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Facebook Faces Tough Scrutiny From Many Directions, Even at Cato Institute

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If the tenor of a Thursday event at the CATO Institute is any indication, Facebook continues to face tough scrutiny from many sides in Washington.

Although the event was titled, “Will Social Media Save Democracy?”, the panel instead became a multi-pronged attack on the company framed around a more negative question, “How Can We Save Democracy from Facebook?”

Panelists at the event laid blame on Facebook for everything from the rise of the alt-right movement to an alleged recent health epidemic around “loneliness.” Further accusations included Facebook and other social media platforms’ role in tilting elections, such as the upset victories for the Brexit initiative and presidential campaign of Donald Trump, as well as enabling foreign governments that stifle opposition and free speech.

Even last week, the government of Papua New Guinea announced a mandatory one-month shutdown of Facebook all across the country for one month. Some have speculated that this shutdown was the government’s attempt to crackdown on political opposition.

Facebook is on the defensive in Washington

At the CATO event, which also included a Facebook representative, the overall consensus among panelists was that Facebook enjoys too much power to disrupt and disintegrate democracy. The recent data privacy scandal involving Cambridge Analytica has reinforced the social media company's defensive posture in Washington.

Critics suggested that steeper regulations must be applied to Facebook in order to protect democracy.

Panelist Ned Ryun, founder of American Majority, a non-profit group providing training for conservative activists, suggested that Facebook exercises power without responsibility. In order to

protect democracy, he said, social media giants such as Facebook and Twitter need to be subject to the same utility-style laws to which telecommunications providers were recently subject.

Monopolies such as Facebook, Ryun continued, need to be broken up and regulated more heavily. If Facebook is neither broken up nor subject to increased regulations, the social media giant may develop the power to act as an unelected, authoritarian government.

Facebook wasn't exactly on the warpath against the allegations

Facebook's response to such concerns was ambiguous. Company Director of Global Politics and Government Outreach Katie Harbath responded to these concerns without a clear answer.

Harbath agreed that change needed to occur in how social media giants regulate content and engage with users. However, she did not agree that Facebook believes in tighter regulations.

Rather than relying on Facebook to police users closely, Harbath suggested that communities self-police their own pages and comments.

She said that the debate over how social media should move forward will not have a clear-cut solution.

Rather, this will continue to be subject to ongoing debate. "These are the conversations we want to be having," she said.

Nevertheless, the overall agreement of panelists, including Harbath, was that Facebook needed to be more engaged in addressing issues that raise problematic public relations problems for the company.