Facebook's revelations: Real change or window dressing?

August 4 2018, by Barbara Ortutay

In this April 18, 2017 file photo, Conference workers speak in front of a demo booth at Facebook's annual F8 developer conference, in San Jose, Calif. For a company bent on making the world more open, Facebook has long been secretive and reluctant to talk about security issues. Yet on Tuesday, July 31, 2018, it rushed forward to alert Congress and the media that it had recently detected a small but telling case of election manipulation. While this signals a new openness for the company, there is plenty that Facebook still isn't saying, and experts wonder whether it's mere window dressing or a true culture shift. (AP Photo/Noah Berger, File)

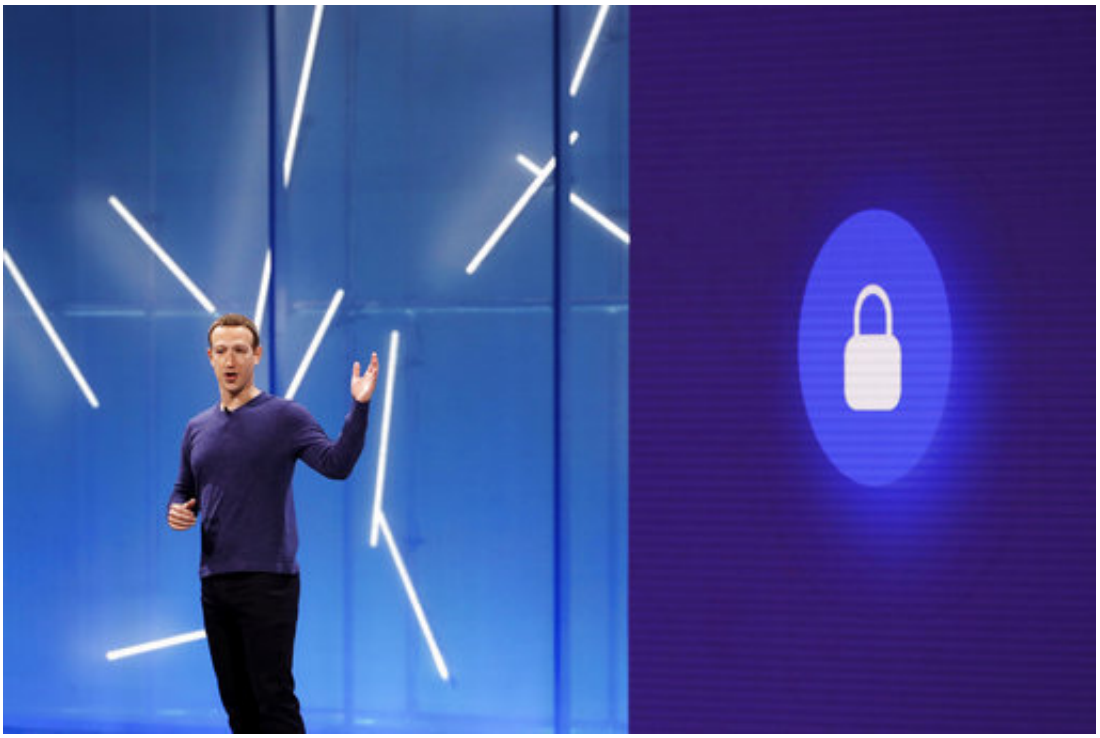
For a company bent on making the world more open, Facebook has long been secretive about the details of how it runs its social network—particularly how things go wrong and what it does about them.

Yet on Tuesday, Facebook rushed forward to alert Congress and the public that it had recently detected a small but "sophisticated" case of possible Russian election manipulation. Has the social network finally acknowledged the need to keep the world informed about the big problems it's grappling with, rather than doing so only when dragged kicking and screaming to the podium?

While the unprompted revelation does signal a new, albeit tightly controlled openness for the company, there is still plenty that Facebook isn't saying. Many experts remain unconvinced that this is a true culture change and not mere window dressing.

"This is all calculated very carefully," said Timothy Carone, a business professor at the University of Notre Dame. He and other analysts noted that Facebook announced its discovery of 32 accounts and pages intended to stir up U.S. political discord just a week after the company's stock dropped almost 20 percent—its worst plunge since going public.

