

Facebook

## Unmarked

Mark Zuckerberg and his questioners in Congress fail to reassure



**S**AYING sorry can be an enriching experience. For Mark Zuckerberg, who this week endured two days of questioning in front of Congress, the rewards of contrition are not just metaphorical. Over the course of his testimony, as the Facebook boss apologised for the leakage of data on 87m users to a political-campaign firm, his company's shares rose by 5.7% and his own net worth by \$3.2bn.

Shareholders were doubtless relieved by Mr Zuckerberg's robotic but gaffe-free display. And even the firm's fiercest critics ought to acknowledge the distance that it has travelled since the Cambridge Analytica story broke in March. Mr Zuckerberg welcomed the idea of regulation and cautiously endorsed a forthcoming European law on data protection. By saying explicitly that Facebook was responsible for the content on its platform, he has opened the door to bearing greater liability for the material it carries. But the bounce in the share price also signals something worrying: that neither the firm nor American legislators have grasped the need for radical change.

Start with Facebook. Mr Zuckerberg told Congress that any firm that has grown at the speed of Facebook was bound to make mistakes. But the dorm-room excuse is wearing thin. Facebook is the sixth-most-valuable listed firm on the planet. It spent \$11.5m on lobbying in Washington in 2017. Its endless guff about "community" counts for little when it has repeatedly and flagrantly disregarded its users' rights to control their own data. The company has carried out lots of fiddles in recent weeks—from making privacy settings clearer to promising an audit of suspicious apps. But it should go much further.

An internal investigation into how third-party apps have been using Facebook users' data is not enough to restore trust:

it should appoint an outside firm to conduct a full independent examination of its own conduct. That would help address lingering questions; Cambridge Analytica may be just one of many such outfits to have got hold of user data, for example. The appointment of an independent chairman would be another way to improve the quality of debate and scrutiny within Facebook. Along with other tech firms, it should create an industry ombudsman whose jobs would include making access to platforms easier for independent researchers. Instead of opening up, however, the risk is that Facebook will throw up walls: its decision to kick third-party data-brokers off the platform has the convenient effect of both protecting users' data and entrenching its power as a source of those data.

### Wanted: well-informed legislators

Even if Facebook did all this, there would still be a need for data-protection regulation in America. Mr Zuckerberg has a majority of the voting rights at the company: an independent chairman would not stop him wielding ultimate control. The firm's advertising-led business model incentivises it to turn users' personal data into targets for ads. Facebook has said nothing about allowing people to opt out of being tracked across the web. It is inherently hard for users of online services to make informed choices about how their data should be stored. In any case, these issues span more firms than Facebook.

That leads to the other concern raised by this week's hearings: the capacity of policymakers to put together good legislation. Where Mr Zuckerberg was competent, his interrogators were often clueless (see United States section). One seemed not to know that the firm made money from advertising; another was more interested in getting Facebook to build fibre-optic cable in her state. To work for its users, the data economy requires thoughtful policy and a sea-change in the way tech firms are run. On this week's evidence, neither looks likely. ■

War crimes in Syria

## The duty to deter

Bashar al-Assad has used chemical weapons again. If he is not punished, others will do so, too



**A**FTER seven years of war and hundreds of thousands of deaths, it takes an act of utter barbarism to shock the world out of its indifference. But every so often, Bashar al-Assad supplies one. On April 7th more than 40 Syrians were killed with poisonous gas in the town of Douma. Videos showed men, women and children lying lifeless, with foam dribbling over their lips. Such horrors are why most countries outlawed the use of chemical weapons long ago—and why Syria's despot flouts that ban. He has carried out dozens of chemical attacks

over the course of Syria's war, sowing terror in rebel-held areas. The world should not let him get away with it.

As *The Economist* went to press, America and its allies were considering responding to the atrocity in Douma with military action. If they are convinced of the evidence against Mr Assad (who denies responsibility), then they should punish him hard enough to deter him from gassing his people again. That will take more than a flurry of cruise missiles. Air strikes should be aimed at the dictator's chemical-weapons plants and command-and-control centres. Turning one of his palaces to rubble (after a suitable warning to let civilians escape) would give ordinary Syrians visible evidence of the disgust the world feels for their ruler. ►►