

House of Commons Select Committees

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Quentin Letts



**sees an international Commons panel
 'empty-chair' the Facebook billionaire**

Few expected Zuck to show ... and he didn't

FACEBOOK'S billionaire boss Mark Zuckerberg 'sent his cat' to an international committee hearing in Westminster. To 'send your cat', we learned from Belgian politician Nele Lijnen, was a Flemish way of saying 'fail to show up'. Canada's Charlie Angus was less poetic. Mr Zuckerberg had 'decided to blow off the meeting'.

The 23-strong committee contained parliamentarians from Britain, France, Argentina, Canada, Belgium, Brazil, Ireland, Singapore and Latvia and was asking about 'disinformation and fake news' at Facebook. They made the most of Mr Zuckerberg's non-attendance.

It gave them something to huff and puff about, something everyone could understand. So much else in the internet-data world is double Dutch and the Dutch were one of the few nations not represented at the long, U-shaped committee table.

Few had expected Mr Zuckerberg to appear, yet a little plastic panel bearing his name had been placed at the witness table. This allowed an 'empty chair' photograph to be taken at the start of the meeting. The committee immediately posted this on the internet to give the impression that Bad Zuck had done a runner at the final moment.

Hmm. That was arguably a little fake-newsy in itself.

Mr Zuckerberg's 'cat' was Lord Allan (Lib Dem), who works for Facebook. Lord (Richard) Allan was once an MP but vacated his Sheffield Hallam seat for a certain Nick Clegg, who now also works for Facebook. Lord

Allan is Clegg's John the Baptist.

The sight of Lord Allan sitting alone at the witness table, facing this massed international panel, had two effects.

It accentuated global concern about Facebook and social-media companies; it also made the fixture look a little one-sided. Sun Xueling, of the parliamentary committee on deliberate online falsehoods from Singapore (that, ahem, hotbed of free speech), explained that she had crossed the world to show how concerned people were about the damage social media can do to national security, racial harmony, social cohesion and trust in national institutions. Lord Allan thanked her for making her journey. He was like that, Allan. Terribly diplomatic.

He hunched and twisted his shoulders to convey Uriah Heepish 'umility. He waved his hands to emote, so much so that at one point the top of his pen went flying. Duck, lads!

He rounded his eyes and lent his voice American uplift to convey his pain-sharing. The international delegates glowered – a Benetton advert in a jolly bad mood.

The committee had complaints about: Facebook flogging off its customers' data, not respecting their privacy settings (Lord Allan pronounced 'privacy' in the US fashion), not making proper checks on associates and allowing the publication of dodgy material which could influence election results and foment discord.





Source: Daily Mail {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Wednesday 28, November 2018
Page: 24
Area: 485 sq. cm
Circulation: ABC 1228002 Daily
Ad data: page rate £32,508.00, scc rate £129.00
Phone: 020 7938 6000
Keyword: Damian Collins

Lord Allan, speaking of 'the Facebook community', kept apologising. This or that should not have happened. Greater efforts would be made in future to prevent their recurrence.

You realised how serious these matters were when we heard that a Facebook post in Sri Lanka urged the murder of Muslims.

LORD Allan said Facebook was assembling 'a dictionary of hate-speech terms'. Was the event in some ways over-theatrical? Yes. But the social-media giants do wield enormous clout.

In front of me, a heavy-eyed Argentine, Leopoldo Moreau, kept joking with his interpreter, a young man with shaky hands and a wonkily-gelled hairdo. When his chance for questions came, the interpreter did much of the verbal fencing with Lord Allan.

The committee's chairman, publicity-prone Tory MP Damian Collins, grumbled about Russians using Facebook to influence western democratic elections. It may or may not be worth noting that Mr Collins is a Remainer. He was displeased when Lord Allan volunteered Facebook's help in writing 'regulatory frameworks'. 'That should be up to parliaments to decide,' snapped Mr Collins.

An Irish MP, Eamon Ryan, was working on a laptop which suddenly started making strange noises. Unable to shut it up, he took it out of the room. See? If only Mark Zuckerberg had been there, he would have known which button to press.