But Facebook's proactive disclosure, including a conference call for reporters with chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg, struck a markedly different tone from the company's ham-handed approach to a string of scandals and setbacks over the past two years. That has included:



In this May 1, 2018 file photo, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg makes the keynote speech at F8, the Facebook's developer conference, in San Jose, Calif. For a company bent on making the world more open, Facebook has long been secretive and reluctant to talk about security issues. Yet on Tuesday, July 31 it rushed forward to alert Congress and the media that it had recently detected a small but telling case of election manipulation. While this signals a new openness for the company, there is plenty that Facebook still isn't saying, and experts wonder whether it's mere window dressing or a true culture shift. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File)

— CEO Mark Zuckerberg's infamous dismissal of the idea that fake news on Facebook could have influenced the 2016 election as "a pretty crazy idea";

— The company's foot-dragging as evidence mounted of a 2016 Russian election-interference effort conducted on Facebook and other social-media sites;

— Zuckerberg, again, declining for nearly a week to publicly address the privacy furor over a Trump campaign consultant, Cambridge Analytica, that scavenged data from tens of millions of Facebook users for its own election-influence efforts.

A chastened Facebook has since taken steps toward transparency, many of them easy to overlook. In April, it published for the first time the detailed guidelines its moderators use to police unacceptable material. It has provided additional, if partial, explanations of how it collects user data and what it does with it. And it has forced disclosure of the funding and audience targeting of political advertisements, which it now also archives for public scrutiny.

All of that is in keeping with the image of Facebook that Zuckerberg relentlessly promotes. In his telling, the giant, data-and-ad-driven social network is a force for good in the world that must now reluctantly do battle with "bad actors," such as Russian agents, who threaten Facebook's noble mission of "connecting the world."

In this Nov. 1, 2017 file photo, Facebook's General Counsel Colin Stretch speaks during a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing on Russian election activity and technology, on Capitol Hill in Washington. For a company bent on making the world more open, Facebook has long been secretive and reluctant to talk about security issues. Yet on Tuesday, July 31, 2018, it rushed forward to alert Congress and the media that it had recently detected a small but telling case of election manipulation. While this signals a new openness for the company, there is plenty that Facebook still isn't saying, and experts wonder whether it's mere window dressing or a true culture shift. (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin, File)

Solving such problems, in Facebook's view, is mostly a matter of more investment, more hard work, more hires, and better technology—particularly artificial intelligence.

And Facebook's newfound passion for openness only goes so far. Of the 32 apparently fake accounts and pages it found, it only released eight to researchers. In a conference call this week, executives declined to

characterize the accounts, even in terms of whether they leaned right or left. Facebook left it to researchers at the nonprofit Atlantic Council, a think tank that is helping the company on election interference, to draw those conclusions.

Facebook said its timing was motivated by an upcoming protest event in Washington that was promoted by a suspicious page connected to a Russian troll farm, the Internet Research Agency. Several people connected to the IRA have been indicted by the U.S. special counsel for attempting to interfere in the 2016 election.

Despite Zuckerberg's repeated mantra—delivered to relentless effect in some 10 hours of testimony before Congress in April—that the company now really gets it, some who know the company best have their doubts.

David Kirkpatrick, the author a Facebook history, argues that neither Zuckerberg nor Sandberg have ever shown themselves to be "deeply alarmed in public." As a result, he suggests, Facebook seems more concerned with managing its image than with solving the actual problem at hand.

In this April 11, 2018 file photo, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg arrives to testify before a House Energy and Commerce hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington, about the use of Facebook data to target American voters in the 2016 election and data privacy. For a company bent on making the world more open, Facebook has long been secretive and reluctant to talk about security issues. Yet on Tuesday, July 31 it rushed forward to alert Congress and the media that it had recently detected a small but telling case of election manipulation. While this signals a new openness for the company, there is plenty that Facebook still isn't saying, and experts wonder whether it's mere window dressing or a true culture shift. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik, File)

Such issues run deep for the company. Some of its biggest critics, including former employees such as Sandy Parakilas and early Facebook investor Roger McNamee, say the company needs to revamp its business model from the ground up to see any meaningful change.

These critics would like to see Facebook rely less on tracking its users in

order to sell targeted advertising, and to cut back on addicting features such as endless notifications that keep drawing people back in. Parakilas, for example, has advocated for a subscription-based model, letting users pay to user Facebook instead of having their data harvested.

Merely hiring more moderators, or hanging hopes on the evolution of artificial intelligence, isn't going to cut it, in their view. There have also been widespread calls for Facebook to acknowledge that it is, in a sense, a media company, responsible for what happens on its platforms—a characterization the social network has long fought.

For all that, Facebook is well ahead of Silicon Valley rivals such as Google and Twitter when it comes to openness—even if only because it's attracted the lion's share of criticism, said Paul Levinson, a media studies professor at Fordham University.

But Facebook "can't win at this game," said Siva Vaidhyanathan, a University of Virginia professor of media studies whose 2018 book "Antisocial Media" critiques Facebook's effect on democracy and society. Because it's so huge—2.2 billion global users and counting—and so difficult to police, he said, "it will always be vulnerable to hijacking and will never completely clean up its content."

Worse, he says, there is no real solution. "It is hopeless," he said. "The problem with Facebook is Facebook."