Blame-avoiding Strategies for a Digital Scandal: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Mark Zuckerberg's Congressional Hearings

Abstract:

The burgeoning digital economy has also aroused wide public concerns over its improper use of personal data for economic and political profits. This study focuses on the milestone Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal and examines how Mark Zuckerberg succeeded in avoiding public blame during two US Congressional hearings. An integrated analytic framework has been established by combining blame theory and critical discourse analysis to examine blame-avoiding strategies used by Mark Zuckerberg during the two Congressional hearings. The findings have revealed not only the topics but also the specific strategies and the linguistic means and realizations for these strategies. It is expected that this study can generate significant implications on blame-avoiding strategies by digital corporations for their inherently flawed business models.

Keywords: blame, blame-avoiding strategies, critical discourse analysis, Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, digital corporations

1. Introduction

In an increasingly digitalized world, the manipulation and exploitation of data and privacy information by digital corporations have risen to be one of the paramount public concerns (Hinds, Williams, and Joinson 2020). More and more people are aware of the power of digital corporations in the collection and use of personal data for economic and political profits. Digital corporations are subject to extensive scrutiny from the public for their policies and measures in data protection and privacy. This can be attributed to the large number of data breaches occurring each year (Winder 2019). Among them, one milestone case is the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal. Founded by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004, Facebook is now one of the most widely used and influential social media in the world. However, it has been increasingly criticized for such issues as user privacy, political manipulation, fake news, and copy infringement in recent years. In the 2010s, personal data belonging to millions of Facebook users and their friends were collected without their consent by a third-party app "thisisyourdigitallife" via Facebook's Open Graph platform (Meredith 2018). They were released to Cambridge Analytic, a British data analytic firm, predominantly for political advertising (Isaak and Hanna 2018). It is the first time that personal data was manipulated and exploited for political purposes on a mass scale.

With the news released on 17 March 2018 by *The Guardian* and the *New York Times*, Facebook was confronted with widespread public criticisms and huge economic losses. This can be witnessed in the sharp drop in its share price and the numerous lawsuits it faces (Kozlowska 2018). The scandal even resulted in #DeleteFacebook movement online. Meanwhile, it also faced US, UK and EU governmental inquiries. How to avoid or shift public blame and restore its socially responsible image has become a sticky question for Facebook and other digital corporations, because the collection and exploitation of personal information are inherent in their business models and the development of the data economy (Boatwright and White 2020). Due to the unprecedented impact of this incident, the US Congress initiated two hearings on Facebook in April 2018 and Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg was required to testify before Congress about its role in the scandal. The two Congressional hearings turned out to be a great success for Mark Zuckerberg managed to escape from the blame and regain people's trust, and

the company's share price regained much of the value it lost since the scandal broke out (Kozlowska 2018). A close examination of Mark Zuckerberg's blame-avoiding strategies in two congressional hearings might offer significant implications for digital corporations given their inherently flawed business models in an increasingly digitalized world.

This study gave a close examination of the blame-avoiding strategies of Mark Zuckerberg in the two Congressional hearings to explain how he succeeded in avoiding public blame and redeeming public interest. The primary purpose is to give a critical discourse analysis of Mark Zuckerberg's blame-avoiding strategies through proposing an integrated analytic framework for blame-avoiding strategies. It is intended to answer three research questions: (1) What are the typical strategies for avoiding blame? (2) How are these strategies used in Mark Zuckerberg's Congressional hearings? (3) What are the linguistic means and realizations of these blame-avoiding strategies? The following sections first give a brief review of previous studies on blaming and blame-avoiding strategies before proposing an integrated analytic framework for blame-avoiding strategies. Then it describes the data and analytic methods employed in this study. This article ends with a detailed elaboration of the findings and a brief discussion of their implications.

2. Previous studies on blaming and blame-avoiding discourses

"Blame games" have become such a persuasive phenomenon for modern organizations and politics that it has become "a political and bureaucratic imperative" to avoid blame (Hood 2010, 24). Receiving blame may incur great losses on "personal or organizational reputation and result in the loss of power, finances and job security for particular officeholders"(Hansson 2015b, 298). As Weaver (1986) argues, "politicians are motivated primarily by the desire to avoid blame for unpopular actions rather than by seeking to claim credit for popular ones" (p. 371). The temptation to apply strategies of blame avoidance permeates administrative structures, operations and language use (Hood 2010; Weaver 1986; Hansson 2015b). Blame avoidance in institutional and political life has drawn growing attention from scholars in political science and public administration, because it helps to "derail, obstruct, or prevent public debates over certain policy issues, alter political agendas and alliances, legitimate social actors, and disempower/delegitimize others" (Hansson 2015b, 298).

