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# Will Mark Zuckerberg ‘Like’ This Column?

Maureen Dowd SEPT. 23, 2017

WASHINGTON — The idea of Mark Zuckerberg running for president was always sort of scary.

But now it’s really scary, given what we’ve discovered about the power of his little invention to warp democracy.

All these years, the 33-year-old founder of Facebook has been dismissive of the idea that social media and A.I. could be used for global domination — or even that they should be regulated.

Days after Donald Trump pulled out his disorienting win, Zuckerberg told a tech conference that the contention that fake news had influenced the election was “a pretty crazy idea,” showing a “profound lack of empathy” toward Trump voters.

But all the while, the company was piling up the rubles and turning a blind eye as the Kremlin’s cyber hit men weaponized anti-Hillary bots on Facebook to sway the U.S. election. Russian agents also used Facebook and Twitter trolls, less successfully, to try to upend the French election.

Finally on Thursday, speaking on Facebook Live, Zuckerberg said he would give

Congress more than 3,000 ads linked to Russia. As one Facebooker posted: “Why did it take EIGHT MONTHS to get here?”

Hillary is right that this \$500 billion company has a lot to answer for in allowing the baby-photo-sharing site to be turned into what, with Twitter, The Times’s Scott Shane called “engines of deception and propaganda.”

Robert Mueller’s team, as well as House and Senate investigators, are hotly pursuing the trail of Russian fake news. On Friday, the Department of Homeland Security told 21 states, including Wisconsin and Ohio, that Russian agents had tried to hack their elections systems during the campaign.

As Vanity Fair pointed out, Mueller’s focus on social media during the campaign could spell trouble for Jared Kushner, who once bragged that he had called his Silicon Valley friends to get a tutorial in Facebook microtargeting and brought in Cambridge Analytica — Robert Mercer is a big investor — to help build a \$400 million operation for his father-in-law’s campaign.

Some lawmakers suspect that the Russians had help in figuring out which women and blacks to target in precincts in Wisconsin and Michigan.

Senator Martin Heinrich, a New Mexico Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee looking into Russia’s intervention in 2016, has a suspect in mind. “Paul Manafort made an awful lot of money coming up with a game plan for how Russian interests could be pushed in Western countries and Western elections,” Heinrich told Vanity Fair.

ProPublica broke the news that, until it asked about it recently, Facebook had “enabled advertisers to direct their pitches to the news feeds of almost 2,300 people who expressed interest in the topics of ‘Jew hater,’ ‘How to burn jews,’ or, ‘History of “why jews ruin the world.””

Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook’s C.O.O., apologized for this on Wednesday and promised to fix the ad-buying tools, noting, “We never intended or anticipated this functionality being used this way — and that is on us.”

The Times’s Kevin Roose called this Facebook’s “Frankenstein moment,” like when Mary Shelley’s scientist, Victor Frankenstein, says, “I had been the author of

unalterable evils, and I lived in daily fear lest the monster whom I had created should perpetrate some new wickedness.”

Roose noted that in addition to the Russian chicanery, “In Myanmar, activists are accusing Facebook of censoring Rohingya Muslims, who are under attack from the country’s military. In Africa, the social network faces accusations that it helped human traffickers extort victims’ families by leaving up abusive videos.”

The Sandberg admission was also game, set and match for Elon Musk, who has been sounding the alarm for years about the danger of Silicon Valley’s creations and A.I. mind children getting out of control and hurting humanity. His pleas for safeguards and regulations have been mocked as “hysterical” and “pretty irresponsible” by Zuckerberg.

Zuckerberg, whose project last year was building a Jarvis-style A.I. butler for his home, likes to paint himself as an optimist and Musk as a doomsday prophet. But Sandberg’s comment shows that Musk is right: The digerati at Facebook and Google are either being naïve or cynical and greedy in thinking that it’s enough just to have a vague code of conduct that says “Don’t be evil,” as Google does.

As Musk told me when he sat for a Vanity Fair piece: “It’s great when the emperor is Marcus Aurelius. It’s not so great when the emperor is Caligula.”

In July, the chief of Tesla and SpaceX told a meeting of governors that they should adopt A.I. legislation before robots start “going down the street killing people.” In August, he tweeted that A.I. going rogue represents “vastly more risk than North Korea.” And in September, he tweeted out a Gizmodo story headlined “Hackers Have Already Started to Weaponize Artificial Intelligence,” reporting that researchers proved that A.I. hackers were better than humans at getting Twitter users to click on malicious links.

(Musk also tweeted that it was a cautionary tale when Microsoft’s chatbot, Tay, had to be swiftly shut down when Twitter users taught her how to reply with racist, misogynistic and anti-Semitic slurs, talking approvingly about Hitler.)

Vladimir Putin has denied digital meddling in the U.S. elections. But he understands the possibilities and threat of A.I. In a recent address, the Russian

president told schoolchildren, “Whoever becomes the leader in this sphere will become the ruler of the world.” Musk agreed on Twitter that competition for A.I. superiority would be the “most likely cause of WW3.”

On Thursday, touring the Moscow tech firm Yandex, Putin asked the company’s chief how long it would be before superintelligent robots “eat us.”

Zuckerberg scoffs at such apocalyptic talk. His project this year was visiting all 50 states, a trip designed by former Obama strategist David Plouffe, which sparked speculation that he might be the next billionaire to seek the Oval Office.

As Bloomberg Businessweek wrote in a cover story a few days ago, Zuckerberg has hired Plouffe, other senior Obama officials and Hillary’s pollster. He has said he is no longer an atheist and he changed Facebook’s charter to allow him to maintain control in the hypothetical event he runs for office.

Yep. Very scary.

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