Public Penitence: Facebook and the Performance of Apology

Kimberly Hall

Abstract
This article explores the 2018 apology campaign launched by Facebook in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal. While the campaign has largely been read as a failure, this article reads the five key moments of apology against the broader cultural discourse produced by the social media giant in order to argue that the campaign is actually quite successful. Facebook uses the performance of apology to create a divided perception of the company that allows it to reroute the expected transformation of the penitent into a strengthening of its brand identity, pointing to the immense discursive power of Facebook.

Keywords
Facebook, social media, apology, discourse

2018 marked a year in which apology became a consistent and significant aspect of the public discourse by and about Facebook. On March 17, the British paper, The Observer, and The New York Times broke the story of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, in which it was revealed that a third-party app, thisisyourdigitallife, created by Aleksandr Kogan, a researcher at Cambridge University, was used to harvest the data of friends of quiz takers without their consent and then sold to the political strategy firm Cambridge Analytica. Facebook responded to the ensuing outcry with an apology campaign that included five high-profile public apologies from the company and its CEO, Mark Zuckerberg. These apologies were largely condemned as failures, unsatisfactory, and insufficient for the scope of the breach. Many commentators, such as Kara Swisher and Zeynep Tufekci, called attention to not only the botched individual apologies, but more importantly to the fact that Facebook, and Zuckerberg in particular, has been making the same sort of apology—without any meaningful change in company practices or policies—for over 14 years.

Apologies are perhaps difficult for the company because contrition is not part of Facebook’s DNA. This is apparent on the platform as well as in its discourse; the range of responses to posts allows users to express joy, approval, anger, but not regret. This is perhaps one materialization of the former unofficial motto of Facebook: “Move Fast and Break Things.” The Silicon Valley veneration of “disruption” evoked by such a statement recalls the hacker origins of the company. It also illustrates the underlying ethos of the company: a privileging of speed over structure, and effects over deliberation. It is a motto designed to preempt any idea of regret over action. It also anticipates that there will be that fracturing or harm as a result of what Facebook enacts. It is a motto that anticipates the future necessity of apologies.

This is perhaps fitting as many scholars have dubbed our contemporary moment the “age of apology,” meaning that apology has become such a normative aspect of both our social lives and corporate life, that apologies are a necessary narrative component of personal identity and corporate brand (Gibney et al., 2008). The corporate apology is so ubiquitous that Harvard Business Review published a guide to corporate apology in 2015, and as Boyd (2011) points out, “apologies are increasingly viewed as an injunctive norm,” despite the fact that most CEOs fail to apologize, apologize at the wrong time, or apologize inappropriately or incompletely (p. 300). Despite its necessity, however, apology remains a difficult performative speech act to get right. This difficulty has led to the burgeoning subfield of apology studies. A topic of fascination since the Classical period, more recent foundational works like J. L. Austin’s (1962) How to Do Things With Words and Erving Goffman’s (1971) Relations in Public establish the significant

Wofford College, USA

Corresponding Author:
Kimberly Hall, Wofford College, Spartanburg, SC 29303-3663, USA.
Email: hallka@wofford.edu
performative and sociological functions of apology, while more recent work in Communication and Management Studies examines the specific context of our contemporary media culture (Ayaburi & Treku, 2020; Frantz & Bennigson, 2005; Taft, 2000). As most analyses conclude, in order for the apology to be considered successful, in the moment of apologizing the offender must both own the mistake and take responsibility, recognize the validity of the victim’s position, apologize, and promise to make amends for the transgression (Smith, 2008). As these many steps make clear, simply saying, “I’m sorry” isn’t enough.

Because of the paradoxically formulaic and complex demands of apologies, the trajectory of Facebook’s flawed apology for Cambridge Analytica points to two significant aspects of apology that suggest that the campaign is much more successful than it has been given credit for. The first is what Goffman (1971) terms the “splitting gesture” whereby the act of apology “split[s] the offender in two . . . the transgression seems more acceptable if the victim believes in this split” that indicates “the offender knows what he or she did wrong and why it was hurtful to the victim” (p. 202). By apologizing, the offender becomes divided between the past self who enacted the harm and a promised future self who will grow from the recognition of the effects of that harm. Adam Ellwanger (2012) defines this as the *metanoic* moment whereby “a profound conversion of the heart” is signaled by the act of apology (p. 309). While this is the ideal, Ellwanger’s (2012) analysis of high-profile public apologies asserts that this ideal has become fulfilled more in form, than in function: “public apologies are better understood as ritualistic public punishment and humiliation . . . they coercively reconcile the offender to an ideology that dictates the norms for public speech and action” (p. 309). It is that reconciliation to an ideology that this article explores in more depth. Using comparative close readings of Facebook’s narratives about the company in its 2018 apology campaign and related cultural texts, it becomes clear that one of the most significant forms of power Facebook wields is the power of narrative control. And reading the apology campaign within this context reveals that the campaign is far from a failure. In fact, despite surface appearances, it is an expertly choreographed exercise of discursive power.

