Spies, Lies, and Stonewalling: What It’s Like to Report on Facebook

By Jacob Silverman

One day in July 2016, Casey Newton, a tech reporter for *The Verge*, sat down at Facebook headquarters in Menlo Park for the biggest interview of his career. Across from him was Mark Zuckerberg. With his characteristic geeky excitement, Zuckerberg described the promising initial test flight of Aquila, a drone with a wingspan larger than a 737 jet that was part of his plan to provide internet connectivity all over the world.

Though Newton hadn't witnessed the test flight in Yuma, Arizona—no members of the press were invited—he believed Zuckerberg's account of it. When his article was published, it reported that Aquila "was so stable that they kept it in the air for 90 minutes before landing it safely."

Months later, however, a Bloomberg story revealed that the flight hadn't gone so smoothly after all—Aquila had crashed. While the craft had indeed stayed aloft for longer than intended, high winds tore a chunk out of a wing, leading to a crash landing.

"I immediately, of course, felt like an idiot," Newton says. "In retrospect there were definitely questions that I should have asked that I did not."

Facebook downplayed the crash, offering to the press a range of excuses: a rough landing was always expected; the cause was mostly a software malfunction; the long flight time was the real story. Newton published a more critical follow-up piece, but the damage was done: he had been had. (The Aquila drone was soon grounded and, within two years, the entire program scrapped.)

“That experience, honestly, it really changed the way I thought about the company and reported on the company,” Newton says. “Before that, I sort of thought, *My goal is to get in front of Mark Zuckerberg and ask him questions, and if I do that, I can do good journalism.*” After the Aquila experience, Newton realized that he could be sitting in front of the CEO and still not get the story. “You’re better off trying to report around the margins of the company.”

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Newton is still in touch with executives at Facebook—some of them are subscribers to his newsletter—but he’s since focused his attention on the company’s abuses of low-level employees and third-party contractors. He no longer trusts Facebook like he once did.

It can feel impossible to comprehend Facebook’s total influence—or to overstate its impact on journalism.

Newton’s professional arc, from enthusiastic tech beat reporter to skeptical industry investigator, matches the trajectories of a number of journalists in recent years. The 2016 presidential election in particular prompted a change in worldview against Facebook and the power wielded by Big Tech. The media had learned, perhaps belatedly, the cost of taking Facebook at its word. More recent, and adversarial, reporting has produced important stories about Facebook’s refusal to tackle the

proliferation of right-wing extremism and conspiracy theories on its platform. In advance of the 2020 election, more journalists are taking a hard look at the Trump campaign's once-heralded digital operation, which spends heavily on Facebook advertising, and its bombastic overseer, Brad Parscale, who has been promoted to overall campaign manager.

Beyond the company's dissembling, reporting on Facebook's operations has become increasingly complex simply because of its size. The company controls the communications and informational intake of more than two and a half billion people. It can feel impossible to comprehend its total influence—or to overstate its impact on journalism. The past four years have made tech reporters out of many journalists who would otherwise confine their scope of interest to politics, culture, labor, or economics. Facebook's reach extends across every beat.

In conversations with more than fifteen journalists and industry observers, I tried to understand what it is like to cover Facebook. What I found was troublesome: operating with the secrecy of an intelligence agency and the authority of a state government, Facebook has arrogated to itself vast powers while enjoying, until recently, limited journalistic scrutiny. (Some journalists, like *The Observer*'s Carole Cadwalladr, have done important work linking Facebook data to political corruption in the UK and elsewhere.) Media organizations have stepped up their game, but they suffer from a lack of access, among other power asymmetries.

Many journalists contacted for this story declined to talk out of fear of hurting relationships with Facebook's communications

shop. A number of journalists agreed to be interviewed, only to pass after speaking to their editors and PR reps. Some spoke to me off the record.

Nearly everyone I talked to acknowledged that the relationship between Facebook and journalists had dramatically deteriorated in recent years. It wasn't long ago, after all, that Facebook and its comms shop was, for many journalists, a valued source.

Facebook appeared in 2004, during a period of general techno-optimism. The site had a palatable origin story, a wunderkind founder, and a minimalist design, and it was largely treated as a trendy newcomer to the social network scene. Covering the company soon became a full-time job for some tech journalists, especially at digital publications like *TechCrunch* or *Gizmodo* that expected writers to generate a stream of news and scoops. Meanwhile, Facebook's comms shop practically acted as an assignment editor, doling out exclusives to generate good press and curry favor with journalists.

Kate Losse, an early Facebook employee who would go on to write *The Boy Kings*, a memoir of her time at the company, told me in an email that journalistic coverage of Facebook in its first years was focused mostly on product updates. A notable story might be about a new feature in the site's news feed.

