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'FACEBOOK CANNOT BE TRUSTED'

Only Congressional hearings can answer what the company knew about Russian meddling — and when.

"Facebook cannot be trusted to regulate itself," tweeted Rhode Island Representative David Cicilline on Wednesday night.

Mr. Cicilline, who is likely to chair the House of Representatives' Judiciary subcommittee that focuses on antitrust law, was responding to a Times investigation, one that painted a damning picture of how Facebook had handled the discovery of Russian misinformation campaigns on its platform. Based on interviews with more than 50 people, the investigation depicted Facebook's top executives — including Sheryl Sandberg and Mark Zuckerberg — ignoring and downplaying the extent of Russian skulduggery, even going as far as to stall the publication of internal findings.

On Thursday, Facebook pushed back in a blog post that denied slow-rolling its response to foreign election interference.

But familiar questions remain unanswered: How much did Facebook know, and when?

The answers to those questions grow in size and seriousness as the breadth of the effort to befall the democratic process becomes more and more apparent. In February, the special counsel Robert Mueller brought an indictment against an infamous Russian troll farm, the Internet Research Agency. In July, Mr. Mueller secured an indictment against 12 Russian intelligence officers for their roles in the hacking of the Democratic National Committee's computers and those of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign. The same officers used both Facebook and Twitter to promote the stolen documents and emails.

In early 2016, people inside Facebook had spotted suspicious Russian activity, which was reported to the F.B.I. But in the days after the 2016 election, Mr. Zuckerberg publicly dismissed the notion that misinformation on Facebook had influenced the election, calling it "a pretty crazy idea."

Even before the Mueller indictments exposed the extent of a coordinated Russian misinformation campaign, suspicions ran high. Many people had questions; few people were in the position to demand answers. Mr. Zuckerberg was one of those few, and for some reason he did not.

Facebook could have approached its civic duty head-on, but instead busied itself with damage control. Joel Kaplan, the company's vice president for global public policy, objected to the public dissemination of internal findings on the grounds that it would offend conservatives. The company also chose to strengthen its ties with Definers Public Affairs, a consulting firm founded by Republican political operatives, which then sought to discredit anti-Facebook activists by linking them to George Soros, a wealthy liberal donor who is often the subject of conspiracy theories. Facebook said it cut ties with Definers on Wednesday night.

Russian influence operations and viral false reports should have been anticipated byproducts of Facebook's business model, which is based on selling advertising on the back of user engagement. In short, Facebook capitalizes on personal information to influence the behavior of its users, and then sells that influence to advertisers for a profit. It is an ecosystem ripe for manipulation.

Facebook is not the only tech company that demands regulatory scrutiny. But Facebook has, perhaps uniquely, demonstrated a staggering lack of corporate responsibility and civic duty in the wake of this crisis.

Real accountability is not forthcoming. Even in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, there was no shake-up in the upper echelons of the company — the most high-profile departure was that of Alex Stamos, the chief security officer who — according to The Times — independently chose to investigate Russian operations on the platform, and clashed with top brass as a result. As for Mr. Zuckerberg, he is unlikely to be ousted as CEO — he is both the majority shareholder and the chairman of the board. As a result, meaningful corporate oversight does not exist at the company.

Meaningful oversight of the tech industry from the executive branch is equally absent.

That's why the incoming House, newly in Democratic hands, should make serious oversight a priority. If the House is looking to set the agenda for the next two years, Facebook should be near the top. What ambiguities remain about what Facebook knew and when are prime subjects for hearings.

As Representative Cicilline's tweet suggests, a sense of urgency is growing around the idea Facebook should be regulated, but there's no consensus on exactly how. The answers can only come if the right questions are asked. Congressional hearings are an obvious start. We can only hope the House doesn't pull any punches.