Given that blame-related defensive practices by government insiders can have broader social implications, many studies address blame avoidance in government (Hering 2008; Hinterleitner 2017; Hobolt and Tilley 2014; Hood 2002, 2010, 2014; Hood, Jennings, and Copeland 2016; Howlett 2012; Leong and Howlett 2017; Vis 2016; Wenzelburger and Hörisch 2016; Weaver 1986). They have also identified many strategies for blame avoidance. For example, Benoit, Gullifor, and Panici (1991) examined President Ronald Reagan's rhetorical efforts to avoid blame during crises and focused on four general strategies, including denial, evasion of responsibility, minimization, and mortification. The findings show that Reagan consistently engaged in denial, and repeatedly attempts to minimize harm to his image primarily through bolstering. However, mortification was not used at first because he had not admitted any wrongdoing. Hood (2010) takes a public administration approach to blame avoidance and makes a distinction between three strategies: (1) presentation strategies, (2) agency strategies, and (3) policy strategies.

Several discourse analysts have shifted their attention to blaming or blame-avoiding strategies in politics (Hansson 2015a, 2017, 2018a, b; Hart 2018; Whittle and Mueller 2016; Wodak 2006, 2015). Wodak (2006) gives a concise overview of linguistic/pragmatic approaches to blaming

and denying. She argues that blaming can be analyzed by a variety of methodologies, such as speech act theory, conversation analysis, discourse analysis, argumentation analysis, and rhetoric. One of the basic functions of blaming and denying is to serve positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation (Wodak 2006). Discourse analysis focuses on the strategies employed in blaming and denying. Strategy is defined as "a more or less detailed and directed plan of practices (including discursive practices), adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological, or linguistic aim" (Wodak 2006, 61). These strategies are realized in various ways. Many discursive strategies have been identified, such as scapegoating, blaming the victim, blaming the messenger, victim-perpetrator reversal, the straw man fallacy, turning the tables, etc. (van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999). Previous studies on blaming and denying strategies in racism and discrimination discourse have found that the majority group often undermines minority groups explicitly and implicitly and denies their discrimination at the same time (van Dijk 1992, 1997, 2013; Solomona et al. 2005; Wodak 2006; Kabachnik, Regulska, and Mitchneck 2012). van Dijk (1992) also identified some specific denial tactics in media discourse and parliamentary debates, such as disclaimers, mitigations, euphemisms, excuses, blaming the victim, and positive self-representation in the negative discourse. These tactics have been excessively used by the majority group to reproduce racism against minorities.

Hansson (2015b) gives a review of some linguistic approaches and analytic tools which are useful for describing various aspects of blame avoidance in institutional settings, such as ways of arguing, framing, denying, representing social actors and actions, legitimizing and manipulating (social) cognition. He argues that "taken separately, these approaches may lack the interpretative power to account for the large variety of possible moves that characterize government-related blame games" (Hansson 2015b, 298). Therefore, he proposes a new heuristic approach to examine how officeholders in the circumstances of blame risk to achieve the goal of positive self-presentation. Hansson (2018a) further combines the discourse-historical approach and the recent literature on blame avoidance in government to unpack the language of government blame games. It shows how blame is avoided through numerous persuasive devices, such as metaphors, lexical cohesion, and ways of framing and positioning, justifications and excuses. They provide useful insights into how blame-avoidance strategies can be achieved through different linguistic strategies.

3. Towards an integrated analytic framework

An integrated analytic framework has been established in this study by combining Hood's blame theory with CDA (van Dijk 2003; Van Dijk 1993; van Dijk 1995; Wodak 1999; Wodak and Fairclough 2013; van Leeuwen 1995). According to Hood (2010), blame is an act of attributing something considered to be bad or wrong to some people or entities. It consists of two essential components: "the perceived avoidable harm" and "the perceived responsibility" (see Figure 1) (Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Hood, 2005).

