MPs move to summon Mark Zuckerberg over Facebook plans to end news sharing under C-18

Drafted motion proposes inquiry into tech giants' "use of intimidation and subversion tactics to evade regulation in Canada and across the world"

Marie Woolf

Ottawa - MPs are preparing to summon Mark Zuckerberg, chief executive of Meta, to testify before a Commons committee over the company's plans to block Canadians' ability to view and share news on Facebook if the federal online news bill becomes law.

Liberal and Bloc Québécois MPs accused Meta and Google of trying to intimidate Parliament by warning they may restrict Canadians' access to news if Bill C-18 passes in its current form.

The MPs on the heritage committee have prepared a motion to launch an inquiry into tech giants' "use of intimidation and subversion tactics to evade regulation in Canada and across the world."

The move follows the revelation in The Globe and Mail that Meta has decided to remove Canadians' access to both written and broadcast news on Facebook and Instagram if Bill C-18 passes as it is currently written.

The online news bill, which is now in the Senate, would make Google and Meta compensate news organizations for posting or linking to their work.

Meta says the system Bill C-18 would set up would allow publishers to make it pay for content they want to post on the platform "with no clear limits." This week, Meta announced it was slashing 10,000 jobs.

The MPs' motion also summons Nick Clegg, Meta's U.S.-based president of global affairs and a former British deputy prime minister, and Chris Saniga, head of Meta in Canada, to testify about the "threat to leave the Canadian news market."

Explainer: What is Bill C-18, and how could it affect how Canadians use the internet?

Liberal MP Anthony Housefather said even though both Mr. Zuckerberg and Mr. Clegg live outside Canada, they should appear "as they have appeared before U.S. congressional committees."

He said he expected all parties to support the Liberal motion, which the committee is likely to vote on next week.

Commons' committees have no power to force people to appear if they are outside Canada. Mr. Zuckerberg declined a previous summons to answer questions about his company's decision to block Australian users from viewing or sharing news stories on Facebook, which it reversed a few days later after government changes to a law that was the model for Canada's online news bill.

In the past five weeks, Google has been carrying out tests of potential responses to the online news bill by blocking the access of around 1.2 million Canadians to news through its search bar.

Last week, Meta said it had resolved to block news if changes to Bill C-18 are not made, saying it would warn Canadians of changes to its services in advance.

The Heritage Minister's parliamentary secretary, Chris Bittle, accused the tech giants on Twitter of "intimidation tactics" saying they are "a step too far."

Martin Champoux, Bloc Québécois member of the committee, said his party is "100-per-cent supportive" of calling Mr. Zuckerberg as a witness.

"After the cavalier attitude of the rep-
representatives of Google at the heritage committee, compounded by Meta's threats, it is clear that MPs have to make the web giants understand that intimidation won't work," he said.

At a hearing before the committee last Friday, MPs accused the head of Google in Canada, Sabrina Geremia, of failing to answer their questions during the meeting and made her swear an oath following frustration with her responses.

The Liberals, Bloc Québécois and NDP have a majority on the committee and are expected to back the motion, which also demands that Meta produce internal and external communications - including e-mails and texts - about Canadian regulations dating back to 2020.

Michael Geist, the University of Ottawa's Canada Research Chair in internet law, said the MPs' demand that Meta and Google supply "more than three years of private third-party communications" is "genuinely frightening."

"Investigating big tech is welcome," he said. "Snooping on Canadians' communications is not."

In an interview Thursday, Heritage Minister Pablo Rodriguez said: "It's disappointing to see that the tech giants continue to resort to threats instead of working with the government in good faith."

Some Canadian news organizations, including The Globe, have already made compensation agreements with big tech platforms.

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