Lessons from a 103-year-old activist

Daniel Trilling

LONDON For more than eight decades Max Levitas was a feature of daily life in London's East End, a busy multicultural district near the heart of the city. Until recently, he could still regularly be seen on the streets — he put his longevity down to the fact that he walked everywhere, plus his weekly steam bath — chatting with people or leafleting for elections and demonstrations. Even in this diverse neighborhood, he stood out for his smart suits and for his unique accent, a rich combination of Yiddish, Irish and Cockney.

In recent years, he'd gained a kind of celebrity as one of the last surviving participants in the Battle of Cable Street, the confrontation in October 1936 between Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists and hundreds of thousands of East Londoners who prevented them from marching through what was then a largely Jewish neighborhood. The incident has passed into folklore as the moment when fascism was prevented from gaining a foothold in Britain.

Mr. Levitas died on Nov. 2 at the age of 103. News of his death drew tributes from many sources, including Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the Labour Party, and Michael D. Higgins, president of Ireland, who described Mr. Levitas as "a defender of democracy and its core values."

This wasn't only because of what he did in the 1930s. Mr. Levitas was determined to make sure that the lessons of the past were heeded today, in an age when racism and authoritarianism have returned to the forefront of politics in many parts of the world. His life told a story, often left out of official narratives, in which people can come

together to take control of their fates.

He was born in Dublin in 1915 to Jewish immigrants who had fled poverty and persecution in the Russian Empire. His relatives who stayed behind would later perish in the Holocaust. Max was the eldest of six children, five of whom survived into adulthood. His father worked as a tailor's presser and the family lived in slum conditions. They were forced to leave Dublin in 1927 when Max's father was blacklisted by the city's sweatshop owners for his trade union activism. The whole family was political: Max's brother Maurice was also a union activist, and even volunteered for the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War.

Max left school at the age of 12 to work in the tailoring industry, and he threw himself into the labor movement as a teenager, joining the Young Communist League. He remained a Communist throughout his life. "It was never an issue to forge a Communist state like in the Soviet Union," he told an interviewer in 2011. "We wanted to ensure that the ordinary working people of England could lead decent lives — not to be unemployed, that people weren't thrown out of homes when they couldn't pay their rent."

Much of his campaigning centered on housing: In 1939, he organized a rent strike in his tenement block that lasted 21 weeks — and would introduce him to Sadie, whom he married two years later. In 1940, during the Blitz, he led an occupation of the Savoy Hotel to protest the lack of air-raid shelters for people in the East End — a campaign credited for the government's subsequent decision to let people shelter in London Underground stations.

As a wave of radicalism swept Britain in 1945, Mr. Levitas was one of 10 Communist candidates elected to his borough council. He remained a coun-

tilor for 17 years — and when I first met him in 2012, he was still able to point out housing estates that had been built as a result of local campaigns. Two years after our meeting, he was still at it, leading a delegation from his apartment block to protest unfair charges for repair work. "He still spoke with all the fire of the young man at Cable Street," one of his neighbors recalled. "It was astonishing, and none of the officials present dared to challenge him." He was 99 at the time.

Mr. Levitas was also alert to the threat of rising fascism at an early stage. In 1934, he was fined £5 by a court for painting anti-fascist slogans on Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square. He took a combative stance when it came to anti-Semitism: He didn't fight in World War II, he said, because he was dismissed from the army after punching an officer who insulted him with an ethnic slur.

But his experiences of anti-Semitism were a cue to show solidarity with others, too. A newspaper clipping from 1934 lists him as a speaker at a meeting in support of the Scottsboro Boys, nine African-American teenagers in Alabama who were falsely accused of raping a white woman. He continued to fight racism on his doorstep, even as its focus shifted to new arrivals from Britain's former colonies.