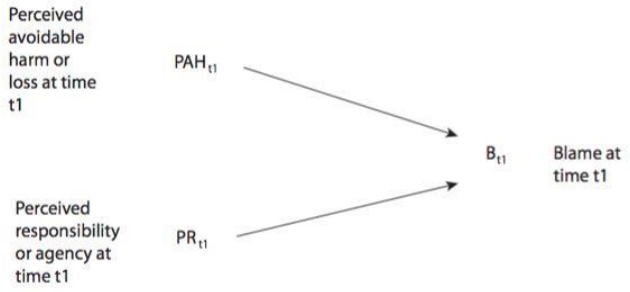

Figure 1. Two key components of blame (Hood 2010, 6)

People's beliefs of the responsible one in a blameworthy event can be taught through discourse. To avoid blame, blamed ones could apply strategic discursive acts to manipulate people's beliefs and knowledge of the responsible agents by reallocating the victimhood and changing the nature of the blameworthy event. The other component of blame is the perceived avoidable harm. According to van Leeuwen (2008, 8), "the core of any social practice is a set of actions performed in a sequence". Through discursive presentations, the actual sequence of actions as well as their consequences could be changed. Therefore, this paper separates the perceived harm into two dimensions, social action, and its consequence. The reasons are as follows:

(1) Actions and consequences refer to different things. Action is the process of doing and consequence is the output of the process and therefore should be distinguished.
(2) A good action does not necessarily lead to a good outcome.
(3) A negative action, if perceived and interpreted positively, could be less blameworthy and sometimes even to be good.

Thus, actor, action and consequence are the key components of the perceived blame (see Figure 2). A blameworthy event is perceived to be a bad social actor conducting problematic actions that result in bad consequences. Accordingly, when imposing blame, accusers could target (1) the actor, (2) the action, and (3) the consequence.

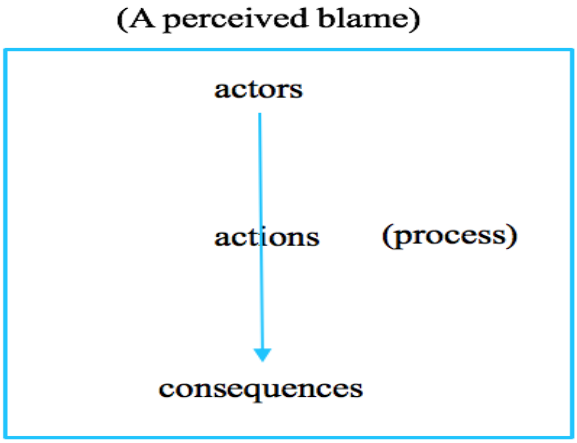

Figure 2. Essential components of blame

When it comes to deflecting blame, blamed ones could also work on these elements discursively to shift people's perceptions of the ill-perceived events. Corresponding to the essential components of a blameworthy event, three presentational ways of deflecting blame are identified. The first way is to work on the perceived bad actors. In most cases, more than one participant is involved in a blameworthy event. By attributing negative properties to *them* and positive properties to *us*, blamed ones are able to manipulate the perceived victimhood to avoid blame. The second way is to work on the perceived social action. This is usually achieved by changing the actual sequence and the number of actions taken. Some negatively perceived actions, if presented with a focus on their agents' good intentions, can be less blameworthy. For example, in political contexts, policymakers are often seen trumpeting their positive actions and saying little about their shadowy negative part to maintain power and control over the public. The third way is to work on the perceived consequence, which is usually achieved by changing its nature. Through discursive acts, some badly perceived consequences can be constructed as the necessary cost of a good deed and thus become less blameworthy. In many

cases, blamed ones prefer to keep silent about bad consequences to get away with public accusations.

Wodak (2001: 73) defined "strategy" as "a more or less accurate and more or less intentional plan of practices (including discursive practices) adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological or linguistic aim". In the context of blaming and denying, what people say and do not, and how, are all meaningful discursive acts. Therefore, this paper takes a view that all discourse is strategic (Shapiro 1990). Based on this view, this paper hereby distinguishes between four macro discursive strategies that blamed ones employ to deflect blame: accepting, downplaying, shifting and denying strategies (see Table 1).