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Source: Daily Mail {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Wednesday 28, November 2018
Page: 24
Area: 485 sq. cm
Circulation: ABC 1228002 Daily
Ad data: page rate £32,508.00, scc rate £129.00
Phone: 020 7938 6000
Keyword: Damian Collins



Missing: Yesterday's 23-strong international panel – and Mr Zuckerberg's empty chair



Source: Daily Mirror {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Wednesday 28, November 2018
Page: 2
Area: 43 sq. cm
Circulation: ABC 533531 Daily
Ad data: page rate £27,700.00, scc rate £112.00
Phone: 020 7293 3000
Keyword: Damian Collins



Zuckerberg in snub to 'fake news' probe

MPs "empty chaired" Facebook boss Mark Zuckerberg after he refused to face questions on fake news.

The firm instead sent VP of policy Richard Allan to face parliamentarians from around the world.

The Committee released a photo of the empty chair.

Damian Collins, chair of Parliament's inquiry on fake news, claimed Facebook knew about Russian activity in 2014.

He said seized emails showed an engineer had warned "entities with Russian IP addresses" accessed "three billion data points a day".

But Facebook said it had found "no evidence of specific Russian activity".





Source: Scottish Daily Express {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Wednesday 28, November 2018
Page: 22
Area: 185 sq. cm
Circulation: Pub Stmt 50613 Daily
Ad data: page rate £5,350.00, scc rate £24.00
Phone: 020 8612 7000
Keyword: Damian Collins



Facebook boss admits need for more oversight

FACEBOOK bosses knew of a possible Russian cyber attack years before details emerged, an MP claimed yesterday.

Damian Collins, chairman of the parliamentary inquiry into fake news, said a Facebook engineer warned hackers had attempted to get data in 2014.

But the social media giant yesterday claimed they found no evidence of Russian activity.

Richard Allan, the social media giant's vice-president of policy solutions, admitted at a "international grand committee" in Westminster that the Cambridge Analytica data harvesting scandal had damaged public trust in the company.

He insisted they were making progress in tackling fake news, claiming 50 per cent of "low quality" posts had been removed from the site. But Mr Allan, who also

By **Michael Knowles**

sits in the Lords, admitted the company needs greater oversight from politicians amid fears of political interference in elections.

Damian Collins told Allan in front of lawmakers from nine countries: "An engineer at Facebook notified the company in October of 2014 that an entity with Russian IP addresses had been using a Pinterest API key to pull over three billion data points a day."

Lord Allan said the email cache referred to by Mr Collins was "at best partial, at worst potentially misleading" and had come from a "hostile litigant".

A Facebook spokeswoman later said: "The engineers who had initially flagged these initial concerns subsequently looked into this further and found no evidence of spe-

cific Russian activity." In a scathing attack, Charlie Angus, the vice chair of a privacy committee said: "Our democratic institutions, our form of civil conversation, seem to have been upended by frat boy billionaires from California.

"I put it to you that you have lost the trust of the international community to self-police."

Lord Allan added: "We recognise through our own actions and external events that we are not in a good place in terms of trust."

Hildegard Naughton, chairwoman of the Irish joint committee on communications, said: "In light of the fake news and data breaches that your company has been involved in over the last two years, do you accept that Facebook needs to be regulated?" "So... yes," Lord Allan replied.

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Quentin Letts



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FACEBOOK'S billionaire boss Mark Zuckerberg 'sent his cat' to an international committee hearing in Westminster. To 'send your cat', we learned from Belgian politician Nele Lijnen, was a Flemish way of saying 'fail to show up'.

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Source: Scottish Daily Mail {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Wednesday 28, November 2018
Page: 18
Area: 457 sq. cm
Circulation: 90121 Daily
Ad data: page rate £5,040.00, scc rate £20.00
Phone:
Keyword: Damian Collins



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Source: Scottish Daily Mail {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Wednesday 28, November 2018
Page: 18
Area: 457 sq. cm
Circulation: 90121 Daily
Ad data: page rate £5,040.00, scc rate £20.00
Phone:
Keyword: Damian Collins



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Source: The Guardian {Main}
 Edition:
 Country: UK
 Date: Wednesday 28, November 2018
 Page: 15
 Area: 264 sq. cm
 Circulation: ABC 135330 Daily
 Ad data: page rate £11,400.00, scc rate £42.00
 Phone: 020 3353 2000
 Keyword: Damian Collins



Facebook engineer 'warned in 2014 of Russia's data harvesting'

Emma Graham-Harrison
Jim Waterson

A Facebook engineer warned the company in 2014 that users apparently based in Russia were scooping vast amounts of data from the site on a daily basis, politicians from nine countries have been told.