Mr. Levitas was widely known and liked across the East End, not least because he debated politics with respect and good humor. A walk with him through the neighborhood would frequently be delayed by people wanting to stop and talk: at the Whitechapel library or the Bengali market nearby, at the burger bar near his house or on

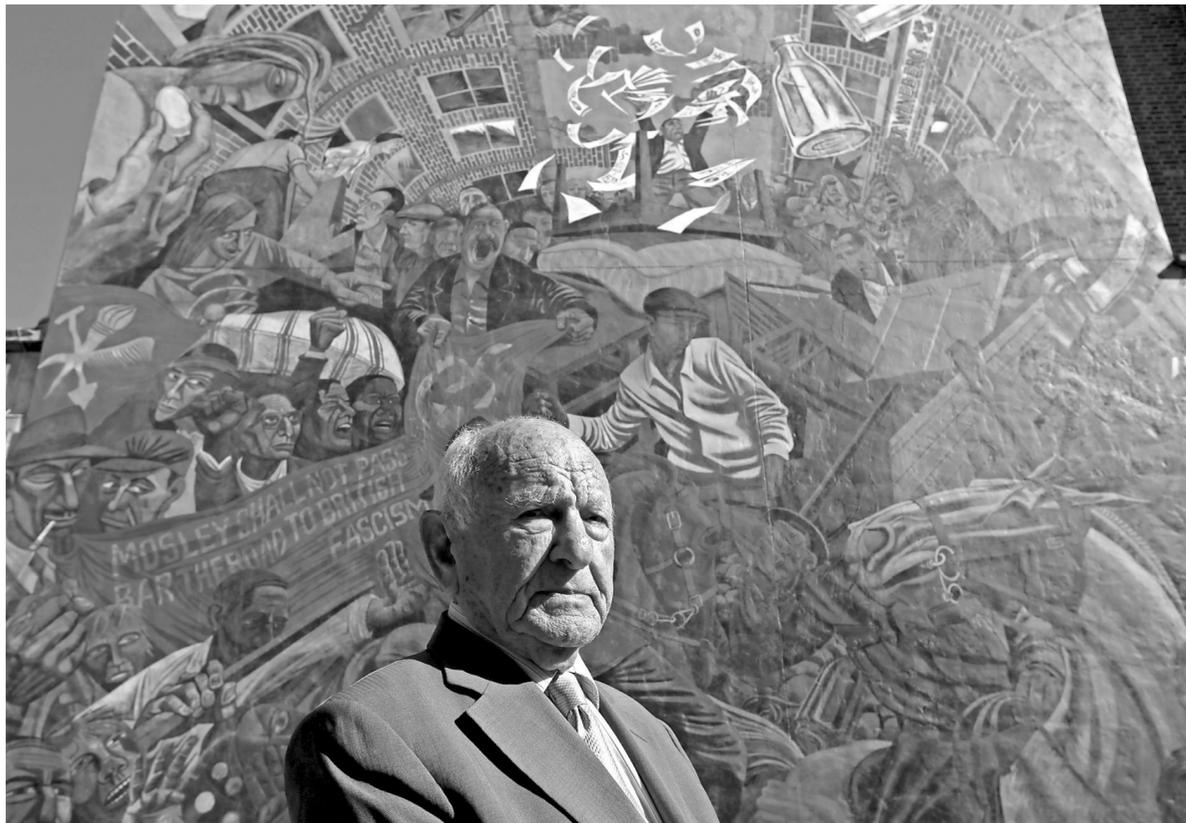
his way up to the steam room in Bethnal Green.

For hundreds of years, the East End has been a point of arrival for poor immigrants — French Protestants, Eastern European Jews, Irish and, more recently, many Muslims from South Asia. Successive groups have been harassed by racists and demagogues who seek to make them scapegoats; in recent years the far-right English Defense League has tried to hold marches past the East London Mosque. Mr. Levitas was among the people stopping them from doing so. But the area has become a symbol for the far right internationally, which falsely portrays it as a "no-go zone" for non-Muslims and uses this false characterization in its cautionary tales about Muslim immigration.

Today, people are under great pressure to retreat behind borders and barriers, while internationalism is portrayed as a project of the elite. Mr. Levitas showed that we don't need to choose between rootedness and openness. We can have both, as long as our starting point is the people around us.

