Zuckerberg's visit to DC shows how high the stakes are getting for Facebook



Say for the moment you are the founder and CEO of a vast social network that has recently come under scrutiny from governments around the world. Your company is incredibly successful, but lately members of various congresses and parliaments have begun wondering aloud whether it is actually *too* successful. Political parties who once cheered you as a job creator are now musing aloud about chopping you up for parts.

You are paranoid — because you believe only the paranoid survive — and so you have built a large policy, communications, and lobbying apparatus to manage these threats into advantages. (It is a happy accident of working in technology that government regulations tends to benefit you by making it harder for challengers to make it out of the crib.) But lately it is not enough: you are the face of the company, and people expect you to show up and make the case for your

company in person.

You do this, once, in your home country, and run so many circles around the people's chosen representatives that when you get back to headquarters for the weekly all-hands the employees erupted in applause. But then everyone in all the other countries starts asking you to come to *their* country, and answer *their* questions, and you decide you would rather not. A big reason these countries are inviting you there is so they can score political points by yelling at you in front of television cameras, which would be neither pleasant nor productive.

But also, to the extent they have questions about your business, they are questions any of your executives can answer. You all speak from the same talking points, after all. Other CEOs might relish shooting from the hip, but not you. So why fly for many hours on your private plane just to answer questions that any number of other people could handle for you?

Usually, for Mark Zuckerberg, the answer is that he doesn't. But on Thursday he did.

Zuckerberg's decision to head to Washington to this week signals, to my mind, just how serious the stakes have gotten for Facebook lately. This month, the attorneys general in eight states and the District of Columbia announced an antitrust investigation into the company. The Federal Trade Commission is conducting an antitrust investigation of its own, as are the Justice Department and the House Judiciary Committee. Meanwhile, the Senate Banking Committee is scrutinizing Facebook's plans to launch Libra, the company's forthcoming cryptocurrency.

There is also the fact that the president has regularly attacked Facebook, although he attacks lots of things, and it's never really clear how serious it is or what the

practical consequences of those attacks might be.

So that's the backdrop for his visit today. Here's Tony Romm on what happened next in the *Washington Post*:

> *Zuckerberg — who spent Thursday meeting with lawmakers on Capitol Hill — declined to answer questions as he navigated past a throng of reporters.*
>
> *Behind the scenes, Zuckerberg heard an earful from lawmakers about the need for his company to better* ***protect the data it collects*** *and guard against* ***political interference in the 2020 election****, members of Congress later revealed. Democrats and Republicans also raised competition concerns with Facebook and its sprawling empire, which also includes WhatsApp and Instagram, at a moment when state and federal regulators are amid antitrust probes.*
>
> *Zuckerberg also met privately with President Trump, Facebook confirmed. The White House did not respond to a request for comment.*

Most of Zuckerberg's conversations on Thursday were private, and we won't know whether they had any practical impact — on him or on elected officials — for some time. But we all owe Sen. Josh Hawley, R-MO, for this readout of his conversation with the CEO:

> *The criticisms about privacy and competition even led one of Facebook toughest foes, GOP Sen. Josh Hawley (Mo.), to request during his private meeting with Zuckerberg that Facebook sell WhatsApp and Instagram, an audacious proposal that the company executive did not support.*
>
> *"I think he was a little taken off guard," Hawley said. "I think that he felt it was not a great idea."*

This is, to my mind, a shame, as selling off WhatsApp and

Instagram really is a very good idea. *The Interface* extends its thanks to the senator for giving it a shot.

In any case, less interesting than the conversations Zuckerberg may have had in Washington today is the fact that he went in the first place. And given the way things have been going for Facebook lately, it might not be too much longer before he goes back.

The Ratio

Trending up: Amazon intends to become carbon-neutral by 2040, a move the company announced after intense pressure from employees.

Trending up: **Facebook** said its users have raised over $2 billion to date for philanthropic causes on the platform.

Trending up: **Google** added an incognito mode for Maps, a long-overdue privacy feature.