Facebook's representative, Richard Allan, often looked uncomfortable during hours of grilling by members of the House of Commons, where he once sat as a Liberal Democrat MP, and parliamentarians from eight other countries. An empty seat was left for Facebook's founder and chief executive, Mark Zuckerberg, underlining the committee's frustration about his refusal to appear.

Allan was questioned on Facebook's failures to crack down on posts inflaming hatred in Sri Lanka, faltering efforts to protect user privacy and data, the company's problems regulating fake accounts and misinformation, and the slow pace of efforts to improve transparency of political advertising.

The Tory MP **Damian Collins** asked about the mass harvesting of data in 2014. "An engineer at Facebook notified the company in October 2014 that entities with Russian IP [internet protocol] addresses had been using a Pinterest API [application programming interface] key to pull over 3bn data points a day [from Facebook]," he said. "Was that reported to any external body at the time?"

Facebook later confirmed the data collection had been investigated. "The engineers who had flagged these initial concerns subsequently looked into this further and found no evidence of specific Russian activity," it said.

Facebook said it had investigated the potentially suspicious activity and insisted it was not a data breach. It said they were legitimate data requests for approximately 6m items a day, not the

3bn claimed by the engineer.

It appeared the cache of documents emerged from a lawsuit launched by the software developer Six4Three in 2015. It had invested \$250,000 in a controversial app that allowed users to filter through friends' photos to find images of them in swimwear, and sued Facebook after the company cut off access to the data of users' friends.

The documents were provided to Six4Three's lawyers by Facebook. They are alleged to contain significant revelations about decisions on data and privacy controls that led to the Cambridge Analytica scandal, including confidential emails between senior executives, and correspondence with Zuckerberg. Collins told a news conference that he considered them important and he aimed to publish a selection after redacting personal details.

"Facebook is trying to pretend that these are all spurious allegations or carefully selected internal documents designed to give a false impression. I think that is a misrepresentation of these documents," he said.

One of the key concerns of the committee was the lack of oversight on Facebook. The Singaporean politician Edwin Tong asked about the role of Facebook posts in stirring religious tensions in Sri Lanka, where its inaction when asked to remove them

led the government to block the platform. "I'm ashamed that these things happen," said Allan, appearing to agree with calls for greater regulation, even though Facebook has poured millions into lobbying to limit controls worldwide. Among current battles, it is appealing against a record £500,000 fine from the UK's data watchdog.

Asked what Facebook needed to do to prevent its platforms being used to spread abuse, Allan said the company needed to make its own controls stronger but also needed better con-

trols from lawmakers - "Frankly, you and your colleagues standing over us."

The Canadian politician Charlie Angus accused the company of "corporate fraud on a massive scale" for doctoring video-viewing metrics it presented to advertisers. He also attacked Facebook's dominance of online life, through its eponymous platform, the photo-sharing app Instagram and the messaging service WhatsApp.

"The problem is Facebook," Angus said, calling for it to be broken up. "Unprecedented economic control of every form of social discourse and communication."



▲ Mark Zuckerberg was absent as parliamentarians asked questions





Source: The Independent (App Edition) {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Wednesday 28, November 2018
Page: 17
Area: 843 sq. cm
Circulation: ABC 54984 Daily
Ad data: page rate £10,472.00, scc rate £44.00
Phone: 020 7005 2000
Keyword: Damian Collins



Facebook's Zuckerberg criticised for failing to appear at London hearing

ANDREW GRIFFIN

Facebook has been savaged by an “international grand committee” of politicians after boss Mark Zuckerberg once again refused to answer questions.

The company was accused of undermining democratic institutions and failing to take responsibility for recent data breaches, allegations of business malpractice, repeated electoral interference and the spread of disinformation and hate speech on the platform.

But the hearing was marked by the fact that Mr Zuckerberg had not arrived, despite a request that came from representatives of nine countries including the UK, Ireland, Canada and France.

Instead, they chose to leave a chair open for the Facebook founder and criticised him for refusing to turn up.

Facebook is being investigated by lawmakers in Britain after consultancy firm Cambridge Analytica, which worked on Donald Trump's presidential campaign, obtained the personal data of 87 million Facebook users from a researcher, drawing attention to the use of data analytics in politics.

Concerns over the social media giant's practices, the role of political adverts and possible interference in the 2016 Brexit referendum and US elections are among the topics being investigated by regulators.

