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Delay, Deny and Deflect: How Facebook's Leaders Fought Through Crisis

By **Sheera Frenkel, Nicholas Confessore, Cecilia Kang, Matthew Rosenberg and Jack Nicas**

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Sheryl Sandberg was seething.

Inside Facebook's Menlo Park, Calif., headquarters, top executives gathered in the glass-walled conference room of its founder, Mark Zuckerberg. It was September 2017, more than a year after Facebook engineers discovered suspicious Russia-linked activity on its site, an early warning of the Kremlin campaign to disrupt the 2016 American election. Congressional and federal investigators were closing in on evidence that would implicate the company.

But it wasn't the looming disaster at Facebook that angered Ms. Sandberg. It was the social network's security chief, Alex Stamos, who had informed company board members the day before that Facebook had yet to contain the Russian infestation. Mr. Stamos's briefing had prompted a humiliating boardroom interrogation of Ms. Sandberg, Facebook's chief operating officer, and her billionaire boss. She appeared to regard the admission as a betrayal.

"You threw us under the bus!" she yelled at Mr. Stamos, according to people who were present.

The clash that day would set off a reckoning — for Mr. Zuckerberg, for Ms. Sandberg and for the business they had built together. In just over a decade, Facebook has connected more than 2.2 billion people, a global nation unto itself that reshaped political campaigns, the advertising business and daily life around the world. Along the way, Facebook accumulated one of the largest-ever repositories of personal data, a treasure trove of photos, messages and likes that propelled the company into the Fortune 500.

[Here's how Facebook failed to police how its partners handled user data.]

But as evidence accumulated that Facebook's power could also be exploited to disrupt elections, broadcast viral propaganda and inspire deadly campaigns of hate around the globe, Mr. Zuckerberg and Ms. Sandberg stumbled. Bent on growth, the pair ignored warning signs and then sought to conceal them from public view. At critical moments over the last three years, they were distracted by personal projects, and passed off security and policy decisions to subordinates, according to current and former executives.

Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's chief operating officer, has overseen an aggressive campaign to fight critics and ward off regulation.

Joshua Roberts/Reuters



When Facebook users learned last spring that the company had compromised their privacy in its rush to expand, allowing access to the personal information of tens of millions of people to a political data firm linked to President Trump, Facebook sought to deflect blame and mask the extent of the problem.

And when that failed — as the company's stock price plummeted and it faced a consumer backlash — Facebook went on the attack.

While Mr. Zuckerberg has conducted a public apology tour in the last year, Ms. Sandberg has overseen an aggressive lobbying campaign to combat Facebook's critics, shift public anger toward rival companies and ward off damaging regulation. Facebook employed a Republican opposition-research firm to discredit activist protesters, in part by linking them to the liberal financier George Soros. It also tapped its business relationships, lobbying a Jewish civil rights group to cast some criticism of the company as anti-Semitic.

In Washington, allies of Facebook, including Senator Chuck Schumer, the Democratic Senate leader, intervened on its behalf. And Ms. Sandberg wooed or cajoled hostile lawmakers, while trying to dispel Facebook's reputation as a bastion of Bay Area liberalism.

This account of how Mr. Zuckerberg and Ms. Sandberg navigated Facebook's cascading crises, much of which has not been previously reported, is based on interviews with more than 50 people. They include current and former Facebook executives and other employees, lawmakers and government officials, lobbyists and congressional staff members. Most spoke on the condition of anonymity because they had signed confidentiality agreements, were not authorized to speak to reporters or feared retaliation.

Facebook declined to make Mr. Zuckerberg and Ms. Sandberg available for comment. In a statement, a spokesman acknowledged that Facebook had been slow to address its challenges but had since made progress fixing the platform.

“This has been a tough time at Facebook and our entire management team has been focused on tackling the issues we face,” the statement said. “While these are hard problems we are working hard to ensure that people find our products useful and that we protect our community from bad actors.”

