

# Facebook's political brand repair

Blog post by Research Associate Alessandra Baldacchino, 25 May 2018

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Facebook's recent decision to run newspaper adverts promoting the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which enters into force today, have raised some eyebrows. It is, of course, interesting to see one of the world's largest technology companies resorting to old fashioned long-copy. The more pertinent question is how well it is likely to work and what it suggests about the next tactical moves for big tech in general.

Facebook no doubt hopes that strategically beating the UK Information Commissioner's Office and the European Union in launching the first major press campaign across Europe to raise awareness about GDPR will signal its commitment to data protection, in the wake of recent scandals. Using old media to do this is presumably a conscious choice.

The strategy is a reminder of how closely Facebook's political and consumer brands are now linked on the data protection question. How well it works is another question. There are three reasons to doubt it can be anything but one part of a much wider rethink.

First, Facebook's press campaign hasn't done a great job of communicating its actual plan of action. If anything, by drawing attention to GDPR, the company is arguably emphasising that it is regulators who are stepping into the data protection space. The headline "New data law means better protection for you" rather begs the question of why self-regulation was lacking.

Second, with the best will in the world, Mark Zuckerberg's public appearances keep adding to the lack of transparency around Facebook's use of data. He missed the opportunity to do some political brand-building with EU MEPs on Tuesday. His long answers lacked specifics and were compounded by suggestions of following up other questions in private. He gained little sympathy with his mantra about making the world a better place and by reiterating Facebook's commitment to Europe.

Thirdly, presenting itself as the leading light in data protection is, in itself, a bold and risky choice. It is not actually definitively clear yet when Facebook will be fully compliant with the GDPR - as Zuckerberg addressed this week. Europe's trust issue with the social media giant came through clearly in Brussels via thorny questions about privacy - a change from US Senators' focus on how Facebook makes its money.

Ultimately, this tense atmosphere goes much wider than just Facebook. But its attempts at political brand repair emphasise how far big tech has to go to be confident in its license to operate in the EU. With a new policy cycle in 2019, a range of anti-trust cases in train and the renegotiation of the [privacy shield](#) all on the horizon, we can expect a lot more political theatre, and dealing with this will need more than a few newspaper ads.