While Facebook says it complies with EU data protection laws, the special hearing in London criticised Mr Zuckerberg for declining to appear to answer questions.

“We've never seen anything quite like Facebook, where, while we were playing on our phones and apps, our democratic institutions ... seem to have been upended by frat-boy billionaires from California,” Canadian MP Charlie Angus said.

“So Mr Zuckerberg's decision not to appear here at Westminster to me speaks volumes.”

Richard Allan, the vice president of policy solutions at Facebook, who appeared on Mr Zuckerberg's behalf, admitted the company had made mistakes but said it had accepted the need to comply with data



Source: The Independent (App Edition) {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Wednesday 28, November 2018
Page: 17
Area: 843 sq. cm
Circulation: ABC 54984 Daily
Ad data: page rate £10,472.00, scc rate £44.00
Phone: 020 7005 2000
Keyword: Damian Collins



rules.

“I’m not going to disagree with you that we’ve damaged public trust through some of the actions we’ve taken,” Mr Allan told the hearing.

Facebook has faced a barrage of criticism from users and politicians after it said last year that Russian agents had used its platform to spread disinformation before and after the 2016 US presidential election, an accusation that Moscow has denied.

Mr Allan repeatedly declined to give an example of a person or app banned from Facebook for the misuse of data, aside from the GSR app which gathered data in the Cambridge Analytica scandal.

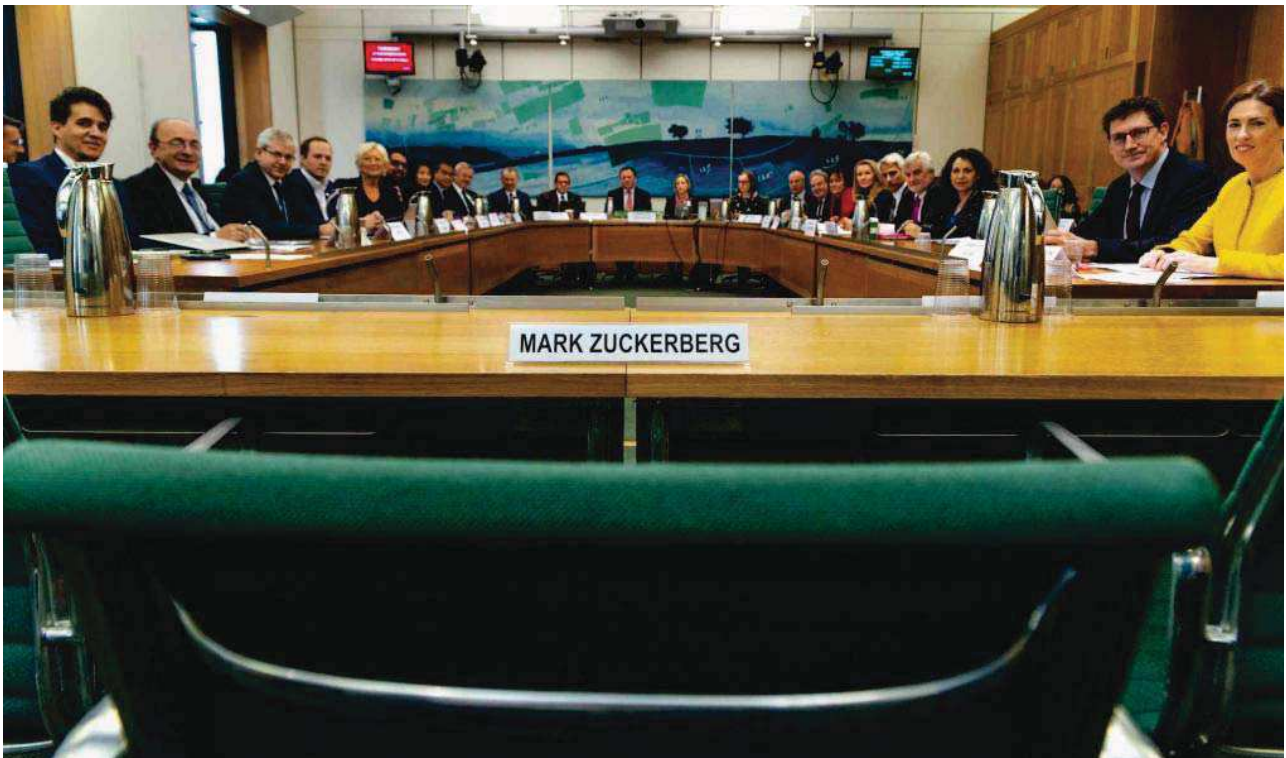
Legal documents reviewed by Reuters showed how the investigation by British lawmakers had led them to seize documents relating to Facebook from app developer Six4Three, which is in a legal dispute with Facebook.