Sam Biddle, a reporter at *The Intercept* who was working at *Valleywag* and *Gizmodo* in the early 2010s, told me that Facebook would offer up scoops to journalists that they credulously swallowed. "It was like pigs at a trough," Biddle says. "We were

all trying to get the same drip-drip of product news out of Facebook, no matter what outlet you were at."

In those years, scandals involving the company were mostly low-grade stuff: users unhappy about design changes; public disputes between the founders (as dramatized in *The Social Network*); murky data collection practices that caused the FTC to force Facebook to sign a "consent decree" in 2011.

Facebook did face some public criticism about its role in eroding consumer privacy, but any skepticism tended to be watered down with exuberant praise. A 2008 *GQ* profile of Zuckerberg anointed him "Boy Genius of the Year" even as it asked, "Do you trust this face?"

In private, Facebook has cultivated relationships with writers and influencers while also carefully working to shape a public narrative. In 2018, as part of a lawsuit filed in a UK court, the company produced thousands of pages of documents and emails that revealed how the company's comms team operated during part of 2014 and 2015. Staffers and their partners at the OutCast Agency, an outside firm, worked with reporters for months on articles that they hoped would paint the company in a good light. A *Time* magazine cover story about Facebook's charitable mission to "wire the world" that was facilitated by Facebook's Internet.org division was applauded internally as a win.

Sometimes, Facebook wrote the story itself. Emails in the document dump suggest that in 2014, in the run-up to Facebook's F8 show, at which it unveils new features for developers, staff at the OutCast Agency wrote an article about how to use Facebook to build an app. They sent the article to a

man named Eric Siu, who has written extensively and positively about using Facebook in business, for publication under his byline at Entrepreneur.com. The article does not appear to have been published, but it shows that Facebook is willing to push its message using Astroturfed content under the patina of credibility lent by sites like *Entrepreneur*. (Siu didn't respond to requests for comment; nor did several former OutCast Agency staffers who now work in various divisions of Facebook.)

A similar tactic was employed in 2018, after George Soros criticized Facebook as a "menace" against which society needed to be defended in a public speech in Davos. The company hired a firm to produce incendiary pro-Facebook research that contained anti-Semitic tropes about Soros, a Jewish Holocaust survivor, as the shadowy funder of anti-Facebook groups. The documents were then passed around to journalists with the urging that they look into Soros's financial interests. In the ensuing controversy, Elliot Schrage, Facebook's head of comms and policy and already on the way out, was blamed, while Sheryl Sandberg and Mark Zuckerberg stated they had no knowledge of the affair.

"Facebook employs the only comms people who have ever yelled at me."

The 2016 presidential election changed everything. After Donald Trump's ascent, greased by the Cambridge Analytica scandal and the embedding of Facebook staff in the Trump campaign's digital

operation, tech was seen as a political force unto itself. Journalists began digging into Facebook in a way few had before.

The company responded by closing itself off. “People have described it to me as a bunker mentality,” says Charlie Warzel, a *New York Times* opinion writer who covers technology, media, and politics. “The relationship is just naturally strained by the fact that they’re dealing with a crisis pretty much weekly, if not more frequently.”

In 2018 and 2019, Caryn Marooney and Rachel Whetstone, two of Facebook’s leaders in policy and communications, left the company. In their place, Warzel notes, Facebook has installed some “really talented flacks” from political power centers like Washington, DC, and London. Those include Nick Clegg, the former British Lib-Dem party leader, and a handful of former Republican operatives, such as Joel Kaplan, Facebook’s VP of policy, who is also a prominent friend and supporter of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh. Campbell Brown, a former CNN anchor and charter school booster who is married to Dan Senor, himself a former Mitt Romney adviser and spokesman for the US military occupation of Iraq, was brought in to develop relationships with news organizations. Mike Isaac, a *New York Times* technology reporter, estimates that the comms and policy divisions now employ several hundred people.

The company’s PR team also appears to have gotten more sophisticated. In 2017, Zuckerberg went on a yearlong “listening tour” across the United States that, while it earned some mockery, raised his political profile. Top execs including Andrew Bosworth and Adam Mosseri have been tweeting more, giving the impression of public availability. And Facebook PR staff

sometimes contact reporters about their tweets, trying to quash stories before they emerge. “They have smartly all gotten on Twitter and basically watch all reporters on Twitter,” Isaac says.

To expand its public outreach, Facebook publishes blog posts to explain new initiatives and efforts to clamp down on misinformation. The company continues to make use of embargoed scoops. It also cultivates reporters and influencers through off-the-record dinners, conference calls, and media scrums.

Taylor Lorenz, a *New York Times* Style reporter, told me that last year she attended an off-the-record dinner sponsored by Instagram. She described the guest list: an Instagram executive, bookers from morning shows, editors of pop culture websites, music critics. To her mind, the dinner didn’t present company propaganda so much as opportunities for informal conversation about trends or new products—what an executive might think about TikTok, for example. But in terms of actual reporting, these events count for little.