Even so, trust in the social network has sunk, while its pell-mell growth has slowed. Regulators and law enforcement officials in the United States and Europe are investigating Facebook's conduct with Cambridge Analytica, a political data firm that worked with Mr. Trump's 2016 campaign, opening up the company to fines and other liability. Both the Trump administration and lawmakers have begun crafting proposals for a national privacy law, setting up a yearslong struggle over the future of Facebook's data-hungry business model.

[Despite a turbulent two years, here's why almost no one in tech thinks Mark Zuckerberg should step down from the company he built.]

"We failed to look and try to imagine what was hiding behind corners," Elliot Schrage, former vice president for global communications, marketing and public policy at Facebook, said in an interview.

Mr. Zuckerberg, 34, and Ms. Sandberg, 49, remain at the company's helm, while Mr. Stamos and other high-profile executives have left after disputes over Facebook's priorities. Mr. Zuckerberg, who controls the social network with 60 percent of the voting shares and who approved many of its directors, has been asked repeatedly in the last year whether he should step down as chief executive.

His answer each time: a resounding "No."

'Don't Poke the Bear'



Joel Kaplan, right, Facebook's vice president for corporate public policy, attended an April Senate hearing where he coached Mark Zuckerberg, the company's chief executive, largely eluded tough questions.

Tom Brenner/The New York Times

Three years ago, Mr. Zuckerberg, who founded Facebook in 2004 while attending Harvard, was celebrated for the company's extraordinary success. Ms. Sandberg, a former Clinton administration official and Google veteran, had become a feminist icon with the publication of her empowerment manifesto, "Lean In," in 2013.

Like other technology executives, Mr. Zuckerberg and Ms. Sandberg cast their company as a force for social good. Facebook's lofty aims were emblazoned even on securities filings: "Our mission is to make the world more open and connected."

But as Facebook grew, so did the hate speech, bullying and other toxic content on the platform. When researchers and activists in Myanmar, India, Germany and elsewhere warned that Facebook had become an instrument of government propaganda and ethnic cleansing, the company largely ignored them. Facebook had positioned itself as a platform, not a publisher. Taking responsibility for what users posted, or acting to censor it, was expensive and complicated. Many Facebook executives worried that any such efforts would backfire.

Then Donald J. Trump ran for president. He described Muslim immigrants and refugees as a danger to America, and in December 2015 posted a statement on Facebook calling for a "total and complete shutdown" on Muslims entering the United States. Mr. Trump's call to arms — widely condemned by Democrats and some prominent Republicans — was shared more than 15,000 times on Facebook, an illustration of the site's power to spread racist sentiment.

Mr. Zuckerberg, who had helped found a nonprofit dedicated to immigration reform, was appalled, said employees who spoke to him or were familiar with the conversation. He asked Ms. Sandberg and other executives if Mr. Trump had violated Facebook's terms of service.

The question was unusual. Mr. Zuckerberg typically focused on broader technology issues; politics was Ms. Sandberg's domain. In 2010, Ms. Sandberg, a Democrat, had recruited a friend and fellow Clinton alum, Marne Levine, as Facebook's chief Washington representative. A year later, after Republicans seized control of the House, Ms. Sandberg installed another friend, a well-connected Republican: Joel Kaplan, who had attended Harvard with Ms. Sandberg and later served in the George W. Bush administration.

Some at Facebook viewed Mr. Trump's 2015 attack on Muslims as an opportunity to finally take a stand against the hate speech coursing through its platform. But Ms. Sandberg, who was edging back to work after the death of her husband several months earlier, delegated the matter to Mr. Schrage and Monika Bickert, a former prosecutor whom Ms. Sandberg had recruited as the company's head of global policy management. Ms. Sandberg also turned to the Washington office — particularly to Mr. Kaplan, said people who participated in or were briefed on the discussions.

In video conference calls between the Silicon Valley headquarters and Washington, the three officials construed their task narrowly. They parsed the company's terms of service to see if the post, or Mr. Trump's account, violated Facebook's rules.