Damian Collins, chair of the culture committee, which convened the hearing, said he would not release those documents on Tuesday because he was not in a position to do so, although he had previously said that the committee had the legal power to.

Additional reporting by Reuters and PA



Source: The Independent (App Edition) {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Wednesday 28, November 2018
Page: 17
Area: 843 sq. cm
Circulation: ABC 54984 Daily
Ad data: page rate £10,472.00, scc rate £44.00
Phone: 020 7005 2000
Keyword: Damian Collins



Invisible man: Facebook chief Mark Zuckerberg never turned up (AFP)



Source: City A.M. {Main}
 Edition:
 Country: UK
 Date: Wednesday 28, November 2018
 Page: 4
 Area: 104 sq. cm
 Circulation: ABC 85866 Daily
 Ad data: page rate £8,000.00, scc rate £33.00
 Phone:
 Keyword: Digital, Culture, Media & Sport Committee



Politicians blast Zuckerberg after Facebook boss's hearing no-show

EMILY NICOLLE
 @emilyjnicolle

POLITICIANS criticised Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg for not appearing at a hearing yesterday, and accused the social media platform of undermining international parliaments and regulators.

A grand committee consisting of representatives from countries including the UK, Canada, France

and Belgium met in Westminster yesterday, convened by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee, to question Facebook policy head, Liberal Democrat peer Lord Richard Allan.

Topics included Facebook's role in possible interference in the Brexit referendum and 2016 US presidential elections, its privacy policies and future regulation of the social media site.

Zuckerberg's absence from the hearing, having turned down several invitations to appear before the international committee, was marked by an empty chair.

"We've never seen anything quite like Facebook, where, while we were playing on our phones and apps, our democratic institutions... seem to have been upended by frat-boy billionaires from California," said Charlie Angus, a Canadian minister.





Source: Daily Express {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Wednesday 28, November 2018
Page: 17
Area: 181 sq. cm
Circulation: ABC 327011 Daily
Ad data: page rate £27,329.00, scc rate £128.00
Phone: 020 7928 8000
Keyword: Digital, Culture, Media & Sport Committee



Facebook boss quizzed on Russia 'cyber attack'

FACEBOOK bosses knew of a possible Russian cyber attack years before details emerged, politicians were told yesterday.

The allegation came at a London-based inquiry into fake news in which the social media giant came under fire from politicians around the world.

Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg snubbed the hearing – sending a deputy to be grilled instead.

Lord Allan, vice-president of policy, was quizzed by Tory MP Damian Collins, chairman of the Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

Mr Collins claimed a Facebook engineer had warned in October 2014 that Russians were harvesting vast amounts of data daily.

It came from a cache of internal emails seized on Sunday by MPs which they have threatened to publish in the next few days.

But Lord Allan said the emails

By **Michael Knowles**

were “potentially misleading” and had come from a “hostile litigant”.

The company later claimed its engineers had found “no evidence of specific Russian activity”.

Lord Allan, a Lib Dem peer, insisted Facebook was making progress in tackling fake news, claiming 50 per cent of “low-quality” posts had been removed.

But he admitted it needed greater oversight amid fears of political interference in elections.

Irish politician Hildegard Naughton asked: “In light of the fake news and data breaches your company has been involved in over the last two years, do you accept Facebook needs to be regulated?”

“So...yes,” Lord Allan replied. “We recognise through our own actions and external events that we are not in a good place in terms of trust.” He also conceded it was

“not great” that Mr Zuckerberg had refused to appear.

Canada’s Charlie Angus said: “While we were playing on our phones and apps, our democratic institutions seem to have been upended by frat boy billionaires from California. You have lost the trust of the international community to self-police.”

Singapore’s Edwin Tong highlighted a post published in Sri Lanka during political unrest in the country, which proclaimed “Kill all Muslims, don’t even let an infant of the dogs escape”.

Mr Tong pointed out that a Facebook moderator said it did not violate standards, a decision Lord Allan downplayed as “a mistake” before accepting its gravity.

