

Zuckerberg faces 'Grandpa' questions from lawmakers

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Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg pauses while testifying before a House Energy and Commerce hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, April 11, 2018, about the use of Facebook data to target American voters in the 2016 election and data privacy. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

Mark Zuckerberg faced two days of grilling before House and Senate committees Tuesday and Wednesday to address Facebook's privacy issues and the need for more regulation for the social media site.

Yet the hearings in Washington managed to showcase the normally press-shy Zuckerberg's ability to perform as an able and well-rehearsed, if a bit stiff, CEO of one of the world's biggest companies—and the degree to which much of Congress appears befuddled about technology and the relevant issues.

"For the most part, so far, this has been a victory for Facebook and Mark Zuckerberg and enormous validation that D.C. is ineffectual," said Scott Galloway, who teaches marketing at New York University.

The hearings were a major test for Zuckerberg. Facebook is confronting its biggest privacy scandal in 14 years after it was revealed that the data firm Cambridge Analytica misused data from up to 87 million users.

Some members of Congress hold computer science degrees or other technical knowledge and were well-versed in the issues, drilling Zuckerberg about how Facebook tracks people who are not on the site and what changes the [social media](#) will make to protect user data. Others focused on concerns like censorship and perceived bias on the site as well as children's privacy policies.

But many appeared out of touch on the fundamentals of how Facebook works and lobbed mainly softball questions.

On Wednesday Gus Bilirakis, a Florida Republican, asked about the removal of inappropriate opioid advertisements from the site. But he also waxed on about how many people his age and older use Facebook.

"My friends, my constituents—we all use Facebook," Bilirakis said. "It's wonderful for us seniors to connect with our relatives."



Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg testifies before a joint hearing of the Commerce and Judiciary Committees on Capitol Hill in Washington, Tuesday, April 10, 2018, about the use of Facebook data to target American voters in the 2016 election. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

Part of the problem was the structure of the hearings. Dozens of lawmakers had just four or five minutes to ask questions. Tough follow-up queries were few.

Another was age: The average age of senators is 62, with several in their 80s. On Tuesday, Senators peppered Zuckerberg with questions about Facebook's lengthy privacy policy and its data but often didn't seem to know how to follow up on Zuckerberg's talk of algorithms and AI systems.

Many of Zuckerberg's answers to Congress people served as a crash

course in Facebook 101, or basic information about Facebook's business model. On Tuesday, 84-year old Senator Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, who had been a senator for nearly eight years when Zuckerberg was born, asked how Facebook's business model works given that it is free.

"Senator, we run ads," Zuckerberg explained, a smile breaking through his solemn demeanor.

Another laugh came when Lindsay Graham, R.-S.C., asked whether Facebook was a monopoly.

"It certainly doesn't seem that way to me," Zuckerberg replied

On Wednesday, Rep. Joe Barton, R-Texas, had a similar "Grandpa" moment, holding up his phone and observing that he had received a question from a constituent "through Facebook."

"I actually use Facebook," he added.



Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg departs after testifying before a House Energy and Commerce hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, April 11, 2018, about the use of Facebook data to target American voters in the 2016 election and data privacy. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

Bobby Rush, D-Ill., appearing frail, reached back in history to liken Facebook's privacy policy to J. Edgar Hoover's covert FBI surveillance program, called Counter Intelligence Program, or Cointelpro, in the 1960s. Zuckerberg responded with one of his oft-repeated statements that users control who sees what on their Facebook page.

And in the fourth hour of the House hearing on Wednesday, Markwayne Mullin, R.-Okla., asked a question Zuckerberg had been asked multiple times. Once again, it was about the basic way Facebook works.

"How can someone control keeping the content within the realm they

want it to without being collected?" Mullin asked.

"If you don't want any data to be collected around advertising, you can turn that off and we won't do it," Zuckerberg reiterated.

The soft questioning "goes directly to the point that the technical expertise among Senators is weak," said Timothy Carone, Notre Dame business professor.

And they allowed Zuckerberg to repeat his talking points—that Facebook doesn't own or sell users data, that he and other senior executives weren't proactive enough with Cambridge Analytica but they've changed that, and that using artificial intelligence in elections to stop fake accounts is a top priority.

The result?

"He's giving the same responses to the same questions from different senators," said Helio Fred Garcia, a professor of crisis management at NYU and Columbia University in New York.



Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg arrives to testify before a House Energy and Commerce hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, April 11, 2018, about the use of Facebook data to target American voters in the 2016 election and data privacy. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

Zuckerberg seemed often to retreat to three "safe havens," Garcia said:

One, diffusing responsibility to his "team."

Two, when pressed on policy issues, agreeing to a principle without committing to details.

And three, never failing in answering questions to start by addressing the questioner as "Senator" or "Congressman."

"He's diligent in showing deference and respect," Garcia said.

Still, Richard Levick, CEO of public-relations firm Levick, who has worked with executives to prepare for testimony, said that while Zuckerberg performed well, Facebook's problems don't end with the end of the hearing.

"The real challenge is going to come now," Levick said. "Everyone will be looking at what Facebook is doing in court and around the country and take issues with the promises that he made today."

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