Mr. Kaplan argued that Mr. Trump was an important public figure and that shutting down his account or removing the statement could be seen as obstructing free speech, said three employees who knew of the discussions. He said it could also stoke a conservative backlash.

"Don't poke the bear," Mr. Kaplan warned.

Mr. Zuckerberg did not participate in the debate. Ms. Sandberg attended some of the video meetings but rarely spoke.

Mr. Schrage concluded that Mr. Trump's language had not violated Facebook's rules and that the candidate's views had public value. "We were trying to make a decision based on all the legal and technical evidence before us," he said in an interview.

In the end, Mr. Trump's statement and account remained on the site. When Mr. Trump won election the next fall, giving Republicans control of the White House as well as Congress, Mr. Kaplan was empowered to plan accordingly. The company hired a former aide to Mr. Trump's new attorney general, Jeff Sessions, along with lobbying firms linked to Republican lawmakers who had jurisdiction over internet companies.

But inside Facebook, new troubles were brewing.

Minimizing Russia's Role

At a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing in November 2017, Facebook and other tech giants were asked about Russia's election meddling. Eric Thayer for The New York Times

In the final months of Mr. Trump's presidential campaign, Russian agents escalated a yearlong effort to hack and harass his Democratic opponents, culminating in the release of thousands of emails stolen from prominent Democrats and party officials.

Facebook had said nothing publicly about any problems on its own platform. But in the spring of 2016, a company expert on Russian cyberwarfare spotted something worrisome. He reached out to his boss, Mr. Stamos.

Mr. Stamos's team discovered that Russian hackers appeared to be probing Facebook accounts for people connected to the presidential campaigns, said two employees. Months later, as Mr. Trump battled Hillary Clinton in the general election, the team also found Facebook accounts linked to Russian hackers who were messaging journalists to share information from the stolen emails.

Mr. Stamos, 39, told Colin Stretch, Facebook's general counsel, about the findings, said two people involved in the conversations. At the time, Facebook had no policy on disinformation or any resources dedicated to searching for it.

Mr. Stamos, acting on his own, then directed a team to scrutinize the extent of Russian activity on Facebook. In December 2016, after Mr. Zuckerberg publicly scoffed at the idea that fake news on Facebook had helped elect Mr. Trump, Mr. Stamos — alarmed that the company's chief executive seemed unaware of his team's findings — met with Mr. Zuckerberg, Ms. Sandberg and other top Facebook leaders.

Ms. Sandberg was angry. Looking into the Russian activity without approval, she said, had left the company exposed legally. Other executives asked Mr. Stamos why they had not been told sooner.

Still, Ms. Sandberg and Mr. Zuckerberg decided to expand on Mr. Stamos's work, creating a group called Project P, for "propaganda," to study false news on the site, according to people involved in the discussions. By January 2017, the group knew that Mr. Stamos's original team had only scratched the surface of Russian activity on Facebook, and pressed to issue a public paper about their findings.

Alex Stamos, Facebook's former security chief, met with criticism as he investigated Russian activity on the platform.
Steve Marcus/Reuters

But Mr. Kaplan and other Facebook executives objected. Washington was already reeling from an official finding by American intelligence agencies that Vladimir V. Putin, the Russian president, had personally ordered an influence campaign aimed at helping elect Mr. Trump.

If Facebook implicated Russia further, Mr. Kaplan said, Republicans would accuse the company of siding with Democrats. And if Facebook pulled down the Russians' fake pages, regular Facebook users might also react with outrage at having been deceived: His own mother-in-law, Mr. Kaplan said, had followed a Facebook page created by Russian trolls.

Ms. Sandberg sided with Mr. Kaplan, recalled four people involved. Mr. Zuckerberg — who spent much of 2017 on a national “listening tour,” feeding cows in Wisconsin and eating dinner with Somali refugees in Minnesota — did not participate in the conversations about the public paper. When it was published that April, the word “Russia” never appeared.