“When it comes to anything consequential, I’m not going to talk to them on background,” Lorenz says. “I want to hear what they have to say on the record. Otherwise it’s useless to me.”

Marie C. Baca, an independent journalist who has written extensively about Facebook, says off-the-record events are an attempt to shape a story’s reporting from its inception. In 2018, when Baca was a reporter for the *Albuquerque Journal*, Facebook’s PR staff came to town to hold off-the-record events about one of their programs for small businesses. Reporters were game, she said, because it was the only access they could get.

When they are not courting journalists in off-the-record meetings, Facebook representatives are known to be difficult, even combative.

"Facebook employs the only comms people who have ever yelled at me," Biddle says.

Lorenz has also seen Facebook shift its tone. "I think the tension comes when you report on anything political," Lorenz says. "The stakes are higher for them." While reporting a story earlier this year on Michael Bloomberg's purchase of positive messages from influencers, Lorenz heard constantly from Facebook PR representatives. She compared the level of attention to when she wrote an article a couple of years ago about Facebook's balky ads system. At the time, Facebook PR reps called Lorenz and demanded headline changes and corrections, which she and her editors refused.

One longtime Silicon Valley reporter who covers Facebook told me the company has a history of front-running stories—feeding information to other publications to get ahead of potentially bad press. It has demanded, and received, approval for quotes.

Several reporters told me that Facebook, like other large tech companies, makes aggressive use of off-the-record sourcing to obstruct the reporting process. "It's pretty standard for a tech comms person to give you an on-record statement, they'll talk about the story with you on background, and then when it's published, they'll come back to you and try to undermine it off the record," says Biddle.

"It has a big effect on the finished product," he explains, meaning that he's left with important information he can't tell his

readers. “To the extent that salient, substantive answers are given to reporters during these conversations, it’s often done in a way that minimizes the reporter’s ability to actually transmit that information to their readers.”

I experienced some of this myself while reporting this article. Over the course of two weeks, I spoke with a Facebook communications representative via phone calls and email—all off the record. I described the general arc of my story and asked specific questions about important details. The evening before publication, the company representative provided responses, on background, to my questions, as well as a statement from John Pinette, Facebook’s vice president of global communications. “The majority of reporters we work with tell us our relationships with them are professional and productive,” he wrote. “A company of our size and impact is going to attract scrutiny from journalists, and it should. That’s why it’s in our interest to develop relationships based on trust and candor.”

Indeed, the impression the comms person endeavored to create was one of openness—Facebook *is* constantly talking to journalists, after all—without providing much real information that I could share transparently with readers.

Michael Nuñez, a technology journalist who has worked at *Forbes* and *Gizmodo* and has broken several notable stories on Facebook, is more blunt in his assessment of Facebook’s comms operation. In his experience, he says, Facebook has been “willing to lie on the record.” Nuñez recalled reporting on an internal poll in which Facebook employees asked Zuckerberg whether the company should do something to try to stop Donald Trump from becoming president. When he asked a Facebook flack about it,

they denied the poll existed. “I remember begging this person: ‘I’m not asking you to confirm the validity of this,’ ” Nuñez said. “ ‘I’m looking at [a screenshot of] it. I’m just here asking you for a comment.’ ”

In Nuñez’s eyes, Facebook is not a trustworthy interlocutor. “The company seems to be pretty comfortable with obfuscating the truth, and that’s why people don’t trust Facebook anymore,” he says. “They’ve had the chance to be honest and transparent plenty of times, and time and time again, you see that the company has been misleading either by choice or by willful ignorance.”

Others, like Warzel, see in Facebook’s battle-hardened posture a strategic effort to resemble companies like Amazon, which rarely responds to public controversy and somehow manages to weather every storm.

Facebook has erected a vigorous security apparatus and modified its internal culture to one defined by secrecy and a loose-lips-sink-ships attitude.

Openness was once a part of Facebook’s internal culture. The workplace was known for Zuckerberg’s weekly all-hands meetings, in which employees could submit questions for consideration. According to a longtime Silicon Valley reporter, the company shared information internally “knowing that there was no reason for employees to go talk to a reporter. People were generally happy. People enjoyed their jobs. They thought they

were connecting the world and making it a wonderful place. And I guess any internal debate stayed within the confines of the company. Now you start to see a lot of cracks in the facade."

The cracks have made way for more internal dissent, including an employee walkout in June in a rare show of public protest against Zuckerberg's refusal to crack down on threatening posts by President Trump. Amid this bubbling-over of discontent, more leakers have appeared. In October, a recording of an all-hands meeting was leaked to Newton at *The Verge* in which Zuckerberg talked about company threats ranging from TikTok to Sen. Elizabeth Warren's antitrust proposals. To stanch the leaks, Facebook has erected a vigorous security apparatus and modified its internal culture to one defined by secrecy and a loose-lips-sink-ships attitude. "It is locked down in a way in which no other tech company is," says Warzel.