The stakes of such power are what Natale et al. (2019) have termed *corporational determinism*, a company’s inferred “right to inform debates and decisions about the governance of digital technologies.” Such a framing asserts that discourse analysis reveals larger ideological arbitrations, which for social media users, providers, and the government all grappling with the appropriate balance of privacy and disclosure is an especially fraught site of negotiation. And although the apology is a moment in which apology theory suggests narrative power must be conceded, I argue that Facebook uses this contested discursive site as a way to recapture control by enacting a splitting gesture that reroutes the *metanoic* transformation into the platform’s brand identity.

**“Move Fast With Stable Infrastructure”**

In the first stage of the apology campaign for the Cambridge Analytica data breach, Mark Zuckerberg took to his own Wall on Facebook on 21 March 2018 to explain the Cambridge Analytica situation to users. This post becomes a template for the apologies that follow later that year. Although this missive follows the first rule of organizational apology outlined by Schweitzer et al. (2015), that a senior leader responds publicly and immediately to a crisis, this communication is hard to characterize as an apology because it never actually apologizes (p. 4). It begins like a bulletin, with Zuckerberg stating, “I want to share an update on the Cambridge Analytica situation.” The statement reads like a post, an informal update on the status of one of the reader’s friends, rather than a distant CEO responding to a crisis. The post then transitions from the first person singular “I” of Zuckerberg to the plural pronoun of “us” signaling Zuckerberg speaking not just as an individual, but as the face of Facebook, a rhetorical transition that figures significantly in all of Facebook’s 2018 apologies. The post goes on to note, “We have a responsibility to protect your data, and if we can’t then we don’t deserve to serve you,” a statement that seems to focus on the user, but which instead calls attention to the company. Cerulo and Ruane (2014) call this an “Offender-Driven Sequence” apology in which the focus is on the offender and the context, an information-dense statement that prioritizes the offenders and their understanding of the breach, rather than acknowledging the validity of the suffering of the victim (p. 131).

Following this opening statement, Zuckerberg maps out a timeline of events to clarify the details of the breach and the steps the company had taken to address them. Strikingly, however, he starts the timeline with the 2007 debut of Facebook Platform, explaining,

> we launched Facebook Platform with the vision that apps should be more social. Your calendar should be able to show you your friends’ birthdays, your maps should show you where your friends live, and your address book should show their pictures. To do this, we enabled people to log into apps and share who their friends were and some information about them.

Starting the timeline in this way, Zuckerberg begins with an almost Edenic vision of what data access could facilitate—a more integrated version of Facebook reality. Not only would such features as mapping of friends’ locations provide a greater experience for users, it should provide that experience. Access to data is an imperative with an idealistic undertone, and the entire statement proceeds from this premise. The complications highlighted in the timeline that follows emphasize the ways in which a single rogue operator worked
to undermine that vision, going so far as to note, “This was a breach of trust between Kogan, Cambridge Analytica, and Facebook,” asserting Facebook’s status as the first victim in this incident, rather than a culpable party.

This move is significant because the launch of Platform and the imperative to openness it invokes is exactly what allows bad actors like Cambridge Analytica to operate. Zuckerberg’s statement idealizes what Platform could have been, rather than what it turned out to be, establishing a nostalgic tone that returns a month later in the “Here Together” commercial. For 7 years the vision of Platform created a positive space in which data sharing was not only encouraged, it enhanced the lives of its users.

This utopian characterization of the platform was communicated publicly through a television ad initially released on 4 October 2012 (Nudd, 2012), a date that corresponded with the date on which Facebook reached one-billion users. The 90-s spot, titled “Chairs,” was directed by Alejandro Iñárritu and through gorgeous cinematography, develops an extended metaphor that compares Facebook to everything from chairs to the universe. When the ad opens the camera zooms in on a solitary red wooden chair seemingly levitating in a forest while an increasingly loud mechanical buzzing slowly overtakes the natural diegetic soundscape, creating a tension amplified by the perplexing image. The screen fades to black as the buzzing takes over, and suddenly switches to a montage of people sitting in a variety of chairs, in a variety of settings, reading, playing, looking into the camera. “Chairs” then appears as a supertitle on the screen, echoed by a female voiceover stating the same word. She then goes on to state,

Chairs are made so that people can sit down and take a break. Anyone can sit on a chair. And if the chair is large enough, they can sit down together. And tell jokes. Or make up stories. Or just listen. Chairs are for people.

In the background, images of chairs used in ways that correspond with all of these ideas flash quickly on the screen. If Facebook is the chair, it is the stable architecture that supports these uses without controlling them. It is the people in this ad that have the power to use the chair in any way that they wish, suggesting that just as chairs are neutral facilitators of communication, so too is Facebook.