Table 1. Four types of macro discursive strategies in avoiding blame

Macro strategies	**Works on**	**Tactics**
Accepting	the perceived actors and actions	apology quick acknowledgement positive "us"
Downplaying	the perceived actors, actions and consequences	restrict information change the subject claim ignorance
Shifting	the perceived actors, actions and consequences	blame the victim blame the alike shift inside an institution blame the other agent(s) reverse
Denying	the perceived actors and actions	Act-denial Control-denial Intention-denial Goal-denial Mitigations

Accepting strategies refer to the discursive acts of accepting blame. As contradictory as it may seem, the act of accepting blame also suggests a gesture of taking responsibility. For officeholders who want to show their affiliations with the public, committing a non-fatal mistake could help shorten the distance. However, fully accepting the imposed blame also equals pleading guilty, which could weaken one's power and authority. A common solution to this could be "a quick acknowledgement of the problem and possible preemptive apology, sometimes accompanied by more or less explicit positive-self presentation" (Hansson 2015b, 311). In a discursive act of denying blame, the act of apologizing preemptively could help blamed ones avoid further accusations. Meanwhile, blamed ones often communicate about their remedial measures and other positive-self actions to shift people's focus from their mistakes.

Downplaying strategies refer to the discursive acts that trivialize and minimize one's negative role in a blameworthy event. Usually, there are at least two sides in a blameworthy event, the perpetrator side and the victim side, with their corresponding needs. While perpetrators work hard on minimizing and trivializing their negative roles, victims concentrate on collecting as much evidence as they can to confirm charges against their perpetrators. In the context of blaming and denying, both perpetrators and victims are required to provide adequate evidence to justify their claims. For instance, in an open investigative hearing where victims and perpetrators promote their perceptions of a blameworthy issue, perpetrators hide key information about who did what to whom, under what circumstances, with what intentions and

lead to what consequences to avoid charges. With regard to hiding information, three discursive ways have been identified.

(1) *Restrict information*. It means to provide blamers with partial, more or less distracting information, for example, by using unspecific pronouns and passive voice to obscure the identity of responsible actors.
(2) *Claim ignorance*, identified by Hansson (2015b). Blamed ones are often seen using personal privacy, law and ongoing investigation as an excuse to avoid sharp questions. In an open investigative congressional hearing where time is strictly limited, claiming ignorance is quite effective for blamed ones to avoid fatal questions.
(3) *Change the subject*. This strategy, identified by Hood (2010), operates to shift people's focus from bad topics to good ones. Bad topics here are not necessarily bad but are more easily for blamed ones to attract blame. Likewise, good topics are more easily for them to shift people's focus and reconstruct a positive self-image.

Shifting strategies refer to the discursive acts of reframing the social reality. This can be realized by altering people's perceptions of the blameworthy actor, action and consequence. Given varied working scopes and effects, five different shifting strategies are distinguished: blame the other agent(s), blame the victim, blame the alike, shift inside an institution and reverse.

(1) *Blame the other agent(s)*, one of the most frequently used strategies in manipulating people's perceptions of the responsible actor. When avoiding blaming the blamed ones often magnify the other agents' faults to shift their own responsibilities. In many cases, blaming the other agent(s) is often accompanied by downplaying strategies. For example, blamed ones like to talk more about other agents negatively while muting their own problematic roles.
(2) *Blame the victim*. This strategy is quite effective in deconstructing the perceived victimhood. Blamed ones who use this strategy aim to scapegoat victims. Through discursive presentations, blamed ones could foreground victims as perpetrators and perpetrators as victims to avoid blame.
(3) *Blame the alike*. It means to normalize and trivialize ill-perceived actions, usually by aggrandizing the scope of bad actors. For example, officeholders, who are blamed for the problematic actions and decisions, often compare themselves to their worse predecessors and other similar groups to minimize their mistakes.
(4) *Shift inside an institution*. It means to shift blamed ones' responsibility inside a social group where they belong. In countries that worship collectivism, *shifting inside an institution* could be quite effective in protecting an important figure in that specific information about the decision-making process is hidden. For instance, a person could use the excuse "this is a decision made by a group" to avoid being held accountable.
(5) *Reverse*. It refers to the strategy of turning a blameworthy consequence into a good deed. For instance, policymakers could present some bad consequences as the necessary cost of a good deed to deflect criticism. Similarly, a problematic action, if interpreted as an act with a good intention, could be less blameworthy.

