

Facebook gets thumbs down for handling of data scandal

March 30 2018, by Frédéric Pouchot



A woman makes a thumbs down sign in front of Facebook's corporate headquarters in Menlo Park, California. The world's biggest social network has come under increasing criticism for its handling of the revelations that the data of 50 million users had been hijacked and used to help elect US President Donald Trump

When it comes to its handling of the scandal over how its users' data was harvested to help elect US President Donald Trump, Facebook gets an almighty thumbs down from crisis management experts.

Public relations specialists questioned by AFP were damning in their verdict of how the world's biggest social network has dealt with the fall-out of the revelations that Cambridge Analytica obtained users' personal information to try to manipulate US voters.

Slow and unconvincing explanations they say have left Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg dangerously exposed.

While the news that the data of 50 million users had been hijacked broke in the The Observer newspaper on March 17, it took Zuckerberg five days to publicly address the firestorm by apologising first on Facebook and then CNN.

That is an eternity in the digital age, said Marie Muzard, head of the MMC communications agency.

"The most basic of basics in crisis management is that every hour that passes without reacting allows a little more sound and fury to gather," she said.

What makes that all the more ironic was that much of that fury was gathering on Facebook itself.

"Because Facebook is a communications platform it has especially a responsibility to be timely and proactive in its response," said Seth Linden, president of New York-based Dukas Linden Public Relations.

"It's one of the most influential brands in the world, which made the lack of a timely response even more negatively impactful."

'Not convincing'

The manner of Zuckerberg's mea culpa and his attempts to explain the breach have been far from convincing, according to Laure Boulay of the Paris-based L'Atelier de l'Opinion (Opinion Workshop).

Instead the crisis has "highlighted the kind of smokescreen" behind which Facebook has worked, she said.

"You can see they need to restore confidence, but Facebook is in a very weak position because it was not transparent enough before all this happened about how it worked and what its teams were doing," she added.

Muzard was even more damning.



This combination of file pictures created on March 30, 2018 shows (L) Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg delivering a keynote address during the Facebook f8 conference in San Francisco, California and (R) Chief Operating Officer of Facebook Sheryl Sandberg inaugurating the interactive Facebook exhibition "Connexions" at start-up hub Station F in Paris on January 22, 2018

"Zuckerberg was smart enough to hold up his hands up and try to offload some of the responsibility onto the researcher Aleksandr Kogan and Cambridge Analytica. Yet pleading naivety and saying that they never thought the data would be used to swing elections is very problematic.

"It is just not credible for a company as smart as Facebook to say that,"

she said.

"If we are to believe that it means that Zuckerberg has created a monster that he cannot control, like Frankenstein. And if we don't swallow that, it implies is that he may be lying," she added.

With the face of the social network having to face the music alone up until now, Zuckerberg risks being burned, experts warned.

Many commentators have noted the conspicuous absence of Zuckerberg's right-hand woman, Sheryl Sandberg, the architect of the internet giant's hugely profitable advertising business based on exploiting its users' data.

The bestselling self-help author had been regarded as the savvy, emotionally intelligent "adult" of the company in contrast to the youthful geeky Zuckerberg.

Zuckerberg vulnerable

"The crux of the crisis is the almost hero status of Zuckerberg and Sandberg," Boulay insisted.

"They have been weakened and we are now practically in the narrative of the fallen idol. The way the company is totally identified with its founder rather than those who actually run the company has left it fragile in the face of the crisis," she added.

Muzard warned that Zuckerberg is personally vulnerable if the "crisis of confidence lingers on. He might find it hard to hold on if shareholders start getting out. Things can happen very quickly. His equivalent at Uber did not survive a series of crises, and because Zuckerberg personifies Facebook there is no real fall guy to take the bullet for him."

He is therefore taking a big gamble by agreeing to testify before the US Congress, even if Facebook has also ramped up its lobbying of politicians.

"There is tremendous pressure on him," said Linden, who has prepared other company bosses to face grillings by lawmakers.

Ideally, he said Zuckerberg would need a month of coaching.

"He must have the patience, knowledge and delivery needed to get through this experience. He must understand the nuances of key congressional committee members' style and their state's needs, and he must be informative without being unintentionally condescending or unclear in his message," Linden said.

"He must also have the right physical posture and tone of voice. Even with the best preparation, it will be a physically and emotionally exhausting," he predicted.

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