But as the ad makes clear, although chairs can be used for anything, there is a clear purpose for which they are best suited: sharing. Chairs are not for solitary pursuits, but to get people to open up and reveal themselves through humor, narrative, even confession. The chair encourages us to sit, but only so that we can give something of ourselves in return. This last use is beautifully illustrated by a single close-up shot of a young woman with tears streaming down her face as she stares directly into the camera. Her appealing vulnerability is an aesthetic expression of the ultimate aim of the platform; the intimate framing manages to eliminate the chair entirely from the frame, allowing for a sense of direct connection with the viewer.

This commercial continues to compare the platform to useful tools that facilitate positive and even revolutionary social connection but ends on a similar note of singularity. Completing the string of metaphors, the narrator intones, “The universe. It is vast and dark and makes us wonder if we are alone. So maybe the reason we make all of these things is to remind ourselves that we are not.” Just as the chair has been framed out of sight, but presumably continues to support the crying young woman, so too does Facebook continue to support social connect on a nearly cosmic scale. The commercial deftly aligns the company with the most vulnerable and vast moments of human life. Openness is touted as the ultimate personal and social value, but the actual value of this openness—in the form of constant data production—is obscured.

This ad is significant not just for its striking aesthetics, but also because it establishes a narrative of trust and solidarity that will inform public reception of Facebook’s later apologies. As Ayaburi and Treku (2020) note, “social media users’ privacy behaviors are intricately tied to the words and actions of the social media platform and not statements issued after the discovery of privacy violations” (p. 180). The narrative of intimacy and stability developed in the “Chairs” ad is later echoed in Facebook’s announcement at the end of April 2014 that it was changing its famous motto from “‘Move fast and break things’ to ‘Move fast with stable infrastructure’” (Levy, 2014). Zuckerberg admits that the new motto isn’t as catchy, but that it reflects a new stage in the company’s development, one that demonstrates, “You have to be stable in order to get to the next level. All the best platforms are” (Baer, 2014). The terminology is important here; no longer does Facebook simply see itself as a social networking site, it is now a platform, the foundational layer upon which other apps and programs can be built and engage with users. And while the positive connotations of support and stability that Zuckerberg uses to describe the new direction of the company seem to suggest a new, more positive direction for the company, Van Dijck et al. (2018) remind us that “Platforms are neither neutral nor value-free constructs; they come with specific norms and values inscribed in their architectures,” emphasizing that while the terminology and rhetoric suggest that by transforming itself into a platform it will somehow neutralize the problems that plagued it as a social media company, there is no such thing as neutrality in constructed spaces (p. 3).

“A Breach of Trust”

Just 4 days after Zuckerberg’s initial post on the subject, Facebook took out full-page apology ads in 10 major newspapers in the United States and the United Kingdom. Printed on 25 March 2018, the ad strikes a slightly more remorseful tone than Zuckerberg’s initial post, although it recycles
many of the key phrases, suggesting that the two messages are working in concert for two different audiences of users and stakeholders. While the switch in medium may seem unusual, as Schweitzer et al. (2015) note, “If a company wants to control the coverage of an apology, the setting can determine how loud—and widely heard—the message will be. Organizations often default to written statements that reach a broad audience, especially when they’re published in newspapers” (p. 9), suggesting that the social media company was savvy to develop the apology campaign as a transmedia effort.

The ad is bold in its simplicity, at a full page and without any graphics; the sparsity of imagery focuses the attention on the words. “We have a responsibility to protect your information. If we can’t, we don’t deserve it,” the ad begins in large type. Like the “Here Together” commercial, the statement uses the plural pronoun, but here “we” signals the collective company who is, for the first time, directly cited as the responsible party in this remedial transaction. While the newspaper ad goes on to note slightly more specific information about how the company will protect users, such as “investigating every single app that had access to large amounts of data before we fixed this,” it remains slightly vague about the details. What is strikingly clear, however, is the closing. The final line of the statement reads, “I promise to do better for you,” moving from the plural identity of Zuckerberg to the singular identity of Mark Zuckerberg, whose signature closes the ad. The statement toggles between the shared identity of Zuckerberg and Facebook gesturing toward Goffman’s splitting gesture, but that split is leveraged for an individual act of metanoia, however vague, the promise to “do better.”

Whereas the newspaper ad and Zuckerberg’s Facebook post were clear about the identity of the offender and somewhat vague about corrective action, the third stage of the apology campaign, the outdoor advertising launched in April 2018 after Zuckerberg’s Congressional testimony, begins to muddy this clarity, introducing ambiguity about the offender. The five versions of the outdoor ad released, shown in Figure 1, point to the culpability of specific modes of engagement, rather than purposeful bad actors. The ads feature brightly colored text against a white background with simple, declarative statements that point to the many aspects of social media that are not positive for users. “Fake news is not your friend,” one ad warns, the text spilling onto a Newsfeed photo of a white man in a suit, the top of his head cropped out of the image, suggesting that this man is either the subject or perpetrator of fake news. The ad goes on in smaller type to announce, “Facebook is working hard to detect and reduce the spread of fake news. Because this is a place for friends, not for the things that get in the way.” The ad adheres to the rhetorical structures that characterize the rest of the campaign. First, there is an odd and direct abdication of responsibility: the reader, who is not even necessarily a Facebook user given the fact that these ads are analogue, is interpelated by the statement, a social directive that suggests that the ad has to remind the reader that these negative aspects of social media, which include data misuse, fake accounts, clickbait, and spam, are harmful and should be avoided. And while the smaller print on every ad goes on to assure the reader that the company is attempting to control the harmful aspect of social networking, the initial grab of the bold headline contains the subtle implication of the user in the problems now plaguing the platform.