Denying strategies refer to the acts of denying blame. Based on van Dijk's typology (1992), forms of rejection are categorized into five types, including 1) act-denial: I did not do that; 2) control-denial: It was an accident, and it was beyond my control; 3) Intention-denial: I did not mean to do that; 4) goal-denial: I did not do that in order to…; and 5) mitigations. It should be

noted that the aforementioned macro strategies are often intertwined to help blamed ones shift their responsibilities and avoid blame.

4. Methodology

This study focuses on Mark Zuckerberg's congressional hearings in 2018. The data were retrieved from the website https://www.washingtonpost.com/ with the search words "transcript of Mark Zuckerberg's hearing". Two results entitled "transcript of Mark Zuckerberg's Senate hearing" and "Transcript of Zuckerberg's appearance before House committee" were selected. The first hearing "Facebook, Social Media Privacy and the Use and Abuse of Data" is a joint one, held on 10 April 2018 by US Senate Judiciary and Commerce Committees. The second hearing "Transparency and Use of Consumer Data" is held on 11 April 2018 by the House Energy Commerce Committee. Both hearings were triggered by the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal.

2018 Facebook congressional hearings are held because of the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal, in which 87 million Facebook users' personally identifiable information is disclosed. The hearings are supposed to help US lawmakers investigate the whole event and find out the responsible actor, which is supposed to be Facebook. Because of its investigative nature, many questions asked by US lawmakers are sharp yes-or-no questions about the absolute information of blameworthy issues, including Facebook's privacy policy, content policy, business model and its act of tracking and collecting users' data. For Zuckerberg who wants to restore public trust and construct a positive image, answers to these questions have to be very careful.

This study gives a close analysis of the data at three different levels: (1) the topics involved; (2) the blame-avoidance strategies used; (3) the linguistic means and realizations (Wodak 2016). It starts with identifying the topics in each question-answer turn. Then the specific discursive strategies used for each topic will be further identified and quantified. Finally, the linguistic means and realizations for these typical discursive strategies are further examined for the construction of Cambridge Analytica and Facebook. Special attention is put on the use of the transitivity system and personal pronouns in his blame-avoidance strategies. Finally, the choice of these topics and Zuckerberg's preferences for different strategies are further discussed in terms of the general strategy of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation (Wodak 2006).

5. Findings

5.1 Analysis of macro-strategies

Figure 3 shows the distribution of four macro-strategies in Zuckerberg's Congressional Hearings. Downplaying strategy takes the largest share, which is followed in turn by accepting, shifting and denying strategies. One interesting finding is that more accepting strategies are employed than denying strategies. This shows Zuckerberg's sincerity in Congressional Hearings. This can be attributed to the nature of the issue, which is evidence-based and undeniable. Therefore, instead of denying these accusations, he acknowledges some widely recognized problems preemptively. However, the prominence of downplaying and shifting strategies suggests that he attributed most of his words to downplaying Facebook's responsibilities and shifting the blame. To further demonstrate how these macro-strategies are used, a detailed analysis of the use of these strategies for different topics has been conducted.