Ms. Sandberg's subordinates took a similar approach in Washington, where the Senate had begun pursuing its own investigation, led by Richard Burr, the North Carolina Republican, and Mark Warner, the Virginia Democrat. Throughout the spring and summer of 2017, Facebook officials repeatedly played down Senate investigators' concerns about the company, while publicly claiming there had been no Russian effort of any significance on Facebook.

But inside the company, employees were tracing more ads, pages and groups back to Russia. That June, a Times reporter provided Facebook a list of accounts with suspected ties to Russia, seeking more information on their provenance. By August 2017, Facebook executives concluded that the situation had become what one called a “five-alarm fire,” said a person familiar with the discussions.

Mr. Zuckerberg and Ms. Sandberg agreed to go public with some findings, and laid plans to release a blog post on Sept. 6, 2017, the day of the company's quarterly board meeting.

After Mr. Stamos and his team drafted the post, however, Ms. Sandberg and her deputies insisted it be less specific. She and Mr. Zuckerberg also asked Mr. Stamos and Mr. Stretch to brief the board's audit committee, chaired by Erskine Bowles, the patrician investor and White House veteran.

Colin Stretch, Facebook's general counsel, learned in 2016 that suspicious Russian activity on the social network had been detected internally.
Eric Thayer for The New York Times

Mr. Stretch and Mr. Stamos went into more detail with the audit committee than planned, warning that Facebook was likely to find even more evidence of Russian interference.

The disclosures set off Mr. Bowles, who after years in Washington could anticipate how lawmakers might react. He grilled the two men, occasionally cursing, on how Facebook had allowed itself to become a tool for Russian interference. He demanded to know why it had taken so long to uncover the activity, and why Facebook directors were only now being told.

When the full board gathered later that day at a room at the company's headquarters reserved for sensitive meetings, Mr. Bowles pelted questions at Facebook's founder and second-in-command. Ms. Sandberg, visibly unsettled, apologized. Mr. Zuckerberg, stone-faced, whirred through technical fixes, said three people who attended or were briefed on the proceedings.

Later that day, the company's abbreviated blog post went up. It said little about fake accounts or the organic posts created by Russian trolls that had gone viral on Facebook, disclosing only that Russian agents had spent roughly \$100,000 — a relatively tiny sum — on approximately 3,000 ads.

Just one day after the company's carefully sculpted admission, The Times published an investigation of further Russian activity on Facebook, showing how Russian intelligence had used fake accounts to promote emails stolen from the Democratic Party and prominent Washington figures.

A Political Playbook

Senators Amy Klobuchar and Mark Warner introduced legislation last fall to force Facebook and other tech companies to disclose who bought political ads on their sites. Al Drago for The New York Times

The combined revelations infuriated Democrats, finally fracturing the political consensus that had protected Facebook and other big tech companies from Beltway interference. Republicans, already concerned that the platform was censoring conservative views, accused Facebook of fueling what they claimed were meritless conspiracy charges against Mr. Trump and Russia. Democrats, long allied with Silicon Valley on issues including immigration and gay rights, now blamed Mr. Trump's win partly on Facebook's tolerance for fraud and disinformation.

After stalling for weeks, Facebook eventually agreed to hand over the Russian posts to Congress. Twice in October 2017, Facebook was forced to revise its public statements, finally acknowledging that close to 126 million people had seen the Russian posts.

The same month, Mr. Warner and Senator Amy Klobuchar, the Minnesota Democrat, introduced legislation to compel Facebook and other internet firms to disclose who bought political ads on their sites — a significant expansion of federal regulation over tech companies.

"It's time for Facebook to let all of us see the ads bought by Russians *and paid for in Rubles* during the last election," Ms. Klobuchar wrote on her own Facebook page.

Facebook girded for battle. Days after the bill was unveiled, Facebook hired Mr. Warner's former chief of staff, Luke Albee, to lobby on it. Mr. Kaplan's team took a larger role in managing the company's Washington response, routinely reviewing Facebook news releases for words or phrases that might rile conservatives.