Strikingly, how the company plans to address these issues is as vague in these ads as it is in the previous statements. These “things that get in the way” are represented by icons or unidentifiable photographs, attributed not to any individual, but to the ideas that motivate them. The only subject that is interpelated by the ads is “you,” the user presumably wronged by the company. This refracts the use of the plural pronoun “we” that the newspaper ads use to align Zuckerberg with Facebook with its users, subtly implicating the user in uninformed actions that lead to negative effects, or “things that get in the way” of the platform’s intended purpose. And although the ads lack a direct apology, they do point to a
transformation facilitated by the company “Working hard to detect and reduce the spread of fake news.” Such a promise assures the reader that something is happening, but there can be no certainty about how exactly these processes are being handled or what the impact of such a transformation might be. Although the focus is now on the victim, there is also a subtle suggestion of complicity, while also indicating that the company is now taking steps to transform, resolve, and move on from this issue. By implicating the user and remaining vague about the process of transformation, the ads suggest that the specifics are technically beyond the user—much as they are even for employees of the company—and thus have little weight in the apology. What is now important is that through the sequence of apologies, the user and the company have been realigned. They are both implicated, and they are both victims, meaning that both are now responsible for making changes that will prevent bad things from happening in the future.

“I’m Not a Bad Guy”

In the most visible and remorseful instance of public apology, Mark Zuckerberg appeared before Congress on 10 April 2018 to testify about the Cambridge Analytica scandal, and answer for the company’s business practices. This appearance was covered extensively by the media because of the scope of the breach and Zuckerberg’s immense cultural status as Long and Brecke (2003) note is common for public apologies (p. 6). But the coverage was also tinged with anticipation about Zuckerberg’s performance. Many of his past interviews feature a discomfiting and almost robotic Zuckerberg, such as his notoriously awkward and “sweaty” 2010 interview with Kara Swisher at the D8: All Things Digital conference (Hardy, 2010). Moreover, a celebrity CEO apology is a significant discursive performance, both a speech act and a spectacle. Lee and Atkinson (2019) and Diers-Lawson and Pang (2016) note that CEO identity is deeply reflective of brand identity, and Cerulo and Ruane (2014) note that

Apologies are “turning points” in the celebrity’s narrative. They present moral dilemmas that focus the public on celebrities’ past behaviors, their attempts to reconcile the past with the present, and the ways in which reconciliation (or the lack of it) may influence a celebrity’s plans for the future. (p. 128)

This nearly overwhelming media attention on his testimony is readily apparent by the suffocating wall of cameras Zuckerberg faces in Figure 2.

Zuckerberg remained calm and collected throughout the proceedings, his polished performance resulting in testimony that felt largely pro forma rather than revelatory or transformative, an impression amplified by Zuckerberg’s. The formal staging and structure of the proceedings are juxtaposed by the jostling of the press cameras, evoking both the live and mediated audiences for the event, as well as a careful calibration of power. The Senators are seated as a panel on a higher dais than Zuckerberg, who is seated alone on a lower level. This position of deference was mirrored in Zuckerberg’s flat affect; he was anything but flippant or sarcastic, in fact he exuded regard and respect. Even in moments in which he couldn’t help but reveal the limits of the senators’ knowledge—moments such as when Senator Thune asked Zuckerberg how the company made money and Zuckerberg responded, “Senator, we run ads,” followed briefly by a smirk that Thune himself was obliged to mirror—Zuckerberg didn’t deter from his role as the cool and collected CEO, ready to atone for his and the company’s oversights (Bloomberg Government, 2018).

In fact, Zuckerberg’s opening statement makes the most sustained and direct expression of regret in the apology campaign. In the closing lines of his opening statement Zuckerberg states, “...that was a big mistake. And it was my mistake. And I’m sorry. I started Facebook, I run it, and I’m responsible for what happens here” (Bloomberg Government, 2018). Zuckerberg here returns to the splitting gesture that characterizes the entire apology campaign, but he more directly performs a precarious rhetorical move in which he splits responsibility between the collective of the Facebook and himself as an individual, creating and then blurring distinctions between who Facebook is and what they do. Responding, for instance, to Senator Thune’s question about how the company was profitable, Zuckerberg responds with “we,” meaning the communal human component of the company. In most of the cases, “we” refers to the people of Facebook, while the functionality and the technology produced by these people is described more remotely. During his questioning by Texas Republican John Cornyn, Zuckerberg articulates the primary mistake of the company:

The broadest mistakes that we made here are not taking a broad enough view of our responsibility... the “move fast” cultural
value is more tactical around whether engineers can ship things, and . . . and different ways that we operate. But I think the big mistake that we’ve made looking back on this is viewing our responsibility as just building tools, rather than viewing our whole responsibility as making sure that those tools are used for good.

