

Zuckerberg feels too guilty and won't go to UK for data privacy testimony, despite threat of future arrest

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Photo by Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

Facebook says that it won't send Mark Zuckerberg to the UK to appear before a Parliamentary committee that threatened to force him to testify the next time he entered the country if he wouldn't come willingly. In a letter, Facebook's head of public policy, Rebecca Stimson, wrote that Zuckerberg "has no plans to meet with the committee or travel to the UK at the present time." She also sent her letter three days after the deadline Facebook was given to respond.

While Zuckerberg appeared before US Congress and has plans to meet with EU lawmakers, he declined to meet with the UK's Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee. Instead, Facebook sent Mike Schroepfer, its chief technical officer, to answer their questions. But the committee was unhappy with his answers — often, with the lack of them — if not also the snub. And so it sent Facebook a follow-up letter on May 1st saying that it would like Zuckerberg to appear to provide satisfactory responses.

"We hope that he will respond positively to our request, but if not the committee will resolve to issue a formal summons for him to appear when he is next in the UK," committee chairman Damian Collins wrote at the time.

In a statement today, Collins said he is "disappointed" with Facebook's response and lack of transparency. But he seems to be backing off of the summons threat and offers to accept testimony from Zuckerberg through a video call.

Still, by declining to appear, Zuckerberg risks being forced to testify the next time he has a

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connecting flight through Heathrow and potentially facing arrest if he doesn't go along. And at a bare minimum, he's guaranteed to have further pissed off UK lawmakers.

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Facebook essentially says that it sees the request to see Zuckerberg as unreasonable. In her letter, Stimson writes that "Facebook has now held lengthy meetings or evidence sessions around the world." That included providing written answers and five hours of testimony from a senior official to the UK committee. "We are disappointed after providing a very significant amount of information ... that the committee declared our response insufficient."

Stimson's letter also includes about 17 pages of answers to questions that Schroepfer didn't give responses to during his testimony last month. One answer reveals that Facebook's Like button, which sends data back to Facebook even if it isn't clicked, is present on 8.4 million websites. Facebook's tracking pixel, which also monitors users, is installed on 2.2 million websites.

Collins says these answers still aren't good enough. "Given that these were follow up questions to questions Mr. Schroepfer previously failed to answer, we expected both detail and data, and in a number of cases got excuses," he writes.

Facebook may want to avoid putting Zuckerberg in front of the UK's Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee for a number of reasons. Aside from prolonging the fallout from the Cambridge Analytica scandal, the committee has also shown itself to be substantially more technologically savvy than many lawmakers elsewhere and has thrown much tougher questions at the company.

The committee plans to follow up with Facebook to "address significant gaps" in the company's answers as it continues to investigate its data privacy practices, as well as issues around propaganda, election ads, and content moderation.