Ms. Sandberg also reached out to Ms. Klobuchar. She had been friendly with the senator, who is featured on the website for Lean In, Ms. Sandberg's empowerment initiative. Ms. Sandberg had contributed a blurb to Ms. Klobuchar's 2015 memoir, and the senator's chief of staff had previously worked at Ms. Sandberg's charitable foundation.

But in a tense conversation shortly after the ad legislation was introduced, Ms. Sandberg complained about Ms. Klobuchar's attacks on the company, said a person who was briefed on the call. Ms. Klobuchar did not back down on her legislation. But she dialed down her criticism in at least one venue important to the company: After blasting Facebook repeatedly that fall on her own Facebook page, Ms. Klobuchar hardly mentioned the company in posts between November and February.

A spokesman for Ms. Klobuchar said in a statement that Facebook's lobbying had not lessened her commitment to holding the company accountable. "Facebook was pushing to exclude issue ads from the Honest Ads Act, and Senator Klobuchar strenuously disagreed and refused to change the bill," he said.

In October 2017, Facebook also expanded its work with a Washington-based consultant, Definers Public Affairs, that had originally been hired to monitor press coverage of the company. Founded by veterans of Republican presidential politics, Definers specialized in applying political campaign tactics to corporate public relations — an approach long employed in Washington by big telecommunications firms and activist hedge fund managers, but less common in tech.

Definers had established a Silicon Valley outpost earlier that year, led by Tim Miller, a former spokesman for Jeb Bush who preached the virtues of campaign-style opposition research. For tech firms, he argued in one interview, a goal should be to "have positive content pushed out about your company and negative content that's being pushed out about your competitor."

Facebook quickly adopted that strategy. In November 2017, the social network came out in favor of a bill called the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act, which made internet companies responsible for sex trafficking ads on their sites.

Google and others had fought the bill for months, worrying it would set a cumbersome precedent. But the sex trafficking bill was championed by Senator John Thune, a Republican of South Dakota who had pummeled Facebook over accusations that it censored conservative content, and Senator Richard Blumenthal, a Connecticut Democrat and senior commerce committee member who was a frequent critic of Facebook.

Facebook broke ranks with other tech companies, hoping the move would help repair relations on both sides of the aisle, said two congressional staffers and three tech industry officials.

When the bill came to a vote in the House in February, Ms. Sandberg offered public support online, urging Congress to “make sure we pass meaningful and strong legislation to stop sex trafficking.”

Opposition Research

Cutouts of Mr. Zuckerberg during a protest outside the United States Capitol in April.

Aaron P. Bernstein/Reuters

In March, The Times, The Observer of London and The Guardian prepared to publish a joint investigation into how Facebook user data had been appropriated by Cambridge Analytica to profile American voters. A few days before publication, The Times presented Facebook with evidence that copies of improperly acquired Facebook data still existed, despite earlier promises by Cambridge executives and others to delete it.

Mr. Zuckerberg and Ms. Sandberg met with their lieutenants to determine a response. They decided to pre-empt the stories, saying in a statement published late on a Friday night that Facebook had suspended Cambridge Analytica from its platform. The executives figured that getting ahead of the news would soften its blow, according to people in the discussions.

They were wrong. The story drew worldwide outrage, prompting lawsuits and official investigations in Washington, London and Brussels. For days, Mr. Zuckerberg and Ms. Sandberg remained out of sight, mulling how to respond. While the Russia investigation had devolved into an increasingly partisan battle, the Cambridge scandal set off Democrats and Republicans alike. And in Silicon Valley, other tech firms began exploiting the outcry to burnish their own brands.

Alexander Nix, former chief executive of the Trump-linked data firm Cambridge Analytica. Facebook came under fire after revelations that it had allowed the firm access to the personal information of tens of millions of people.

