

Spies, Lies, and Stonewalling: What It's Like to Report on Facebook | Columbia Journalism Review

By Jacob Silverman

July 1, 2020

Newton's professional arc, from enthusiastic tech beat reporter to skeptical industry investigator, matches the trajectories of a number of journalists in recent years. The 2016 presidential election in particular prompted a change in worldview against Facebook and the power wielded by Big Tech. The media had learned, perhaps belatedly, the cost of taking Facebook at its word. More recent, and adversarial, reporting has produced important stories about Facebook's refusal to tackle the proliferation of right-wing extremism and conspiracy theories on its platform. In advance of the 2020 election, more journalists are taking a hard look at the Trump campaign's once-heralded digital operation, which spends heavily on Facebook advertising, and its bombastic overseer, Brad Parscale, who has been promoted to overall campaign manager.

Beyond the company's dissembling, reporting on Facebook's operations has become increasingly complex simply because of its size. The company controls the communications and informational intake of more than two and a half billion people. It can feel impossible to comprehend its total influence—or to overstate its impact on journalism. The past four years have made tech reporters out of many journalists who would otherwise confine their scope of interest to politics, culture, labor, or economics. Facebook's reach extends across every beat.

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