Trending down: **YouTube** announced it remove verification badges from thousands of accounts for reasons it could barely articulate.

Governing

 Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos pledged the company will be carbon-neutral by 2040 as part of a massive new plan to fight climate change. The announcement comes the day before thousands of Amazon employees are set to walk off the job to protest the company's contributions to pollution and support of fossil-fuel companies and climate deniers. Here's Justine Calma at *The Verge*:

> *The pledge's target is 10 years earlier than the most ambitious version of the Paris agreement's climate goals, which currently aims for the world to become carbon-neutral*

> *by 2050. Bezos pledged that Amazon would measure and report emissions on a regular basis, implement decarbonization strategies, and offset any remaining emissions. Other companies are also invited to sign on to the commitment.*
>
> *Bezos' goal is for 80 percent of Amazon's energy use to be renewable by 2024. By 2030, Bezos hopes to run Amazon on renewables alone. Bezos says he wants Amazon to be a role model for other companies, which is why he says Amazon will be the first company to sign on to the new pledge.*

Amazon's plan also came with an order for 100,000 electric delivery vans from Michigan-based startup Rivian. The vans will hit the road by 2024, but Amazon might begin testing them as soon as 2020. (Andrew J. Hawkins / *The Verge*)

Facebook also announced a climate-related initiative: it's banning single-use plastic water bottles at all of its offices worldwide. (Roland Li / *San Francisco Chronicle*)

The U.K.'s most polarizing journalist, Carole Cadwalladr, is toeing the line between journalism and activism. Her reporting on **Facebook's** Cambridge Analytica scandal changed how people talk about data privacy, but some say she's pushing a policy agenda and has taken her activism too far. (Ben Jodah / *The Atlantic*)

The California Consumer Privacy Act — our very own GDPR-lite — will apparently go into effect as scheduled on January 1st. The law overcame significant attacks from tech giants and lawmakers in the most recent legislative session seeking to water it down. (Hayley Tsukayama / Electronic Frontier Foundation)

A history of the Democratic Party's "breakup" with big tech, from the summer of 2016 until now. Today, it's common for Democrats to call for big tech companies to be broken up — but until recently, the party was a reliable ally for Silicon

Valley's. (Gabriel Debenedetti / *Intelligencer*)

Trolls have developed new ways to make misinformation go viral ahead of the 2020 election. Reporters are responding with advanced troll-dodging (and troll-hunting) tactics. (Sara Fischer / *Axios*)

Americans don't trust tech execs or politicians: over 80 percent say members of Congress act unethically some or most of the time, and 77 percent say the same about tech leaders, according to a new survey by Pew. More than half also say journalists don't admit mistakes. (Pew Research Center)

The problem with deciding what's "true" isn't about trolls or fake news — it's about technology, argues sociologist William Davies. Having uninterrupted access to information makes people skeptical about who and what to trust, he writes. (William Davies / *The Guardian*)

Industry

 YouTube announced it would remove verification badges for a large number of channels as part of a confusing overhaul of the program. Until recently, the company was verifying any account that hit 100,000 subscribers — even if it had never verified the account holder's identity. But instead of asking those accounts to provide documentation about their creators, the company is instead proactively un-verifying thousands of accounts and then asking them to appeal YouTube's automated decision. Coupled with the transition away from a highly recognizable checkmark symbol to a muted gray parallelogram flag gizmo, YouTube has handled a hugely consequential decision in one of the strangest ways imaginable. Julia Alexander for *The Verge*:

> *Verification is an extremely important feature for creators. It affects which creators get top recommendations when people search for something on YouTube. Channels that no longer meet*

the criteria and may have their badge removed will be notified today, YouTube confirmed to The Verge. Creators will have the option to appeal the decision before the change takes place in late October.

Being verified also represents status for creators. Having the checkmark beside their channel name is a sign of being one of the most prominent members of the community. Losing that checkmark is going to leave creators feeling upset — especially at a time when many people have already voiced their concerns with YouTube's treatment of their community.