Tolga Akmen/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

“We’re not going to traffic in your personal life,” Tim Cook, Apple’s chief executive, said in an MSNBC interview. “Privacy to us is a human right. It’s a civil liberty.” (Mr. Cook’s criticisms infuriated Mr. Zuckerberg, who later ordered his management team to use only Android phones — arguing that the operating system had far more users than Apple’s.)

Facebook scrambled anew. Executives quietly shelved an internal communications campaign, called “We Get It,” meant to assure employees that the company was committed to getting back on track in 2018.

Then Facebook went on the offensive. Mr. Kaplan prevailed on Ms. Sandberg to promote Kevin Martin, a former Federal Communications Commission chairman and fellow Bush administration veteran, to lead the company’s American lobbying efforts. Facebook also expanded its work with Definers.

On a conservative news site called the NTK Network, dozens of articles blasted Google and Apple for unsavory business practices. One story called Mr. Cook hypocritical for chiding Facebook over privacy, noting that Apple also collects reams of data from users. Another played down the impact of the Russians’ use of Facebook.

The rash of news coverage was no accident: NTK is an affiliate of Definers, sharing offices and staff with the public relations firm in Arlington, Va. Many NTK Network stories are written by staff members at Definers or America Rising, the company’s political opposition-research arm, to attack their clients’ enemies. While the NTK Network does not have a large audience of its own, its content is frequently picked up by popular conservative outlets, including Breitbart.

Mr. Miller acknowledged that Facebook and Apple do not directly compete. Definers’ work on Apple is funded by a third technology company, he said, but Facebook has pushed back against Apple because Mr. Cook’s criticism upset Facebook.

If the privacy issue comes up, Facebook is happy to “muddy the waters,” Mr. Miller said over drinks at an Oakland, Calif., bar last month.

On Thursday, after this article was published, Facebook said that it had ended its relationship with Definers, without citing a reason.

In public, Facebook was more conciliatory. Mr. Zuckerberg agreed to testify on Capitol Hill. The company unveiled a gauzy advertising campaign, titled “Here Together,” to apologize to its users. Days before Mr. Zuckerberg’s appearance in Congress in April, Facebook announced that it was endorsing Ms. Klobuchar’s Honest Ads bill and would pre-emptively begin disclosing political ad buyers. It also informed users whose data had been improperly harvested by Cambridge Analytica.

But Mr. Zuckerberg’s good-will tour was bumpy. Thanks to intensive coaching and preparation, the company’s communications team believed, he had effectively parried tough questions at the April hearing. But they worried he had come off as robotic — a suspicion confirmed by

Facebook's pollsters.

Mr. Zuckerberg spoke with Representative Greg Walden during a break in an April hearing, telling him he was surprised at the tough line of questioning.

Michael Reynolds/EPA, via Shutterstock

Mr. Zuckerberg's political instincts were no more well-tuned. During a break in one hearing, he buttonholed Greg Walden, an Oregon Republican who leads the House Energy and Commerce Committee, to express his surprise at how tough on Facebook Democrats had been.

Mr. Walden was taken aback, said people who knew of the remark. Facebook's leader, Mr. Walden realized, did not understand the breadth of the anger now aimed at his creation.

Personal Appeals in Washington

Ms. Sandberg, center left, has wooed or cajoled lawmakers in Washington. Drew Angerer/Getty Images

Ms. Sandberg had said little publicly about the company's problems. But inside Facebook, her approach had begun to draw criticism.

Some colleagues believed that Ms. Sandberg — whose ambitions to return to public life were much discussed at the company — was protecting her own brand at Facebook's expense. At one company gathering, said two people who knew of the event, friends told Ms. Sandberg that if Facebook did not address the scandals effectively, its role in spreading hate and fear would define her legacy, too.

So Ms. Sandberg began taking a more personal role in the company's Washington campaign, drawing on all the polish that Mr. Zuckerberg sometimes lacked. She not only relied on her old Democratic ties, but also sought to assuage skeptical Republicans, who grumbled that

Facebook was more sensitive to the political opinions of its work force than to those of powerful committee leaders. Trailing an entourage of as many as 10 people on trips to the capital, Ms. Sandberg made a point of sending personal thank-you notes to lawmakers and others she met.