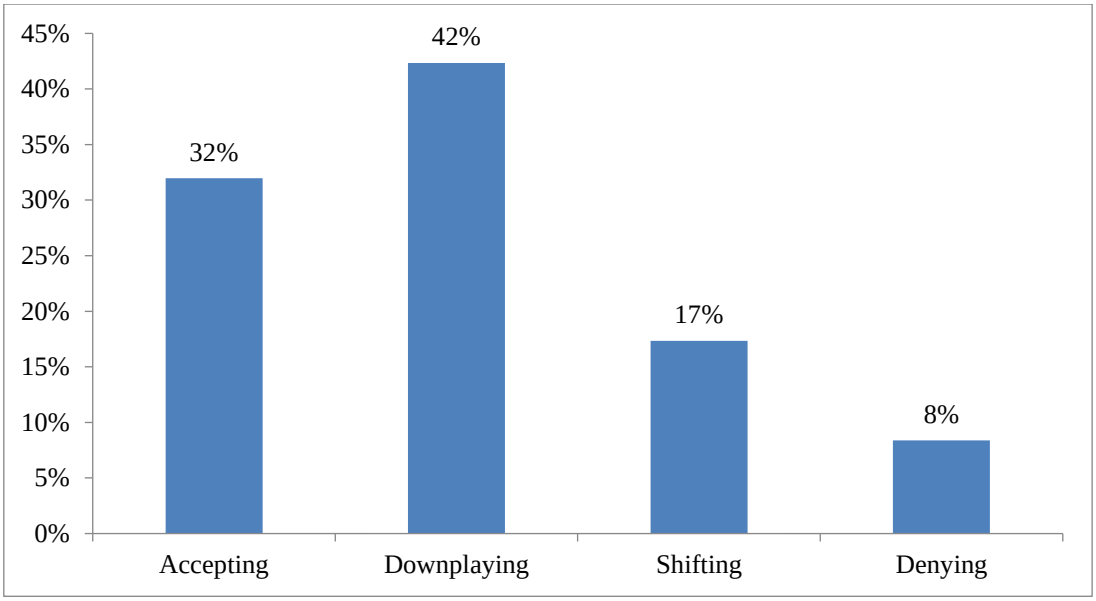

Figure 3. Distribution of macro-strategies used by Mark Zuckerberg

As Figure 4 shows, the most frequently challenged topic is "Cambridge Analytica". This is not surprising because it is the main culprit of the scandal. However, it is followed in turn by such topics as "data protection", "data collection", "transparency", "regulation", "political bias", "business model", "discrimination", and "newsfeed integrity". They are all issues directly related to Facebook. Most of them are concerned about Facebook's data policies and regulations. They also show the main blame and challenges Facebook faces during the Congressional Hearings.

Denying strategies are used for topics that are mostly framed in Yes-or-No questions which could strike a death blow to Facebook. These topics are "business model", "transparency", "Russians", "Cambridge Analytica", "data collection", "data tracking", "discrimination", "newsfeed integrity" and "political bias". To avoid incurring legal and economic consequences, Zuckerberg opts to deny the accusations. However, simple denial may also construct an insincere image. Therefore, denying strategies are often immediately followed by shifting strategies in his discourse. That explains why shifting strategies have also been used frequently for those topics mentioned above. For example, in terms of Facebook's "business model", Facebook is accused of selling customers' privacy to advertisers, and this is one typical way how digital corporations make money. However, instead of accepting the blame, Zuckerberg shifts the question by underlining Facebook's good intention to provide free services and connect people in the world. In the case of "Cambridge Analytica", he also tries to shift the blame on Cambridge Analytica's ill acts and highlight Facebook's innocence in the scandal.