With the knowledge that a company that has built a globe-spanning surveillance apparatus might always be watching, reporters and sources take tremendous precautions. Any Facebook-issued device, or even a phone with the Facebook app installed, could be vulnerable to the company's internal investigators. If a source has friended a reporter on a social network or merely looked up their profile on a company computer, Facebook can find out. It can potentially tap location data to see if a reporter and a source appear to be in the same place at the same time.

Warzel compares the company's mentality to that of an intelligence agency. "I have former Facebook sources who will tell me an interesting tip and then lament that they don't know a single person who could possibly confirm this, even though

these people would like to confirm this, because they don't own a single device that Facebook couldn't forensically tap into to figure out the source of a leak."

Facebook hires ex–CIA agents for its security operations, says Newton. (*BuzzFeed* has also reported on Facebook's hiring of former intelligence officers.) After he started doing critical reporting on the company, he went through his own information security training.

In 2016, after Nuñez published a *Gizmodo* article on political bias in Facebook's trending-topics feature, every one of his Facebook friends who worked at the company was individually called into a room and interrogated by company staff. Private messages between Nuñez and his friends were read back to them.

"It's really unfortunate because it seems there are employees at Facebook who genuinely have a conscience, a sense of moral and ethical obligations, and want to see the company adhere to that," Warzel says. "Every big powerful organization leaks, and that's a way of holding it accountable outside the walls of that company.

"More and more of the best journalism is going to be done without any help from Facebook."

What Facebook has become is the press's assignment editor, its distribution network, its great antagonist, devourer of its ad revenue, and, through corporate secrecy, a massive block to journalism's core mission of democratic accountability.

Faced with these daunting circumstances, what can journalists do better?

Part of the challenge of covering Facebook is that many beat reporters are not granted the time and resources needed to develop sources within a hostile company. Instead, they are often expected to report on the latest viral controversy. Every week seems to bring new evidence of horrific behavior abetted by the Facebook platform and overlooked by its harried staff of poorly paid moderators. The result is accountability journalism that points fingers but doesn't address root problems. This kind of reporting is important, but there's a way in which it serves as a form of reactive content moderation that Facebook should be doing on its own. It leaves one to ask: What does accountability journalism look like for Facebook when its own systems of accountability are so lacking?

One story helps sum up the situation. In 2018, Jesselyn Cook, a tech reporter for *HuffPost*, learned that photos of her had been taken from a Facebook photo album and posted in a private Facebook group. The posts were sexist and abusive, and Cook began to receive harassing messages. She reported the group to Facebook, but no action was taken. Eventually, she managed to get the ear of one of the group's administrators, who agreed to delete the photos.

Two months later, Cook contacted Facebook again—this time as a reporter seeking comment about the experience for an article—and the company quickly responded. Within hours, the group was deleted.

Cook's experience is sadly representative. Too often, the company doesn't acknowledge a problem—harassment of doctors by anti-vaccine activists, say, or deception in political advertising—until the press covers it or a politician complains. It's as if Facebook is constantly playing a game of whack-a-mole, but at its own pace and with little regard for its users.

"Facebook responds best to bad press," Judd Legum, who publishes the newsletter *Popular Information*, says.

This dynamic serves no one. Over and over, the press is left chasing down Facebook reps for comment on a single offensive group or account on a platform of billions of people. Until Facebook provides comprehensive solutions for these problems of harassment, content moderation, and user experience, journalists will always be talking about the latest outrage that pops up on the platform. This leaves little media oxygen for reporting on first-order issues about the company and its larger societal machinations.

Adrian Chen, a former staff writer for *The New Yorker* and *Gawker*, says that journalists need to investigate the "internet political economy" as much as the mechanics of the Facebook platform. We need to understand "how they wield their influence politically to create the environment that has allowed them to become what they are."

What Facebook has become is the press's assignment editor, its distribution network, its great antagonist, devourer of its ad revenue, and, through corporate secrecy, a massive block to journalism's core mission of democratic accountability. Whether journalists can survive these conditions to produce meaningful, critical work about Facebook depends as much on their own

adaptability as it does on the backing of revenue-minded media owners who might not wish to antagonize one holder of the advertising duopoly during an unfolding economic calamity. Except for one or two premium-tier media properties, journalism needs Facebook more than Facebook needs journalism.

“I don’t think the adversarial relationship between Facebook and the press is going to change,” Biddle says. “It’s a question of whether Facebook is going to stop resenting it so obviously and realize that this is what comes with being an enormously powerful, enormously wealthy corporation.”

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