The Daily Express has compiled a dossier of hate-filled material found on the social media site.

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Source: Metro (London) {Main}
 Edition:
 Country: UK
 Date: Wednesday 28, November 2018
 Page: 6
 Area: 374 sq. cm
 Circulation: ABC 874484 Daily
 Ad data: page rate £32,868.00, scc rate £138.10
 Phone: 020 7938 6000
 Keyword: Digital, Culture, Media & Sport Committee



Empty chair shaming for Facebook's Zuckerberg

by DANIEL BINNS

FACEBOOK boss Mark Zuckerberg was 'empty chaired' and condemned for failing to show up to an inquiry in London.

MPs were joined by politicians from around the world yesterday for a hearing into alleged privacy breaches and the spread of hate speech and fake news on the social network.

Facebook's vice-president of policy solutions, Lib Dem peer Lord Richard Allan, was sent in Mr Zuckerberg's place. He admitted it was 'not great' that the website's founder was absent.

Canadian politician Bob Zimmer told Lord Allan: 'In this room we represent over 400million people, and to not have your CEO sit in that chair there is an offence to all of us in this room and, really, our citizens as well.'

Mr Zuckerberg (pictured) appeared before the US Congress in April but has repeatedly refused to appear in London.

The inquiry yesterday heard claims of Facebook's failure to tackle misinformation and data harvesting of its 2billion users. One post went viral in Sri

Lanka, urging people to 'kill all Muslims [and] don't even let an infant of the dogs escape'. Despite complaints, a Facebook moderator said the post 'did not violate the network's standards' - even though it appeared at a time of sectarian clashes

that left several people dead.

Tory MP Damian Collins, who chairs the digital, culture, media and sport committee, said Facebook knew it was vulnerable to a Russian cyber attack as far back as 2014. This was revealed in emails seized from the boss of a US software firm who was ordered to hand them over by parliament's serjeant-at-arms during a business trip to London.

Facebook said comments were taken out of context and 'no evidence of specific Russian activity' had been found at that time.

Lord Allan admitted 'we've damaged public trust with some of the actions we've taken'. His fellow Lib Dem, former deputy prime minister Nick Clegg, joined Facebook as head of global affairs last month.





Source: Metro (London) {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Wednesday 28, November 2018
Page: 6
Area: 374 sq. cm
Circulation: ABC 874484 Daily
Ad data: page rate £32,868.00, scc rate £138.10
Phone: 020 7938 6000
Keyword: Digital, Culture, Media & Sport Committee



Absent Facebook friend: Mark Zuckerberg's empty chair at the global inquiry in London yesterday



Source: The Daily Telegraph {Business}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Wednesday 28, November 2018
Page: 1
Area: 708 sq. cm
Circulation: ABC 360117 Daily
Ad data: page rate £46,000.00, scc rate £214.00
Phone: 020 7931 2000
Keyword: Digital, Culture, Media & Sport Committee



Facebook had Russia suspicions as early as 2014

Russians were accessing '3bn data points a day' but social network said it did not constitute interference

By James Cook and Laurence Dodds

FACEBOOK investigated suspicions of Russian data harvesting as early as 2014, at least two years before the social network admitted to widespread interference from Moscow, according to private emails seized by Parliament.

Damian Collins, chairman of the Commons digital, culture, media and sport committee, revealed that Facebook staff had found computers in Russia accessing "3bn data points a day" from the social network in 2014.

Facebook said it had investigated the matter and found that it did not constitute genuine interference from Russia. It said the internet traffic being sent to Russia was legitimate, and related to Pinterest, a popular picture sharing app. However, the disclosure raises more questions about how Facebook dealt with Russian attempts to interfere with the service. The Kremlin has been accused of meddling with democratic votes in the US, UK and elsewhere in Europe, and Facebook has previously said it did not discover any such attempts until after the 2016 pres-

idential election.

At a hearing of an "international grand committee on disinformation and fake news", a coalition of different parliamentary committees investigating Facebook, Mr Collins asked the social network's policy chief Richard Allan why the investigation was not previously disclosed.

"If Russian IP addresses were pulling down a huge amount of data from the platform, was that reported or was that just kept, as so often seems to be the case, within the family and not talked about?" he asked. A Facebook spokesman later said: "The engineers who had flagged these initial concerns subsequently looked into this further and found no evidence of specific Russian activity."

