

The New York Times

Facebook Targeted in Scathing Report by British Parliament

By Adam Satariano

Feb. 18, 2019

LONDON — After 18 months investigating Facebook and online misinformation, a British parliamentary committee issued a scathing report on Monday, accusing the company of breaking data privacy and competition laws and calling for new regulations to rein in the technology industry.

Repeated scandals involving Facebook and other tech companies demand more government oversight, the committee concluded, including laws making internet companies legally liable for content shared on their websites.

“The era of self-regulation for tech companies should come to an end,” said Damian Collins, the chairman of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, which published the report.

The conclusions in Britain add to momentum globally for new regulations against the technology sector. Europe has been the most aggressive in taking on Silicon Valley, but a tougher approach is gaining ground in the United States, where the Federal Trade Commission is considering imposing a multibillion dollar fine against Facebook, and lawmakers have called for new data-privacy regulations.

The parliamentary report recommends the creation of a British watchdog to oversee the technology industry, similar to the country’s approach to regulating media companies. It also suggested legally requiring Facebook and other large internet platforms to remove what the government determines to be harmful content, or risk fines or other punishments.

Silicon Valley has long opposed making tech companies responsible for content on their sites. The industry argues that websites like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are simply unbiased platforms for others to share material, and that new restrictions could impede free speech.

**You have 3 free articles remaining.
Subscribe to The Times**

“Social media companies cannot hide behind the claim of being merely a ‘platform’ and maintain that they have no responsibility themselves in regulating the content of their sites,” the parliamentary report said.

Facebook acknowledged past mistakes and said it was open to “meaningful regulation.”

“While we still have more to do, we are not the same company we were a year ago,” said Karim Palant, a public policy manager for Facebook in Britain. “We have tripled the size of the team working to detect and protect users from bad content to 30,000 people and invested heavily in machine learning, artificial intelligence and computer vision technology to help prevent this type of abuse.”

The blistering report concludes the committee’s work, which started as a study of how social media can be manipulated to influence elections like Britain’s 2016 vote to exit the European Union, but became a closer examination of Facebook business practices. The committee held several hearings related to Facebook’s relationship with Cambridge Analytica, the voter-targeting firm that gained access to 87 million Facebook users.

The committee does not have lawmaking authority on its own, but Mr. Collins said in an interview that he hoped the recommendations would be incorporated into a broader review of technology regulation underway within the British government. Policymakers are debating new rules to prevent online election meddling, and the spread of hate speech and terrorist content.

A British parliamentary committee would not typically cause much worry for a company of Facebook’s size, but the panel became a persistent challenge for the social media company.

Mr. Collins has threatened to force Facebook’s chief executive officer, Mark Zuckerberg, to testify if he ever travels to Britain. In December, the committee released a trove of secret internal emails in which Mr. Zuckerberg and other Facebook executives discussed sharing access to user data with certain companies, like Netflix and Airbnb, while cutting off others.

The committee said the emails showed Facebook’s willingness to sacrifice user privacy to maximize revenue and generate more advertising dollars. Without new oversight, technology companies cannot be expected to change, the report concluded.

“The big tech companies must not be allowed to expand exponentially, without constraint or proper regulatory oversight,” the report said. “But only governments and the law are powerful enough to contain them.”