When Mr. Levitas first arrived in the East End, it was a desperately poor neighborhood in the heart of an empire that stretched across the globe. Today, the area where he spent his life abuts one of the world's major financial centers through which billions of dollars flow each day. And yet, poverty and homelessness have made a comeback. From his youth to his death, this inequality was Max Levitas's cause. He was 100 years old when he attended one of his last protests in 2015, against the Conservative government's austerity policies.

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ANDREW WINNING/REUTERS

Max Levitas, shown in 2011. He was one of the last living participants in the 1936 Battle of Cable Street against fascists in East London, depicted in the mural.

Battling fires and the tech inferno

Kara Swisher

Contributing Writer

When I flew into San Francisco on Nov. 11, the haze shrouding the city was not the usual charming fog, and there was an acrid smell, like a barbecue on steroids. California was on fire.

In the past week, towns have been burned out of existence, people have fled the raging flames, and ashes have been falling from a tangerine sky.

The conflagration is airborne via the smoke, creating a "weather of catastrophe," which is the phrase Joan Didion once used to describe the hot Santa Ana winds blowing into Los Angeles. "The wind shows us how close to the edge we are," she wrote.

As 2018 comes to a close, that edge — a sense that the end times are near — has never been more obvious to those in California's tech business. And while that feeling is nowhere near comparable to the suffering of those fleeing and battling the fires that are burning away the Western landscape, the toxic smoke is a bleak backdrop

and an apt metaphor for where Silicon Valley now finds itself.

Much of the mess, of course, has been emanating from one company: Facebook. The realization of how much the social media giant has screwed up has dropped slowly, but now we know.

This week, a New York Times investigation into who knew what about the Russian manipulation of Facebook's platform painted a devastating picture of a company if not out of control, then driving directly and with great alacrity into what were clearly avoidable walls.

In addition to showing how Facebook's leaders failed to deal forthrightly with the situation, the piece has numerous examples of what I can only call dirty tricks to hurt rival companies and deflect public attention. And that is on Mark Zuckerberg and Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's chief executive and chief operating officer, as well as a panoply of top executives.

One is Facebook's man in Washington, Joel Kaplan, who could not seem to make any decision that was not a perplexing misjudgment. This was a practice he continued by sitting behind Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh at his confirmation hearings as

his chief cheerleader. Conflict of interest much? Very much.

But the frightening news from Silicon Valley goes beyond one company. Tech leaders made screens so addictive that they won't let their own children use them; they operate in a monoculture that reflects only itself and turns a blind eye to sexual harassment and diversity; and they accept dirty money from unsavory investors like the Saudis.

The overall sense of this year is that the brilliant digital minds who told us they were changing the world for the better might have miscalculated. Dan Lyons, a longtime tech observer and author of the new book "Lab Rats: How Silicon Valley Made Work Miserable for the Rest of Us," recently tweeted: "Nobody in Silicon Valley can solve homelessness or figure out how to hire with diversity, but 11 electric scooter companies have raised VC funding. Oh, and a

company that uses robots to make pizza. You wonder why there's a tech backlash."

Actually no one wonders that anymore, which is why it's probably time to think about where the industry goes from here. While I can be hard on tech, I still have hope that it can regain its innovation, inspiration and sunny approach to the future.

To do this, I have five suggestions:

EMBRACE TRANSPARENCY

As seen in the Facebook mess, the biggest error of all is the slow dribbling out, and outright covering up, of bad news. There is no greater threat to innovation than this kind of behavior, which suggests a company that wants to hold on to its power rather than be honest about its faults. Google has also failed to be transparent enough in regard to its creation of a search engine in China, its payoffs to men accused of sexual harassment and its work with the Defense Department. At Twitter, it is still unclear how it makes decisions about the removal of hateful content on its platform. And it sure would be nice if Uber would release the SWISHER, PAGE 14