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Privacy on the internet has been a major concern for as long as the internet has had widespread access. There have always been those people afraid to shop online or have social media accounts out of fear that their information may fall into the wrong hands. Many of those fears were realized recently when the news broke that IT service management company, Cambridge Analytica, had taken the personal data of 87 million Facebook users without their knowledge or consent. This massive breach of privacy has led to many questions about Facebook as a company, and what things they could have done to prevent this from happening. These questions went far enough that Mark Zuckerberg was forced to stand before congress and answer questions about exactly that.

This highly publicized breach of privacy has forced the average person in society to think about their privacy and safety on the internet far more than they ever thought they would have to. In that way, this event may be good for the public discourse. It is forcing us to have a conversation that most people avoid because they either do not understand it or do not find it particularly interesting. It also does not help this important discourse goes above the heads of the average person, who often knows very little about the intricacies of how technology works. In fact when it comes to the internet and technology, most people do not even know what they do not know. However this story in particular may be changing that to some extent and it has maybe cast a little bit of a light on where we could be doing much better in the realm of cybersecurity. Take for example, Pamela Lokken, one of the most avid Facebook users I know and someone who knows very little about technology or cybersecurity. She is one of millions that are troubled by how Facebook has handled this situation.

“I know that everything on the internet is not private. I know that it’s saved somewhere and it’s out there. You can’t expect it to really, truly be private. But I don’t expect that my conversations with friends and family on Facebook to be compromised like that.” Lokken said. “I use Facebook a lot to keep in touch with family that lives all over the place now and I appreciate that aspect of Facebook. So when I start to question whether or not I can use those types of tools, that makes me think that it’s going to be harder to keep in touch with those people and that’s frustrating to me.”

This is a sentiment echoed by many people across the country and globe and even lead to the trending topic and small movement called #deletefacebook. This name itself is very close to the worst possible PR look that Facebook could possibly have. It even utilizes a hashtag, the calling card of Twitter, Facebook’s biggest rival as far as popularity in the social media market. It had to be pretty close to Facebook’s worst nightmare come to life. The corporate offices could not have possibly had a more disastrous series of headlines occur within a few weeks span. All of this was supposed to come to head when Mark Zuckerberg reported to congress to answer questions directly from lawmakers on live television in front of the entire world. However, what was expected to be a moment of reckoning for Facebook actually ended up being a net positive for the company.

When Mark Zuckerberg arrived on Capitol Hill everyone expected him to be blitzed with questions and Facebook’s reputation and stock would suffer as a result. However, as the lawmakers asked more questions it became obvious that many of these lawmakers had very little education on this specific data breach or about cyber security as a whole. The questions they were asking had very simple answers and just anybody who did a little bit of research on Facebook and its policies would be able to find those answers. There were even some questions that were downright embarrassing like when a senator asked how Facebook makes money when it is free for users. Mark Zuckerberg simply replied with “We run ads” and many online expressed disbelief as to how a United States senator could ask a question that had such an obvious answer. There were also instances of lawmakers asking Zuckerberg if someone could “call Facebook up” and ask to see a specific person’s file, which while possible in theory, would never actually happen. The hearing quickly became the joke of the day on the internet and the absurdity of everything that was unfolding was being thoroughly lampooned. By the time the hearing was over, Facebook had not been dealt a devastating blow to their brand and in fact had actually rehabbed its image a little bit. Following the hearing there are a couple different avenues that this story could move down according to UW-Whitewater professor Eric Loepp.

“Congress may pursue additional regulatory authority over social media like Facebook, like Europe has, so much of this debate is over the proper scope of regulation around things like disclaimers on ads, clearer user agreements, eliminating bots, etc. Historically, the government does not regulate technology that much in this country as governments elsewhere do, so there are no easy answers. It is hard to predict the outcome. I do know the FTC is investigating the data sharing element and that could potentially involve massive fines/penalties. The FTC investigation is what I’m keeping an eye on. Time will tell.” Loepp said.

Going forward there are still many questions that have to be answered. How was something of this scope allowed to take place? Why didn’t Facebook know anything about it? Should Facebook be punished for not knowing more about what was happening on their own website? All those along with many others will have to be answered in the coming months and the U.S. government will have to make some tough decisions regarding the future of social media and data as a whole. A scandal of this size and magnitude was a real eye-opener for many people and really provided a prime example of how your privacy on the internet is not what most people think it is. Most people suspect that what they don on the internet is saved somewhere but I don’t think anybody truly expected the private information of over 85 million people to be accessed through the largest social media site in existence with seemingly no problem. Privacy is something that consumers place at a premium and if Facebook cannot provide it they will eventually find an alternative. Going forward there will be changes in how the government regulates social media and how the privacy of its citizens will be handled. However if there is anything we know about the internet, it is that the mechanisms of security are always one step slower than the mechanisms of those who seek to access protected information.

This story still has at least one more shoe yet to drop with the U.S. government moving toward some sort of regulation of social media companies and the social media space. Whatever the final decision regarding Facebook and its role in all of this is, a light has been shone on a security risk that most people had been ignoring for a very long time. That will no longer be the case going forward and hopefully this scandal will help educate the average American about cybersecurity and all the risks they didn’t even know they were taking when they sign-in.