

A Facebook Insider's Exposé Proves Bad Behavior at the Top

VIEWS

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The publisher of “Careless People” kept the existence of this memoir a secret until a few days ago — with good reason, it turns out.

For seven years, beginning in 2011, the book’s author, Sarah Wynn-Williams, worked at Facebook (now called Meta), eventually as a director of global public policy. Now she has written an insider account of a company that she says was run by status-hungry and self-absorbed leaders, who chafed at the burdens of responsibility and became ever more feckless, even as Facebook became a vector for disinformation campaigns and cozied up to authoritarian regimes.

“Careless People” is darkly funny and genuinely shocking: an ugly, detailed portrait of one of the most powerful companies in the world. What Wynn-Williams reveals will undoubtedly trigger her former bosses’ ire. Not only does she have the storytelling chops to unspool a gripping narrative; she also delivers the goods.

During her time at Facebook, Wynn-Williams worked closely with its chief executives Mark Zuckerberg and Sheryl Sandberg. They’re this book’s Tom and Daisy — the “careless people” in “The Great Gatsby” who, as Wynn-Williams quotes the novel in her epigraph, “smashed up things and creatures” and “let other people clean up the mess they had made.”

Wynn-Williams was so eager to work at Facebook that she pitched herself to the company for months before it eventually hired her. Born and raised in New Zealand, she had been working as a diplomat at her country’s embassy in Washington and, before that, at the United Nations. She was drawn to human rights and environmental issues. Relying on Facebook to stay connected with her friends back home, she believed the platform “was going to change the world.” As governments realized what Facebook could do, she sold herself to the company by telling its officials they could use a diplomat. When they finally hired her, she was elated: “I can’t believe I have the opportunity to work on the greatest political tool of my lifetime.”

What follows is a book-length admonishment to be careful what you wish for. Any idealism about Facebook’s potential as “the greatest political tool” sounds bitterly ironic now, 14 years later. By the end of her memoir, Wynn-Williams is told that her superiors have “concerns” about her performance; she feels so beaten down by her tenure at the company that she describes getting fired as a “quick euthanasia.”

Wynn-Williams sees Zuckerberg change while she's at Facebook. Desperate to be liked, he becomes increasingly hungry for attention and adulation, shifting his focus from coding and engineering to politics. On a tour of Asia, she is directed to gather a crowd of more than one million so that he can be "gently mobbed." (In the end, she doesn't have to; his desire is satisfied during an appearance at a Jakarta shopping mall with Indonesia's president-elect instead.) He tells her that Andrew Jackson (who signed the Indian Removal Act into law) was the greatest president America ever had, because he "got stuff done."

Sandberg, for her part, turns her charm on and off like a tap. When Wynn-Williams first starts at Facebook, she is in awe of Sandberg, who in 2013 publishes her best-selling corporate-feminism manifesto, "[Lean In](#)." But Wynn-Williams soon learns to mistrust "Sheryl's 'Lean In' shtick," seeing it as a thin veneer over her "unspoken rules" about "obedience and closeness."

Wynn-Williams is aghast to discover that Sandberg has instructed her 26-year-old assistant to buy lingerie for both of them, budget be damned. (The total cost is \$13,000.) During a long drive in Europe, the assistant and Sandberg take turns sleeping in each other's laps, stroking each other's hair. On the 12-hour flight home on a private jet, a pajama-clad Sandberg claims the only bed on the plane and repeatedly demands that Wynn-Williams "come to bed." Wynn-Williams demurs. Sandberg is miffed.

Sandberg isn't the only person in this book with apparent boundary issues. Wynn-Williams has uncomfortable encounters with Joel Kaplan, an ex-boyfriend of Sandberg's from Harvard, who was hired as Facebook's vice president of U.S. policy and eventually became vice president of global policy — Wynn-Williams's manager. A former Marine who clerked for Justice Antonin Scalia and who was part of the "[Brooks Brothers riot](#)" of 2000, which helped bring George W. Bush into office, Kaplan went on to serve as a deputy chief of staff in his administration.

Wynn-Williams describes Kaplan grinding up against her on the dance floor at a work event, announcing that she looks "sultry" and making "weird comments" about her husband. When she delivers her second child, an amniotic fluid embolism nearly kills her; yet Kaplan keeps emailing her while she's on maternity leave, insisting on weekly videoconferences. She tells him she needs more surgery because she's still bleeding. "But where are you bleeding from?" he repeatedly presses her. An internal Facebook investigation into her "experience" with Kaplan cleared him of any wrongdoing.

Such scenes of personal degradation are lurid enough, but Wynn-Williams also had a front-row seat to some of Facebook's most ignominious episodes. In the lead-up to the 2016 election, Facebook employees embedded with the Trump campaign helped

it [micro-target](#) potential voters, feeding them bespoke ads filled with “misinformation, inflammatory posts and fund-raising messages.” (The Clinton campaign [declined](#) Facebook’s offer to embed employees.) The following year, in Myanmar, a country heavily reliant on Facebook, hateful lies [propagated](#) on the platform [incited a genocide](#) against the minority Rohingya ethnic group. Wynn-Williams says she started raising the alarm about Myanmar several years earlier, trying to persuade Facebook to beef up its monitoring operations when she learned that hate speech was circulating on the platform. Content moderation was painfully (and lethally) slow, she writes, because the company relied on one contractor who spoke Burmese: a “Burmese guy” based in Dublin, multiple time zones away from both Myanmar and Facebook’s California headquarters. “Myanmar demonstrates better than anywhere the havoc Facebook can wreak when it’s truly ubiquitous.”

The book includes a detailed chapter on “Aldrin,” the code name for Facebook’s project to [get unblocked in China](#). According to Wynn-Williams, the company proposed all kinds of byzantine arrangements involving China-based partnerships, data collection and censorship tools that it hoped would satisfy China’s ruling Communist Party. Knowing that Zuckerberg would probably face questions about China from Congress, his team gave him cleverly worded talking points. “There seems to be no compunction about misleading Congress,” Wynn-Williams writes. “Senators will need to ask exceptionally specific questions to get close to any truth.” When Zuckerberg eventually appears before a Senate committee in 2018, a senator asks him how Facebook is handling the Chinese government’s unwillingness “to allow a social media platform — foreign or domestic — to operate in China unless it agrees to abide by Chinese law.” In his reply, Zuckerberg states, “No decisions have been made around the conditions under which any possible future service might be offered in China,” to which Wynn-Williams comments: “He lies.”

Wynn-Williams has filed [a whistle-blower complaint](#) to the Securities and Exchange Commission. Professionally, she has moved on, to work on policy issues related to artificial intelligence and to pour her gallows humor into this book. “Careless People” may contain a cast of careless people, but it’s ultimately Zuckerberg who “wants to be the decider.” She shows him replacing the imperfect system of checks and balances that her policy team developed over the years with his decrees, which typically coincide with his business interests: “Facebook is an autocracy of one.”

And autocracies aren’t bound by term limits. In 2016, during a summit of world leaders in Peru, Wynn-Williams noticed that many faces were familiar; a number of other leaders were gone. “I’m struck by the impermanence of importance,” she writes. “Yet

Mark could conceivably continue to hold his place chairing world leaders for another 50 years. He'll see these leaders off and the generations of leaders that follow them. Like the queen."

The post [A Facebook Insider's Exposé Alleges Bad Behavior at the Top](#) appeared first on [New York Times](#).