



INSIDE THE TWO YEARS THAT SHOOK FACEBOOK AND THE WORLD

Posted by [Derek A. Lackey, Editor](#) / March 25, 2018

For those who want to understand the inside view of Facebook and its struggle to "do the right thing" vs "making money" this article by NICHOLAS THOMPSON AND FRED VOGELSTEIN is exceptional. WIRED's recent cover portrayed a beaten up Mark Zuckerberg, methinks the beating is not over. Reading this article and watching the [Cambridge Analytica story](#) unfold, could be more than Facebook can reasonably deal with. Perhaps the one thing Facebook did not account for: human being. The good and the bad.

"ONE DAY IN late February of 2016, Mark Zuckerberg sent a memo to all of Facebook's employees to address some troubling behavior in the ranks. His message pertained to some walls at the company's Menlo Park headquarters where staffers are encouraged to scribble notes and signatures. On at least a couple of occasions, someone had crossed out the words Black Lives Matter and replaced them with All Lives Matter. Zuckerberg wanted whoever was responsible to cut it out.

Black Lives Matter doesn't mean other lives don't, he wrote. We've never had rules around what people can write on our walls, the memo went on. But crossing out something means silencing speech, or that one person's speech is more important than another's. The defacement, he said, was being investigated.

All around the country at about this time, debates about race and politics were becoming increasingly raw. Donald Trump had just won the South Carolina primary, lashed out at the Pope over immigration, and earned the enthusiastic support of David Duke. Hillary Clinton had just defeated Bernie Sanders in Nevada, only to have an activist from Black Lives Matter interrupt a speech of hers to protest racially charged statements she'd made two decades before. And on Facebook, a popular group called Blacktivist was gaining traction by blasting out messages like American economy and power were built on forced migration and torture.

So when Zuckerberg's admonition circulated, a young contract employee named Benjamin Fearnow decided it might be newsworthy. He took a screenshot on his personal laptop and sent the image to a friend named Michael Nuez, who worked at the tech-news site Gizmodo. Nuez promptly published a brief story about Zuckerberg's memo.

A week later, Fearnow came across something else he thought Nuez might like to publish. In another internal communication, Facebook had invited its employees to submit potential questions to ask Zuckerberg at an all-hands meeting. One of the

most up-voted questions that week was What responsibility does Facebook have to help prevent President Trump in 2017? Fearnow took another screenshot, this time with his phone.

Fearnow, a recent graduate of the Columbia Journalism School, worked in Facebooks New York office on something called Trending Topics, a feed of popular news subjects that popped up when people opened Facebook. The feed was generated by an algorithm but moderated by a team of about 25 people with backgrounds in journalism. If the word Trump was trending, as it often was, they used their news judgment to identify which bit of news about the candidate was most important. If The Onion or a hoax site published a spoof that went viral, they had to keep that out. If something like a mass shooting happened, and Facebooks algorithm was slow to pick up on it, they would inject a story about it into the feed.

Facebook prides itself on being a place where people love to work. But Fearnow and his team werent the happiest lot. They were contract employees hired through a company called BCforward, and every day was full of little reminders that they werent really part of Facebook. Plus, the young journalists knew their jobs were doomed from the start. Tech companies, for the most part, prefer to have as little as possible done by humans because, its often said, they dont scale. You cant hire a billion of them, and they prove meddlesome in ways that algorithms dont. They need bathroom breaks and health insurance, and the most annoying of them sometimes talk to the press. Eventually, everyone assumed, Facebooks algorithms would be good enough to run the whole project, and the people on Fearnows team who served partly to train those algorithms would be expendable.

The day after Fearnow took that second screenshot was a Friday. When he woke up after sleeping in, he noticed that he had about 30 meeting notifications from Facebook on his phone. When he replied to say it was his day off, he recalls, he was nonetheless asked to be available in 10 minutes. Soon he was on a videoconference with three Facebook employees, including Sonya Ahuja, the companys head of investigations. According to his recounting of the meeting, she asked him if he had been in touch with Nuez. He denied that he had been. Then she told him that she had their messages on Gchat, which Fearnow had assumed werent accessible to Facebook. He was fired. Please shut your laptop and dont reopen it, she instructed him.

That same day, Ahuja had another conversation with a second employee at Trending Topics named Ryan Villarreal. Several years before, he and Fearnow had shared an apartment with Nuez. Villarreal said he hadnt taken any screenshots, and he certainly hadnt leaked them. But he had clicked like on the story about Black Lives Matter, and he was friends with Nuez on Facebook. Do you think leaks are bad? Ahuja demanded to know, according to Villarreal. He was fired too. The last he heard from his employer was in a letter from BCforward. The company had given him \$15 to cover expenses, and it wanted the money back.

The firing of Fearnow and Villarreal set the Trending Topics team on edge and Nuez kept digging for dirt. He soon published a story about the internal poll showing Facebookers interest in fending off Trump. Then, in early May, he published an article based on conversations with yet a third former Trending Topics employee, under the blaring headline Former Facebook Workers: We Routinely Suppressed Conservative News. The piece suggested that Facebooks Trending team worked like a Fox News fever dream, with a bunch of biased curators injecting liberal stories and

blacklisting conservative ones. Within a few hours the piece popped onto half a dozen highly trafficked tech and politics websites, including Drudge Report and Breitbart News..."

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