 Facebook's NPE Team, which works to develop new products and market, recently released two efforts to court teens in Canada. Bump, an app that connects students who go to the same school, launched in August and is still available for download. Aux, a music app that integrates with Spotify and Apple Music to let people virtually listen to songs with friends, has already been pulled from the App Store. Ime Archibong, a respected Facebook veteran, is leading the team, Alex Heath reports in *The Information*:

The new group behind the teen-oriented apps—known inside Facebook as NPE—could play an important role in helping Facebook draw a younger user base that is increasingly fleeing to social media rivals like Snapchat and TikTok. The group could also help Facebook retain talent eager to work on more longshot projects that don't fit into what employees internally refer to as the company's core "family of apps": Facebook, Messenger, Instagram and WhatsApp.

At the same time, regulatory scrutiny of big tech companies could make future acquisitions of startups more hazardous, pressuring them to invent the next big thing in-house. The selection of Archibong, a media-savvy executive who is known to be close to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, suggests the company believes the effort will receive wide attention.

People in emerging markets like India can now speak to **Google's** virtual assistant, Google Assistant, on the phone. The project, a partnership between Google and Vodafone Idea, allows people to ask about the weather, game scores, or traffic, in Hindi and English. (Pranav Dixit / *BuzzFeed*)

Google started testing Incognito Mode for Maps to let users navigate without their search history or location being tracked. (Jules Wang / Android Police)

Twitter's head of public policy quit after eight years at the company.

Facebook introduced some novel new ad formats, including video poll ads and AR ads. (Facebook)

Disney CEO Bob Iger speculated that **Apple** and Disney might have merged if Steve Jobs had not died in 2011. Iger recently resigned from Apple's board amid Apple's plans to invest heavily in original content. (Bob Iger / *Vanity Fair*)

Instagram warned users who manage their profiles with Buffer and Hootsuite that their accounts have been "compromised" and they need to stop using these services. It could be a bug, though the company has been reviewing third-party apps that have this level of access to its APIs for abuses. (Rob Price / *Business Insider*)

People are successfully using **Instagram** hashtags meant to bring awareness to the opioid crisis, like #opioidcrisis and #opioidaddiction, to sell drugs on the platform. (Joseph Bernstein / *BuzzFeed*)

An **Instagram** influencer famous for provocative photos of her extra-long tongue nets almost $100,000 a year. She has 2 million followers and makes money from ads and merchandise.

The "straight man **Instagram** aesthetic" is fixated on nighttime skylines, fast food, and photos of other people's dogs, this

piece argues. (Madeleine Holden / *MEL*)

Digital media publishers are often guilty of the same data-harvesting practices as the NSA and other spy agencies they report on, a computer scientist argues. (Timothy Libert / *The New York Times*)

And finally …

‘Sorry to This Man’ Is the Perfect Meme for Right Now.‘Sorry to This Man’ Is the Perfect Meme for Right Now

Emma Grey Ellis tells us why everyone is excited about “Keke Palmer’s accidental roast, ‘sorry to this man.’”

> *Here’s what happened. The Hustlers actress did a video interview with Vanity Fair while hooked up to a lie detector. The interviewer asks if her character True Jackson, of True Jackson, VP, was a better VP than US vice president Dick Cheney, showing Palmer a photo of Cheney on an airplane. The hope, clearly, was to make her nervous and send the polygraph needle jumping all over the page. Palmer was nonplussed. “I hate to say it, I hope I don’t sound ridiculous,” Palmer says after a beat. “I don’t know who this man is. I mean, he could be walking down the street, I wouldn’t know a thing. Sorry to this man.” People on Twitter found this pure and innocent gaffe delicious.*

The memes, they are good:

Talk to us

Send us tips, comments, questions, and questions to shout at Zuckerberg from the press scrum: casey@theverge.com and zoe@theverge.com.

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rg-dc-visit-hawley-trump-antitrust-investigations