

Libra and Calibra, Facebook's Cryptocurrency Project: Mark Zuckerberg Appears Before US Congress

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It was never going to be pretty. The Facebook CEO knew [in appearing](#) before the House Financial Services Committee to answer questions on the company's proposed cryptocurrency that a few sizeable bumps would appear. As it turned out, much of the questioning had little to do with the Libra currency, along with its digital wallet format known as Calibra.

New York Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez exemplified the mood, and the method. "In order for us to make decisions about Libra, I think we need to kind of dig into your past behaviour and Facebook's past behaviour with respect to our democracy." It was a scene made out of crudely crafted scripts, albeit mildly spiced by convention: the elevated idealist, perhaps a bit sketchy about history, speaking to the sociopathic innovator; AOC versus Robot Zuck.

In any case, the occasion begged a few questions, as does the entire issue of approaching the power of Facebook and Mark Zuckerberg. To call it a threat to democracy is flabby logic, and distinctly lazy, given the use by Congress of that same company and its own elasticity on matters of fact.

What matters, evidently, is how strong those bonds of use are. For Ocasio-Cortez, the issue of packing Zuckerberg in the company of the far right somehow explains everything. "In your ongoing dinner parties with far-right figures, some of whom advance the conspiracy theory that white supremacy is a hoax, did you discuss social media bias against conservatives, and do you believe there is a bias?" The Facebook CEO remained non-committal.

The line being pushed here, and one that will be revisited with dreary repetition, is the notion of truthful advertising in politics. For a member of Congress to insist that Facebook "take down lies" or otherwise is a fabulous clash of oxymoronic variables. Once you leave it to Facebook to determine political advertising content, another beast is created, one bolstered by the fictional exercises of the "fact checker".

Rep. Madeleine Dean (D-Penn) [attempted](#) to tie a neat bow around the presidency and Facebook, asking Zuckerberg whether Facebook conducted "any business with Trump International Hotel here in Washington, D.C." She had noted "public reports of enterprises and even governments doing business with Trump hotels to curry favour with the Donald Trump administration." The whiff of conspiracy and foreign intrigue is never far away from the post-2016 Democrat.

This point is supremely feeble, if only demonstrating a certain incredulity towards an obvious fact of US business: If you want things done, or at least done in your favour, its best to be in the good books of the administration. Even better, keep Congress in your pocket, a practice that companies from Boeing to Chase Bank do with zealous dedication. Instead of pointing out that obvious point, Zuckerberg preferred a softly, softly approach. "Congresswoman, I will look into it with my team."

Rep. Joyce Beatty (D-Ohio) was enthusiastically grim, suggesting that the digital monster world of Facebook had devastated lives like the Grim Reaper. "It's almost like you think this is a joke when you have ruined the lives of many people, discriminated against them. Do you know what percentage of African-Americans are on Facebook, in comparison to a majority of folks?" Zuckerberg professed ignorance: Facebook did not ask users to specify their race.

Such exchanges ignore the fundamental point that Facebook is voracious, its reach and keenness to identify what it calls "communities" insatiable. The chicken and egg problem presents itself: is the company generating a fictional community to control, or merely furnishing pre-existing communities with the means of engagement?

A clue was supplied back in 2015, when Facebook commissioned IPSOS MediaCT to [conduct a study](#) on "how African Americans communicate and consume media". Of particular interest was the versatile movement between platforms and devices in efforts to "connect to community and sustain culture." With some sense of contentment, it was found that Facebook was the "go-to source for connecting with" an extended family comprising immediate members, church groups and close friends. "Nearly 9 out of 10 African Americans use Facebook to keep up with friends and family, and 7 out of 10 use it to observe what friends and family are doing."

Much of that reads like deodorised marketing tinged with a dash of the sinister, and should be treated as such, but such encounters as those between Beatty and Zuckerberg look all too much like strawman shows rather than cerebral jousts over policy.

Other axes were brought forth to grind. Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-NY) levelled a few blows against Zuckerberg for being an "accelerant in many of the destructive" political confrontations across the globe. (That naughty business of interference, otherwise casual in the policy of the US imperium.) Republican Rep. Ann Wagner from Missouri got heavy on the issue of online child exploitation while Democrat Rep. William Lacy Clay from the same state trod over ground on discrimination against various communities.

Facebook is an engine for facile, commodified social relations, the product of an asocial being who had to find his understanding of humanity through something called a "social network". Its genius lies in mining the confessional, the exposure, the ridiculousness of humans who are garrulous behind the screen and forthcoming on it. It brings out the voyeur in its users and gives substance a profound shallowness. Little wonder that politicians both adore and dread the medium, using it one day to promote messages in the illusion of feeling closer to their constituents, and condemning it as being distinctly unprincipled and undemocratic the next.

For one, the manipulation of politics, the buying of votes, the wooing of legislatures, never began, nor will stop, with Facebook. Facebook is merely the acid manifestation of a long-term problem with managerial democracy, doomed to a slow and cruel death at the hand of

amoral apparatchiks. Cambridge Analytica was not a revolutionary in the field, merely a successor to the public relations creatures that had come into gold with data mining and personality profiling.

Ironically enough, Zuckerberg's under six-hour hearing absorbed much in the way of questions without giving much away. But on Libra, the main reason for his showing, he struggled. How would the company make money from Libra? How would the external Libra Association be fuelled? (To date, the 21 companies in the association have yet to fork out the minimum \$10 million entry fee, suggesting the possibility of Facebook going alone.) As Alex Heath [noted](#), "Zuckerberg's testimony didn't shed any light on what specific laws Facebook thinks should govern Libra." Much more time might have been expended on that instead of lobbing grenades at Big Bad Zuck, lies, identity politics and all.

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