There are two important divisions Zuckerberg sets up in this statement. First, he uses the plural pronoun “we” to describe Facebook the company, the people making the decisions, and making the mistakes. This group is now in the process of looking back, taking stock, and reevaluating the company’s culture. But in a second important distinction, Zuckerberg draws a line between being responsible for software, and being responsible for content. He refers to the company’s product as “tools,” and citing the team’s mistake in thinking that their responsibility ended there and not with a responsibility for how those tools have been used. This is a tricky distinction at the heart of the regulation question: should social media companies be responsible for the content posted on their platforms, and therefore become a de facto speech regulator? Like the ads preceding the testimony, the answers to such specific transformational questions remain vague, but the metanoic gesture is clear.

“Creation Myths Need a Devil”

In their analysis of the apologies of celebrities, Cerulo and Ruane (2014) found that the status and iconicism of the offender led to higher levels of public forgiveness (p. 145). And Mark Zuckerberg, while remaining enigmatic, has certainly achieved the iconic status of other high-profile tech CEOs such as Steve Jobs and Bill Gates. The mythos of Mark Zuckerberg as a brilliant and recalcitrant outsider determined to flout institutional norms is key to the narrative about the company, solidified further by cultural texts that have also solidified his status as a celebrity. Zuckerberg has been the subject of at least five books; and while several, such as Roger McNamee’s (2019) Zucked: Waking Up to the Facebook Catastrophe, read as exposés, others, such as Think Like Zuck: The Five Business Secrets of Facebook’s Improbably Brilliant CEO Mark Zuckerberg, hold up the CEO as the model of a boy genius.2 Zuckerberg has been featured glowingly in profiles on news programs such as 60 Minutes, and roasted on comedy shows like South Park and Saturday Night Live, which depict the CEO as robotic and awkward.3 In each of these instances, Zuckerberg has become synonymous with his company. This pairing creates a difficult dynamic for the CEO when apologizing; because he is so strongly associated with the company and its decisions—a correlation he has willingly sought—he has to perform additional rhetorical work in order to move toward the personal and corporate transformation required by the metanoic demands of apology.

Perhaps nowhere is this difficulty more apparent than in David Fincher’s 2010 Academy-Award winning film about the founding of Facebook, The Social Network. While Fincher’s film thematizes rather than actualizes the “splitting gesture” Goffman identifies in apologies, the film is significant in how it anticipates the ways in which the public will need to repeatedly seek truth from the company and its founder.4 The film details the founding of Facebook, a narrative that unfolds through two depositions, one brought by co-founder Eduardo Saverin for the dilution of his shares, and the other by Tyler and Cameron Winklevoss and Divya Narendra for stealing the idea for Facebook from their start-up, ConnectU. This structure allows the narrative to jump between the present and the past through flashbacks to Zuckerberg’s time at Harvard, when the company was founded.

As these flashbacks reveal, it is not just in the present that Zuckerberg is plagued by the demand for contrition. In one flashback we see Zuckerberg enduring a hearing of the Harvard Administrative Board to determine his punishment for having created Facemash, a hacked together attractiveness rating website which garners such massive traction from students that it crashes the university’s servers. At this hearing Zuckerberg initially appears perfunctorily repentant, but he does not apologize. Significantly, as Figure 3 illustrates, the staging of the Administrative Board hearing closely mirrors the shot of Zuckerberg testifying before Congress, but in this shot, Zuckerberg’s standing position places him higher than his interlocutors, a power dynamic reflected in his flippant responses. When asked by the chair for a personal statement, Zuckerberg clumsily rises to his feet and responds, “I’ve already apologized in the Crimson to the AVHW, to the First Latina, and to any women at Harvard who may have been insulted, as I take it that they were.” Zuckerberg here doesn’t actually apologize to the Administrative Board, or even to the groups that he has mentioned, just makes a point that he has issued a mediated apology through the campus newspaper, much as his Congressional testimony was preceded by his newspaper apology. He is not repentant about this action, simply noting...
that his printed apology also covered any women who may have taken offense. There is no guilt or admittance of wrongdoing, only the implication that others may have been offended by his actions—the illegal harvesting and distribution of personal data in the form of images.

In fact, Zuckerberg never apologizes in the film, despite the fact that its entire narrative structure—a series of depositions—is designed to elicit an apology, or at least the admission of wrongdoing. As the film jumps between the diegetic present of the depositions and the years preceding the lawsuits, there is some sense that the film will uncover not simply the truth about the company’s founding, but an emotional recognition from Zuckerberg about the problematic nature of these early years. It is a structure that sets up an expectation of closure by way of apology, but that closure is denied by Zuckerberg’s repeated refusal to acknowledge his own wrongdoing.