Her top Republican target was Mr. Burr, whose Senate committee's Russia investigation had chugged along. The two spoke by phone, according to a congressional staff member and a Facebook executive, and met in person this fall. While critics cast Facebook as a serial offender that had ignored repeated warning signs about the dangers posed by its product, Ms. Sandberg argued that the company was grappling earnestly with the consequences of its extraordinary growth.

She made the same case in June at a conference of the National Association of Attorneys General in Portland, Ore. At the time, several attorneys general had opened or joined investigations into the company. Facebook was eager to head off further trouble.

The company organized several private receptions, including what was billed as a conversation with Ms. Sandberg about "corporate citizenship in the digital age" and a briefing on Cambridge Analytica.

While Facebook had publicly declared itself ready for new federal regulations, Ms. Sandberg privately contended that the social network was already adopting the best reforms and policies available. Heavy-handed regulation, she warned, would only disadvantage smaller competitors.

Some of the officials were skeptical. But Ms. Sandberg's presence — companies typically send lower-ranking executives to such gatherings — persuaded others that Facebook was serious about addressing its problems, according to two who attended the conference.

Facebook also continued to look for ways to deflect criticism to rivals. In June, after The Times reported on Facebook's previously undisclosed deals to share user data with device makers — partnerships Facebook had failed to disclose to lawmakers — executives ordered up focus groups in Washington.

In separate sessions with liberals and conservatives, about a dozen at a time, Facebook previewed messages to lawmakers. Among the approaches it tested was bringing YouTube and other social media platforms into the controversy, while arguing that Google struck similar data-sharing deals.

Deflecting Criticism

Monika Bickert, Facebook's head of global policy management, testifying before Congress in July. Demonstrators held up signs with octopus imagery that a company official flagged as anti-Semitic.

Joshua Roberts/Bloomberg

By then, some of the harshest criticism of Facebook was coming from the political left, where activists and policy experts had begun calling for the company to be broken up.

In July, organizers with a coalition called Freedom from Facebook crashed a hearing of the House Judiciary Committee, where a company executive was testifying about its policies. As the executive spoke, the organizers held aloft signs depicting Ms. Sandberg and Mr. Zuckerberg, who are both Jewish, as two heads of an octopus stretching around the globe.

Eddie Vale, a Democratic public relations strategist who led the protest, later said the image was meant to evoke old cartoons of Standard Oil, the Gilded Age monopoly. But a Facebook official quickly called the Anti-Defamation League, a leading Jewish civil rights organization, to flag the sign. Facebook and other tech companies had partnered with the civil rights group since late 2017 on an initiative to combat anti-Semitism and hate speech online.

That afternoon, the A.D.L. issued a warning from its Twitter account.

“Depicting Jews as an octopus encircling the globe is a classic anti-Semitic trope,” the organization wrote. “Protest Facebook — or anyone — all you want, but pick a different image.” The criticism was soon echoed in conservative outlets including The Washington Free Beacon, which has sought to tie Freedom from Facebook to what the publication calls “extreme anti-Israel groups.”

An A.D.L. spokeswoman, Betsaida Alcantara, said the group routinely fielded reports of anti-Semitic slurs from journalists, synagogues and others. “Our experts evaluate each one based on our years of experience, and we respond appropriately,” Ms. Alcantara said. (The group has at times sharply criticized Facebook, including when Mr. Zuckerberg suggested that his company should not censor Holocaust deniers.)

Facebook also used Definers to take on bigger opponents, such as Mr. Soros, a longtime boogeyman to mainstream conservatives and the target of intense anti-Semitic smears on the far right. A research document circulated by Definers to reporters this summer, just a month after the House hearing, cast Mr. Soros as the unacknowledged force behind what appeared to be a broad anti-Facebook movement.