The use of Russian addresses to access Facebook data does not prove that people in Russia were behind an attempt to scrape data from Facebook, since software can be used to mask the origin of internet traffic.

Mr Allan was questioned yesterday after Facebook's chief executive Mark





Source: The Daily Telegraph {Business}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Wednesday 28, November 2018
Page: 1
Area: 708 sq. cm
Circulation: ABC 360117 Daily
Ad data: page rate £46,000.00, scc rate £214.00
Phone: 020 7931 2000
Keyword: Digital, Culture, Media & Sport Committee



Zuckerberg declined multiple demands to appear in front of the committee. Last night, further pressure was piled on Facebook after a black employee accused the company of maintaining a climate of racial discrimination in which black and Latino workers are feared, marginalised and harassed by security guards.

In a scathing memo later posted on his personal Facebook page, Mark Luckie, a departing manager at the social network's headquarters in Menlo Park, California, said the social network "has a black people problem".

"Racial discrimination at Facebook is real," wrote Mr Luckie. "Too many black employees can recount stories of being aggressively accosted by campus security beyond what was necessary."

A Facebook spokesman said it "wants to fully support all employees" who report discrimination or troubling "micro-behaviours" and is "doing all we can to be a truly inclusive company".



Richard Allan, Facebook's policy chief, gave evidence to MPs on the digital, culture, media and sport committee



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Lone protest: Facebook's chief executive Mark Zuckerberg declined multiple demands to appear in front of the committee



Facebook was warned of Russian data harvesting in 2014, says MP

Mark Bridge
 Technology Correspondent

Facebook was told four years ago that Russians were exploiting security failings to harvest “billions” of items of user data a day, an MP claimed yesterday.

Damian Collins said that he had seen an internal email that showed a Facebook engineer notifying the company in October 2014. Facebook has indicated that it only became aware of Russian interference on its platform after the US presidential election in late 2016.

The email, the first disclosure from a large cache of seized Facebook papers that MPs plan to release, was cited at an unprecedented “Grand Committee” of British and international lawmakers who questioned Lord Allan of Hallam, Facebook’s European policy director. Mark Zuckerberg, who founded the US tech giant in 2004, refused to attend.

Mr Collins, head of the special committee, said that he was not ready to publish the full cache of documents seized by the digital, culture, media and sport committee, which he also chairs.

However, he described the email as of “considerable public interest”. It allegedly shows that the engineer told Facebook that “entities” with Russian IP addresses had been pulling three billion data points a day. The data, including

details of users’ Facebook friends, appeared to have been obtained by people who created apps for the Pinterest website, which gave them developers’ access to users’ Facebook data. Mr Collins’ remarks suggested that Russians exploited a similar loophole to the one that enabled the British data company Cambridge Analytica to obtain users’ data without their knowledge.

In Westminster, an empty chair behind a nameplate for Mr Zuckerberg, 34, highlighted his absence. The billionaire has turned down repeated

requests to appear before parliament to answer questions on fake news and his company’s failure to protect users’ data.

Those attending from nine countries, including Canada, France and Ireland, signed a joint declaration that social media companies should be regulated.

The alleged data harvesting came at the same time as Russia set up its Internet Research Agency. Facebook posts from the “troll factory”, supportive of Donald Trump, were seen by 126 million Americans. Alan Woodward, of Surrey University, said that the data

made available to app developers could have been used to successfully “micro-target” disinformation.

Mr Collins asked Lord Allan: “If Russian IP addresses were pulling down a huge amount of data from the platform was that reported or was that just kept within the family and not talked about?”

The peer said that the documents were only a partial set of information obtained by a “hostile litigant”. Parliament seized them from an executive of Six4Three, a US software company using them in a case against Facebook in California, where their publication is prohibited.

Lord Allan said that he would return to the committee with answers to the questions about Facebook’s response. A Facebook spokesman later

said: “The engineers who had flagged these initial concerns subsequently looked into this further and found no evidence of specific Russian activity.” He said that the requests had been nor-

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Referring to the US Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organisations (Rico) act, used to target the mafia, Paul Farrelly, MP, said to Lord Allan: “I’ve read the summary and the thought I have is Rico. Racketeering. Has Facebook ever taken advice on possible Rico offences?” Lord Allan said that he was unaware of any such preparation.

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Country: Republic of Ireland
Date: Wednesday 28, November 2018
Page: 21
Area: 545 sq. cm
Circulation: ABC 0 Daily
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