In the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, journalist Jim Rutenberg (2018) argues that “Everything we needed to know about Facebook was right in front of our faces, on the big screen, in 2010.” Jesse Eisenberg’s Zuckerberg is recalcitrantly curt, coy, and condescending; he uses these tactics to delay or refract that truth and delegitimize the process exploring the claims being made against him. When the film was first released, Rutenberg (2018) notes, he was “rooting for the young Mark Zuckerberg to get the better of people trying to hold him back . . . When I streamed the movie the other day, I found my sympathies had shifted.” Rutenberg (2018) notes that while the film took factual liberties, he also recognized, for the first time,

the beginning of a pattern that has become all too familiar . . . Something bad happens of increasingly severe consequences on Facebook . . . After it is called out, Mr. Zuckerberg or another company official vows to do better. And when the heat is off, the cycle begins anew.

Rutenberg returning to the film in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal is telling because it signals the strength of cultural discourse about celebrities and Zuckerberg in particular. And as Cerulo and Ruane (2014) note, the power of apology and the impulse to forgive are rooted in larger cultural narratives about those individuals and companies (p. 144).

What Rutherford fails to connect here, however, is the fact that in Fincher’s film Zuckerberg never apologizes within an official context. Instead, he challenges the very necessity of an apology, remaining combative and belligerent, even in the face of apparent wrongdoing, such as when Saverin angrily confronts Zuckerberg in the Facebook office after learning that his ownership shares had been diluted to 0.3%. Instead of apologizing, however, Zuckerberg suggests that the error is Saverin’s fault, chiding him “you signed the papers . . . you’re going to blame me because you’re the business head of the company and you made a bad business deal with your own company?” While Zuckerberg looks pained, even torn as the confrontation continues, he remains silent, shifting uncomfortably in his seat, but refusing to acknowledge or accept blame. The point of the disagreement in this scene is significant because it is about theliteral and metaphorical fracturing that the fledgling company cannot seem to avoid. Just as the company becomes divided over and over again in the distribution of shares as the company wins various rounds of venture capital funding, so too do Zuckerberg’s loyalties divide him from his origins. His transition is realized less as a transformation and more as a fragmentation; it is not just friendships or business relationships that are broken, it is Zuckerberg himself. He is presented with moments which offer the opportunity for apology, and although he does not offer the performative speech act which would invite forgiveness, the film does make clear that Zuckerberg suffers a fracturing, however slight, each time he encounters the dissonance between the account of his actions and the demand for an apology that never comes.

“Something Happened”

As his Congressional testimony demonstrates, in contrast to the film, in the apology campaign Zuckerberg does begin to apologize as early as the newspaper ads, signaling an extended metanoic transformation. But as his testimony and the final message of the apology campaign maintain, that fractured, split self remains central to Facebook’s identity. It divides the brand into two key selves: Facebook the company, and Facebook the platform. The former is the human, repentant self that will transform and transgress no more, while the latter self is the cold machinic entity that operates beyond the control of remorse and regret. Nowhere is this more emphasized than in the 2018 “Here Together” commercial, which debuted just 2 weeks after Zuckerberg testified in front of the US Congress. As many commentators have noticed, the commercial is slick and effective. The ad begins with a montage of quirky and endearing images unfurling over a delicate piano soundtrack like a highlight reel of all of the positive, connective aspects of Facebook: couples dancing, friends laughing, people uniting. As the various forms of connections made possible by the platform are articulated, the male voiceover croons, “we found others like us and, just like that, felt a little less alone,” as the heart emoji pops onto the screen, emphasizing that connection is what underpins social media. One reason the opening of this commercial is so effective—despite the lack of an actual apology—is that it performs the reparation work that rhetorical theorists point out is a necessary component of the apology ritual. Legal scholar Lee Taft (2000) has argued that an effective apology articulates the norm that has been violated (p. 1140), and Erving Goffman (1971) goes further to insist that an apology “must affirm a belief in the offended rule” (p. 114). The
“Here Together” commercial clearly achieves this aspect of apology, accentuating the shared norm of positive sociality, in an echo of the earlier “Chairs” commercial.

“But then something happened,” the ad continues as ominous emojis begin to proliferate on screen, completely obliterating the heart emoji that had only seconds before occupied the entire frame. The prepositional opening of this sentence emphasizes the sense of shared disruption. “Something” is also vague enough so that the company can acknowledge the problem without having to own its cause. The next sentence also again asserts the plural pronoun, “we,” as in, “We had to deal with spam, clickbait, fake news, and data misuse,” a move that aligns the company with those it has wronged. Both are injured parties in a process that seems abrupt and mysterious. There is no agent in this statement, no transgression, only an abstracted event that cannot be narrated, or even depicted. The emoji icons suggest a frenzy of feeling, but don’t provide any specifics about the event. The obliqueness of this denial is a masterful manipulation of the apology, because as sociologist Nicholas Tavuchis (1991) asserts, an apology is a social exchange that paradoxically restores social order without amending the transgression (p. 31). Because the human side of Facebook has been aligned with the user, the other side of Facebook is now aligned with the transgressor. In this move the company is allowed to both acknowledge the event and distance itself from it. It further echoes a deep public unease: the fear that although Facebook has become a fundamental part of most people’s lives, that ubiquity is not matched by understanding. The average user understands how to operate within the interface but doesn’t necessarily understand what goes on behind that polished surface. This informational asymmetry aligns with an economic analysis of apology which finds that “an effective apology shifts the principal’s attribution of the cause of the bad outcome from the agent’s disposition to the external situation” (Ho, 2012, p. 143).