He was a natural target. In a speech at the World Economic Forum in January, he had attacked Facebook and Google, describing them as a monopolist “menace” with “neither the will nor the inclination to protect society against the consequences of their actions.”

Definers pressed reporters to explore the financial connections between Mr. Soros's family or philanthropies and groups that were members of Freedom from Facebook, such as Color of Change, an online racial justice organization, as well as a progressive group founded by Mr. Soros's son. (An official at Mr. Soros's Open Society Foundations said the philanthropy had supported both member groups, but not Freedom from Facebook, and had made no grants to support campaigns against Facebook.)

Definers also circulated research about other critics of Facebook, such as Diamond and Silk, the pro-Trump social media stars who had claimed they were treated unfairly by Facebook.

In at least one instance, the company also relied on Mr. Schumer, the New York senator and Senate Democratic leader. He has long worked to advance Silicon Valley's interests on issues such as commercial drone regulations and patent reform. During the 2016 election cycle, he raised more money from Facebook employees than any other member of Congress, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

Mr. Zuckerberg speaking with Senator Chuck Schumer in July. The lawmaker, whose daughter works at Facebook, has intervened on the company's behalf.

Drew Angerer/Getty Images

Mr. Schumer also has a personal connection to Facebook: His daughter Alison joined the firm out of college and is now a marketing manager in Facebook's New York office, according to her LinkedIn profile.

In July, as Facebook's troubles threatened to cost the company billions of dollars in market value, Mr. Schumer confronted Mr. Warner, by then Facebook's most insistent inquisitor in Congress.

Back off, he told Mr. Warner, according to a Facebook employee briefed on Mr. Schumer's intervention. Mr. Warner should be looking for ways to work with Facebook, Mr. Schumer advised, not harm it. Facebook lobbyists were kept abreast of Mr. Schumer's efforts to protect the company, according to the employee.

A Senate aide briefed on the exchange said that Mr. Schumer had not wanted Mr. Warner to lose sight of the need for Facebook to tackle problems with right-wing disinformation and election interference, as well as consumer privacy and other issues.

The War Room

Ms. Sandberg with Jack Dorsey, Twitter's chief executive, testifying before the Senate Intelligence Committee in September. Tom Brenner for The New York Times

One morning in late summer, workers layered opaque contact paper onto the windows of a conference room in Facebook's Washington office. Not long after, a security guard was posted outside the door. It was an unusual sight: Facebook prided itself on open office plans and transparent, glass-walled conference rooms.

But Ms. Sandberg was set to testify before the Senate Intelligence Committee — a pivotal encounter for her embattled company — and her aides were taking no chances.

Inside the room, they labored to prepare her for the hearing. They had assembled a binder-size briefing book, covering virtually every issue she might be questioned about, and had hired a former White House lawyer who specialized in training corporate executives.

Facebook lobbyists had already worked the Intelligence Committee hard, asking that lawmakers refrain from questioning Ms. Sandberg about privacy issues, Cambridge Analytica and censorship. The argument was persuasive with Mr. Burr, who was determined to avoid a circuslike atmosphere. A day before the hearing, he issued a stern warning to all committee members to stick to the topic of election interference.

In the committee room the next day was an empty chair behind a placard labeled "Google." Facebook had lobbied for the hearing to include a Google emissary of similar rank to Ms. Sandberg. The company won a partial victory when Mr. Burr announced that Larry Page, a Google co-founder, had been invited, along with Jack Dorsey, Twitter's chief executive.

Mr. Dorsey showed up. Mr. Page did not.

As the hearing unfolded, senators excoriated Google for its absence, earning a wave of negative news coverage for Facebook's rival.

Ms. Sandberg's notes from the September hearing. Facebook lobbyists had worked hard to limit the range of questions Ms. Sandberg would face.

Tom Brenner for The New York Times

Ms. Sandberg spread neatly handwritten notes on the table before her: the names of each senator on the committee, their pet questions and concerns, a reminder to say thank you.

In large letters were her stage directions: "Slow, Pause, Determined."

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