Mr. Zuckerberg and the Internet. An essay on power relations and privacy negotiation

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Abstract

This essay aims to analyze the power relations existing within one of the most interesting events of the last few months, namely, Mark Zuckerberg's hearing before the American Congress, on the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Despite the fact that many questions addressed serious issues, such as privacy policies or information leakage prevention, there were few senators who seemed to audition the witness more for tech advice, or who didn't seem to understand how the virtual world functions. These interventions sparkled the amusement of social media users and, unexpectedly, helped Zuckerberg redeem, to a certain extent, his reputation.

Keywords

Surveillance, privacy, power Relations, Mark Zuckerberg, knowledge

A special attention has been dedicated over the last decades to power relations (Goldstein, Hays, 2012) in Human and Social Studies, especially to the narrative around power exertion (Roselle et al, 2014). However, power cannot be separated from the individual that possesses it, therefore power is assumed to be socially constructed around the impression created by every social actor (Dreher, 2015), especially when their socio-economic status is considered (Piven, 2007). Moreover, power can be transferred, and so do other characteristics, such as confidence, optimism or risk seeking tendency (Goldstein, Hays, 2012), even though similar characteristics might be associated rather with a certain social class, than with individual behavior patterns (Wacquant, 2013).

One of the most important contemporary authors on power relations studies is Manuel Castells. The sociologist has argued that, in many respects, communication can be

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considered one of the factors that influence social dynamics, considering the fact that its power can shape beliefs, representations and behavior (Castells, 2009) through agenda setting and its framing (Grindstaff, 2011).

Whether this idea is grounded in P. Bourdieu's assumption that each social class determines a specific set of actions and tastes, therefore creating a distinction among individuals, or he may have elaborated this statement when observing how fast technology develops and its effect on communication, his theory's truthfulness has been recently unintentionally highlighted:

As the senator continued to interrogate the witness, the audience became more and more feverish. The witness was trying to refrain himself from smiling, but he could just not pass this opportunity. For weeks, he has been "hunted" and "harassed" by media to answer all kinds of questions about the information leakage scandal, and now, so unexpectedly, he gets this unique opportunity to show, once again, his honest intentions, skills, and to redeem his reputation. All he had to do was to let his interrogator speak. As the latter spoke, it became more and more obvious that he barely had a clue about how the virtual world works, to the astonishment and (somehow) embarrassment of the other senators. Normally, this should not be a problem; there are millions of individuals who don't know such information, and the world continues to effectively function. However, the interrogator was nothing less but a senator, member of a lawmakers committee, entitled to regulate technology, its use, and its consumption.

But to make things clearer, let's rewind to the moment this scandal erupted. It is not a secret that (skilled, may we add) knowledge is power. The more information agencies have about people, the more effective they can become. But one of the biggest problems is posed by the data gathering itself. There are many possibilities of gathering data, each of them having pros and cons. Censuses, for example, are pretty accurate, but they are expensive and conducted approximately once in a decade, not to mention individuals' possible reluctance to offer so many information about their beliefs, income or intimate context. On the other hand, about half of the global population uses the internet (Internet World Stats, 2018). Getting information about people should be easier this way, because these individuals knowingly access the internet and become active parts of some online groups or communities. But collecting data may become problematic only when ethical aspects are omitted.

In 2014, Cambridge Analytica, a company specialized in data mining, hired Alexandr Kogan to gather information about American voters. The American presidential campaign was about to begin only two years from that moment, therefore strategies needed to be elaborated quickly. The best way Kogan (or, maybe, his employers from Cambridge Analytica) thought to collect data was via Facebook. Just like other platforms, Facebook allows external developers to connect various applications to the main platform. In social sciences, the statistical program "R" works similarly to the way mentioned above: there is a common "canvas" that researchers use for their studies, but there is also the possibility that these researchers develop packages and attach them to the main program.

This is exactly what Kogan did. He created an app called "This is Your Digital Life" (Nicholas Confessore, 2018) and asked Facebook users to download and use this app, in

exchange of small amounts of money. Instead of gathering the 300,000 responses that he was supposed to obtain, Kogan came into possession of information about not less than 87 million Facebook users. The next thing he did was to hand the data over to Cambridge Analytica, even though he initially mentioned that all of the data collected will only serve for scientific purposes. However, a 2018 investigation (idem, 2018) revealed the fact that there might be a connection between the information leakage and the major geopolitical events of the past years, especially President Trump's election.

In order to shed some light upon the situation, Mark Zuckerberg, one of the co-founders of Facebook, was invited to testify before the American Congress. The hearing, lasting two days, was broadcasted on every channel, and somehow ironically, on Facebook as well. The senators interviewed him about privacy policies and how was it possible that information belonging to 87 million users were improperly collected. Zuckerberg claimed they knew about this situation right after the leakage happened, and asked Kogan to delete the information that he wrongfully shared with an unauthorized third-party. Kogan accepted the terms, but never deleted the data.

However, somebody may wonder what's so interesting about this topic. After all, such information leakage may happen every day. This is true, but the most fascinating aspect of this hearing is not the topic itself, but the dynamics of power relation existing in the dialogue between the witness and the senators.

To begin with, the charges were some of the most severe: "Today's hearing is extraordinary. It's extraordinary to hold a joint committee hearing. It's even more extraordinary to have a single CEO testify before nearly half of the United States Senate. But then, Facebook is pretty extraordinary. More than 2 billion people use Facebook every month. 1.4 billion people use it every day; more than the population of any country on Earth except China, and more than four times the population of the United States […] In many respects, Facebook's incredible reach is why we're here today. We're here because of what you, Mr. Zuckerberg, have described as a breach of trust. A quiz app used by approximately 300,000 people led to information about 87 million Facebook users being obtained by the company Cambridge Analytica. There are plenty of questions about the behavior of Cambridge Analytica and we expect to hold a future hearing on Cambridge and similar firms. But as you've said, this is not likely to be an isolated incident; a fact demonstrated by Facebook's suspension of another firm just this past weekend"[2] said sen. John Thune.