Facebook is the platform that operates beyond the boundaries of our understanding and thus control.

This seemingly unresolvable tension between the social and the technical recalls the final scene of The Social Network in which Zuckerberg sits alone in the law firm’s board room working on his laptop. He has just sent a friend request to Erica Albright, the former girlfriend from whom his split opens the film. As the camera zooms steadily in toward the profile image of Albright, Zuckerberg is depicted hitting the refresh button, almost robotically, every few seconds. While this could be read as Zuckerberg’s desire to connect with a former flame and somehow account for the behavior that conditions our understanding of him, I think this scene is much more metaphorical. Here Zuckerberg keeps attempting to rework a system that, despite being the creator of, he simply can’t master. The endless loop of action without corresponding reaction—pressing the refresh button to see if Albright has accepted his friend request—seems now to suggest that the social dynamics that govern the platform have always escaped Zuckerberg. While he is master of the operational logistics, the social motivations that determine how these affordances are used are beyond him. Just as his testimony before the Administrative Board at Harvard reveal that Zuckerberg’s mastery over the network is impressive and articulate, his grasp of how his manipulation of that network caused real

apology that Ellwanger (2012) identifies, the stage in which the future transformation of the transgressor is promised (p. 319). In this final apology, the splitting gesture allows Facebook to pull off the ultimate metanoic gesture: it moves from victim to savior in an extended apologetic gesture without ever having to make any meaningful change.

“A Little Less Alone”

Although Facebook has been derided for the “failure” of this apology campaign, this extended close reading of the narrative by and about the company argues that the campaign should actually be read as a resoundingly successful, even masterful. When we consider the power of Facebook, we must consider the enormity of their narrative power and its implications in our lives. As Villadsen (2008) points out, apologies are an important site of analysis because they enable “a rhetorical investigation of a community’s understanding of its collective norms at a given time” (p. 26). What’s at stake here in an understanding of how Facebook is apologizing, and how these apologies have become part of its discursive significance, is actually an investigation of who “we,” as the “Here Together” commercial names its user base, want to be. Because “we” is ultimately the makeup of the public sphere. And if the public sphere is now divided between technology that has been both mystified and siloed, and the people who rely on that technology to communicate, then we are left with a public sphere that operates beyond the boundaries of our understanding and thus control.

The “Here Together” commercial ends by promising, “That’s going to change. From now on, Facebook will do more to keep you safe and protect your privacy.” Here, suddenly, the chummy “we” has been dropped, and the ominous “that” which remains undefined is promised to be transformed. “That” is the “something” which is on the platform, but not of the platform. Instead, the company, now named for the first time, is asserted as the solution: the company will do more to keep “you safe”—here the commercial now differentiates the viewer from the company for the first time—and “protect your privacy.” Such a promise completes the performance of metanoic
harm to people on that network escapes him. As he repeatedly hits the refresh button, we learn from the closing subtitles that Zuckerberg eventually settles in the two cases against him. We too must ask ourselves, what are we willing to settle for?

Declaration of Conflicting Interest
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD
Kimberly Hall https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0540-7515

Notes
1. See, for instance, Thompson and Vogelstein (2018) and Estes (2018).
2. See also Kirkpatrick (2010), Losse (2014), and Mezrich (2009).
3. See “Franchise Prequel” (Season 21, Episode 04) in South Park (2017) and Saturday Night Live (7 April 2018).
4. It is also worth noting that Aaron Sorkin’s Academy-Award winning screenplay for the film is based on the book The Accidental Billionaires by Ben Mezrich, a nonfictional account of the company’s founding based on interviews with original co-founder Eduardo Saverin.
5. See, for example, Mak (2018), Lawler (2018), and Feldman (2018).

