

18063 **It's Time to Regulate the Internet**

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It will be fantastically satisfying to see the boy genius assailed and torn apart. All the politicians—ironically, in search of a viral moment—will lash Mark Zuckerberg from across the hearing room. They will corner Facebook's founder, seeking to pin all manner of sin on him. This will make for splendid spectacle, but spectacle is a vacuous substitute for policy.

As Facebook's scandals have unfolded, the backlash against Big Tech has accelerated at a dizzying pace. Anger, however, has outpaced thinking. The most fully drawn and enthusiastically backed proposal now circulating through Congress would regulate political ads that can appear on the platform, a law that hardly curbs the company's power or profits. And, it should be said, a law that does nothing to attack the core of the problem: the absence of governmental protections for personal data.

This weakness has long been apparent to activists toiling on the fringes of debate—and the dangers might even have been apparent to most users of Facebook. But it's one thing to abstractly understand the rampant exploitation of data; it's another to graphically see how our data can be weaponized against us. And that's the awakening occasioned by the rolling revelation of Facebook's complicity in the debacle of the last presidential campaign.

Mark Zuckerberg might believe that the world is better without privacy. But we can finally see the costs of his vision. Our intimate information was widely available to malicious individuals, who hope to manipulate our political opinions, our intellectual habits, and our patterns of consumption; it was easily available to the proprietors of Cambridge Analytica. Facebook turned data—which amounts to an X-ray of the inner self—into a commodity traded without our knowledge.

In the face of such exploitative forces, Americans have historically asked government to shield them. The law protects us from banks that would abuse our ignorance and human weaknesses—and it precludes the commodification of our financial data. When manufacturers of processed food have stuffed their products with terrible ingredients, the government has forced them into transparently revealing the full list of components. After we created transportation systems, the government insisted on speed limits and seat belts. There are loopholes in all of this, but there's an unassailable consensus that these rules are far better than the alternative. We need to extend our historic model to our new world.