However, Zuckerberg's tendency wasn't to deny the guilt, but to admit, accept and apologize. To a certain extent, he said what the senators would have chalked up

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[2] All of the quotations mentioned in the present article represent the transcripts posted by the Washington Post journalists. The transcripts are available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2018/04/10/transcript-of-mark-zuckerbergs-senate-hearing/?utm_term=.d1829b02660b and https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2018/04/11/transcript-of-zuckerbergs-appearance-before-house-committee/?utm_term=.b015213f4f7e

against him: "We didn't take a broad enough view of our responsibility, and that was a big mistake. And it was my mistake. And I'm sorry. I started Facebook, I run it, and I'm responsible for what happens here." As a result, senators' questions begin to address other areas of the internet use, rather than privacy policies or future prevention of information leakage. This aspect stirred up a wave of amusement on social media.

All of a sudden, Zuckerberg, from "that bad guy who sold the data or didn't care enough about his customers' private data"[3] started to become a very competent individual having to face bizarre questions. The dynamics of power negotiation were subtle, fast and on a unexpected changing pattern. The climax was apparently reached by two senators who didn't seem to have enough knowledge about how the virtual world functions, although it's their responsibility to regulate technology: "sen. Hatch: Well, if so, how do you sustain a business model in which users don't pay for your service?" Zuckerberg humbly (whilst clearly anticipating the reactions provoked by such a question) replied: "Senator, we run ads", refraining himself from smiling, while his staff smirked, and the rest of the senators were trying, although embarrassed to a certain extent, to maintain a straight face.

Moreover, when everybody else was trying to get as much details as possible about the data obtained by Cambridge Analytica, a senator complained about the fact that Facebook employees are not that diverse when it comes to skin color distribution: "And I know you've — have a number of diversity initiatives. In 2017, you've increased your black representation from 2 percent to 3 percent. While this is a small increase, it's better than none. And this does not nearly meet the definition of building a racially diverse community" said sen. Butterfield.

Other senators seemed more to be asking for advice or to declare their admiration for Facebook: "Yesterday when we talked, I gave the relatively harmless example that I'm communicating with my friends on Facebook and indicate that I love a certain kind of chocolate. And all of a sudden, I start receiving advertisements for chocolate. What if I don't want to receive those commercial advertisements?" asked sen. Nelson, while sen. Tillis revealed his secrets for a harmonious Facebook experience: "I've got 4,900 friends on my Facebook page. I delete the haters and save room for family members and true friends on my personal page, as I'm sure everybody does".

Of course, not all the questions followed this pattern, but those who did were subjected to criticism and amusement on social media, especially as comments and memes (Boredpanda Contributors, 2018), some of them being discriminatory towards elderly individuals. For example, with approximately 30,000 appreciations, a Twitter user, Robby Soaves stated: "Mark Zuckerberg is now living out every young person's worst nightmare: trying to explain how tech stuff works to the nation's elderly". Bob Vulfov, another Twitter user posted: "Zuckerberg: im ready to answer any questions u might have about facebook/ 84-YEAR-OLD-SENATOR: excellent. Mr Zuckerberg my Farmville farm needs more pigs but I cannot figure out where to purchase them". The memes and

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[3] This phrase does not represent someone's quotation, but a description observed by the author to have been elaborated by multiple users/ collective author on social media, right after the scandal erupted

comments addressed other topics, such as Zuckerberg's expressions or looks: "I appreciate that zuck has eight gazillion dollars and still looks like he got his hair cut by his mom" (said Twitter user, Brandy Jensen).

To conclude, besides the topic itself, the hearing was interesting from a sociological point of view as well: not only the guilty individual redeemed to a certain extent his reputation without doing anything else but providing answers to senators' questions, but the power seemed to be migrating from the senators- who represented the state, the law and the authority- to the witness. Despite the fact that these hearings were meant to shed some light upon the situation created, more questions emerged. As sociologists, we cannot refrain from wondering whether this meeting would have been scheduled had the number of users affected would have been significantly smaller. Moreover, it is obvious that using a service or a product never comes for free. However, Facebook is a free platform, hence there are ways to compensate this aspect. On the other hand, telecommunication companies (and they don't provide free services) used to sell data about their customers, internet providers are allowed to sell the browsing history of their users, and the national regulations are yet to prohibit that behavior.

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Cristiana Lotrea is a Phd. Candidate at the University of Bucharest, Doctoral School of Sociology. In 2015, she graduated from University as valedictorian, with the thesis on "The Perception of Sexual Harassment of Men by Women" in which she highlighted the fact that sexual harassment may be perceived either as an offence or as a compliment when perpetrator's gender is considered. In 2017 she graduated as valedictorian from the "Research in Sociology" Master Program with the thesis "Studying the Romanian Youth. Towards an Understanding of the Process of Emergence into Adulthood" in which she analyzed the processes that young adults go through. For the doctoral research, Cristiana Lotrea aims to study the way parents with locomotor disabilities manage to glide from the role of care-receivers to one of care- providers, as well as to understand their challenges, coping strategies and speech adjustments. Her main areas of interest are Sociology of Health and Illness, Sociology of Self and Identity, and Social Stratification.