References
Austin, J. L. (1962). How to do things with words. Harvard University Press.
Ayaburi, E. W., & Treku, D. N. (2020). Effect of penitence on social media trust and privacy concerns: The case of Facebook. International Journal of Information Management, 50, 171–181.
Baer, D. (2014, May 3). Mark Zuckerberg explains why Facebook doesn’t “move fast and break things” anymore. Business Insider. https://www.businessinsider.com/mark-zuckerberg-on-facebooks-new-motto-2014-5
Bloomberg Government. (2018, April 10). Transcript of Mark Zuckerberg’s Senate hearing. The Washington Post. https://bloomberg.bgon/transcripts/
Boyd, D. (2011). Art and artifice in public apologies. Journal of Business Ethics, 104, 299–309.
Cerulo, K. A., & Ruane, J. M. (2014). Apologies of the rich and famous: Cultural, cognitive, and social explanations of why we care and why we forgive. Social Psychology Quarterly, 77(2), 123–149.
Diers-Lawson, A., & Pang, A. (2016). Did BP atone for its transgressions? Expanding theory on “ethical apology” in crisis communication. Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management, 24(3), 148–161.
Ellwanger, A. (2012). Apology as metanoic performance: Punitive rhetoric and public speech. Rhetoric Society Quarterly, 42(4), 307–329.
Estes, A. (2018, March 21). Mark Zuckerberg fails to apologize. Gizmodo. https://gizmodo.com/mark-zuckerberg-fails-to-apologize-1823966476
Facebook. (2018, April 25). Here together [Television commercial]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4zd7X98eOs
Feldman, B. (2018, April 26). A close read of Facebook’s disingenuous apology ad. Intelligencer—New York Magazine. https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/04/a-close-read-of-facebooks-disingenuous-apology-ad.html
Fincher, D. (Director). (2010). The social network [Film]. Sony Pictures Releasing.
Frantz, C. M., & Bennigson, C. (2005). Better late than early: The influence of timing on apology effectiveness. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 41(2), 201–207.
Gibney, M., Howerd-Hassmann, R., Coicaud, J. M., & Sreiner, N. (2008). The age of apology: Facing up to the past. Pennsylvania University Press.
Goffman, E. (1971). Relations in public: Microstudies of the public order. Transaction Publishers.
Hardy, Q. (2010, June 2). Mark Zuckerberg: Great perspiations. Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/velocity/2010/06/02/mark-zuckerberg-great-perspiations/#4f3f67477dc
Ho, B. (2012). Apologies as signals: With evidence from a trust game. Management Science, 58(1), 141–158.
Kirkpatrick, D. (2010). The Facebook effect. Simon & Schuster.
Lawler, R. (2018, April 25). Facebook’s apology ad tried to remind you of the good times. Engadget. https://www.engadget.com/2018/04/25/facebook-here-together-apology-ad/
Lee, S. Y., & Atkinson, L. (2019). Never easy to say ‘sorry’: Exploring the interplay of crisis involvement, brand image, and message appeal in developing effective corporate apologies. Public Relations Review, 45(1), 178–188.
Levy, S. (2014, April 30). Mark Zuckerberg on Facebook’s future, from virtual reality to anonymity. WIRED. https://www.wired.com/2014/04/zuckerberg-f8-interview/
Long, W., & Brecke, P. (2003). War and reconciliation: Reason and emotion in conflict resolution. MIT Press.
Losse, K. (2014). The boy kings: A journey into the heart of the social network. Free Press.
Mak, A. (2018, April 27). Facebook’s new TV ad doesn’t inspire a lot of confidence. Slate. https://slate.com/technology/2018/04/facebook-new-ad-accidental-reminder-biggest-problems.html
McNamee, R. (2019). Zucked: Waking up to the Facebook catastrophe. Penguin Press.
Mezrich, B. (2009). The accidental billionaires: The founding of Facebook: A tale of sex, money, genius, and betrayal. Doubleday.
Natale, S., Bory, P., & Balbi, G. (2019). The rise of corporational determinism: Digital media corporations and narratives of media change. Critical Studies in Media Communication, 36(4), 323–338.
Nudd, T. (2012, October 4). Ad of the day: Facebook. Adweek. https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/ad-day-facebook-144194/
Rutenberg, J. (2018, November 18). The Facebook movie told us what we needed to know about Mark Zuckerberg. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/18/business/
Schweitzer, M. E., Brooks, A. W., & Galinsky, A. D. (2015). The organizational apology: A step-by-step guide. *Harvard Business Review, 93*(9), 44–52.
Smith, N. (2008). *I was wrong: The meanings of apologies*. Cambridge University Press.
Taft, L. (2000). Apology subverted: The commodification of apology. *The Yale Law Journal, 109*(5), 1135–1160.
Tavuchis, N. (1991). *Mea Culpa: A Sociology of apology and reconciliation*. Stanford University Press.
Thompson, N., & Vogelstein, F. (2018, March 20). A hurricane flattens Facebook. *WIRED*. https://www.wired.com/story/facebook-cambridge-analytica-response/
Van Dijck, J., Poell, T., & de Waal, M. (2018). *The platform society: Public values in a connective world*. Oxford University Press.
Villadsen, L. S. (2008). Speaking on behalf of others: Rhetorical agency and epideictic functions in official apologies. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly, 38*(1), 25–45.
Zuckerberg, M. (2018, March 21). Personal post. https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10104712037900071&id=4

**Author Biography**

Kimberly Hall (PhD, University of California, Riverside) is an assistant professor of Digital Media Studies and English at Wofford College. Her research interests include discourse in and about social media and digital culture.