 percent who say they often get their news from newspapers. Elisa Shearer:

> *Overall, television is still the most popular platform for news consumption – even though its use has declined since 2016. News websites are the next most common source, followed*

> *by radio, and finally social media sites and print newspapers. And when looking at online news use combined — the percentage of Americans who get news often from either news websites or social media — the web has closed in on television as a source for news (43% of adults get news often from news websites or social media, compared with 49% for television).*

Launches

Facebook opening Bryant Park pop-up to teach users about privacy

Part of me wants to fly to New York just to experience the surreal majesty of the Facebook privacy pop-up kiosk in person. It will take place on Thursday in midtown, Nicolas Vega reports:

> *"It's been a tough year, and people have a lot of questions," Khaliah Barnes, a privacy and public policy manager at Facebook, told The Post. "We wanted to have the opportunity to connect with people face to face."*
>
> *Visitors to the kiosk, to be located next to Bryant Park's Holiday Market, will be able to stop by without an appointment, speak with Facebook employees and drink free hot chocolate.*

Facebook relaunches search ads to offset slowing revenue

Facebook is bringing back search ads, Josh Constine reports:

> *The reintroduction of search ads could open an important new revenue stream at a time when Facebook's revenue growth is quickly decelerating as it runs out of News Feed ad space, the Stories format that advertisers are still adapting is poised to overtake feed sharing on social apps and users*

> *shift their time elsewhere. In Q3 2018, revenue grew 33 percent year-over-year, but that's far slower than the 49 percent YOY gain it had a year ago, and the 59 percent from Q3 2016. Opening up new ad inventory for search could reinvigorate the sagging revenue growth rate that, combined with Facebook's privacy and security scandals, has put intense pressure on Facebook's leaders Mark Zuckerberg and Sheryl Sandberg.*

Instagram is testing Creator Accounts for high-profile influencers

Instagram is launching "Creator Accounts" to give high-profile users additional controls and analytics.

Takes

Delete All Your Apps

In the aftermath of the *New York Times'* story on how app developers use and abuse location-history data, Jason Koebler suggests it's time to delete all of our apps. Bold!

> *This problem is getting worse, not better: Facebook made WhatsApp, an app that managed to be profitable with a $1 per year subscription fee, into a "free" service because it believed it could make more money* ***with an advertising-based business model****.*
>
> *What this means is that the dominant business model on our smartphones is one that's predicated on monetizing you, and only through paying obsessive attention to your app permissions and seeking paid alternatives can you hope to minimize these impacts on yourself. If this bothers you, your only options are to get rid of your smartphone altogether or to rethink what apps you want installed on your phone and act accordingly.*

Facebook Has Better Uses for Its Cash Than Stock Buybacks

Shira Ovide wishes Facebook wasn't planning to spend $9 billion buying up its own stock:

> *If I were making a short list, I would put on it hiring more moderators to do the terrible, laborious work of actively sniffing out hoaxes, election-related tampering and calls to violence on Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and other Facebook-owned hangouts. It might not hurt to increase investment on cybersecurity to do more to prevent foreign governments from using Facebook as a tool for propaganda or to prevent thieves from taking advantage of Facebook software loopholes to compromise accounts of tens of millions of people. Facebook could spend even more on policy wonks to shape and prepare for more heavy-handed regulation of tech companies. I could go on.*

And finally …

Twitter is often the story of a company that can't stop hitting itself, and in the wake of Jack Dorsey's recent public lashing over his Burmese meditation retreat, the CEO has decided to land a few more self-inflicted blows.

> ** more color on this given the resulting conversation.*
>
> *I've been meditating for 20 years, with the last 2 years focused on vipassana. After experiencing it in Texas last year, I wanted to go to the region that maintained the practice in its original form. That led me to Myanmar.*
>
> *— jack (@jack) December 11, 2018*

I predict that, had he run any of his planned tweets by his quite capable PR staff, Dorsey could have avoided Burma-gate altogether. Instead, he is left to explain Twitter's views on

promoting free expression in the context of … his meditation hobby? I said it yesterday and I’ll say it again: the best way to discuss your silent meditation retreat is as silently as possible.

Talk to me

Send me tips, comments, questions and Congressional testimony: casey@theverge.com.

https://www.theverge.com/2018/12/12/18136956/google-hearing-sundar-pichai-congress-bias