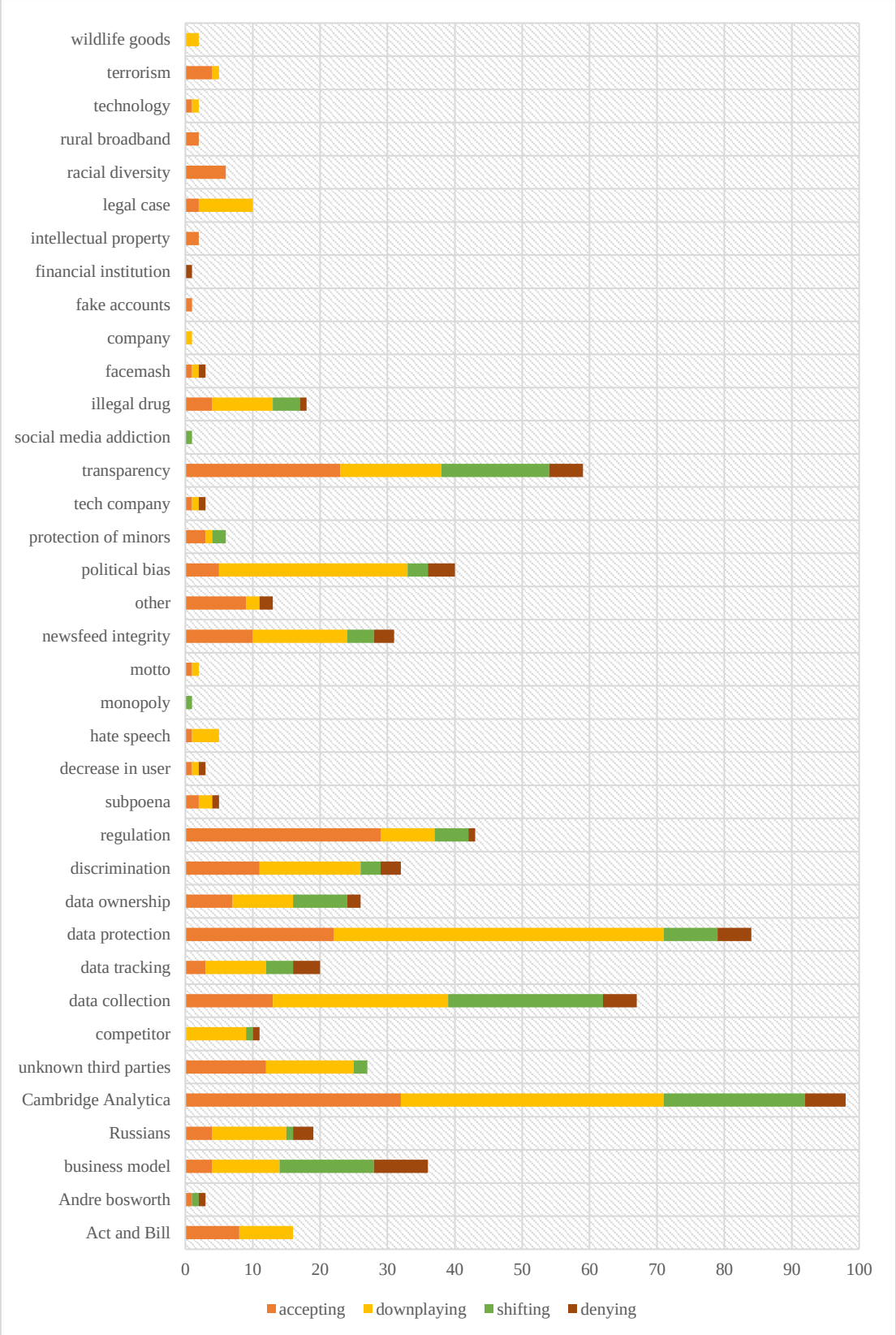

Figure 4. Macro-strategies for each topic

Accepting strategies have been used to address topics that are general and less blameworthy, such as "terrorism", "rural broadband", "racial diversity", "intellectual property", and "protection of minors". These issues are not exclusive to Facebook. They are global problems that can be identified for all international corporations. Acknowledging these issues, instead of damaging its image, can contribute to the construction of a socially responsible image for Facebook. Nevertheless, accepting strategies have also been used for the issue of "transparency", "Cambridge Analytica" and "unknown third parties". These issues are key to the data scandal and indefensible. Nevertheless, these preemptive accepting strategies are often followed by remedial measures to construct a positive image for the corporation.

Downplaying strategies are often employed for such topics which are likely to incur legal and political consequences, such as "legal case", "illegal drug", "political bias", "hate speech", "subpoena", "discrimination", "data protection", "data collection" and "Russians". These topics involve hard evidence and absolute knowledge. For instance, on topics like "discrimination" and "hate speech", US lawmakers raise sharp questions about Facebook's content policy which Zuckerberg was unwilling to expose to the public. In the case of "data collection" and "data protection", Facebook is accused of invading users' privacy. To avoid blame, Zuckerberg chooses to hide the key information to minimize Facebook's negative role.

In other words, Zuckerberg has made a systematic choice of the four strategies for addressing these different topics. While building a sincere image by acknowledging some general issues and problems, Zuckerberg denies Facebook's responsibilities in some issues which might incur serious political and economic consequences. This has been complemented by downplaying its responsibilities. As regards these questions that point to the inherent problems of digital corporations, he also uses shifting strategies to underline Facebook's contributions to the world. Hereby he manages to escape from punishment while maintaining its traditional business model without making major changes. This may account for his successes in Congressional Hearings. To further demonstrate how this has been achieved, the following sections give a close linguistic analysis of the strategies for two major blames: "Cambridge Analytica" and "Facebook".

5.2 Analysis of micro-strategies

5.2.1 Facebook. Blame on Facebook's exploitation is related to Facebook's business model and its act of collecting and tracking users' data. People believe that Facebook makes money by selling users' privacy to advertisers. The perceived business model is that Facebook first offers people free services to attract more users and people must consent to share their data with Facebook in return. By doing so, Facebook collects and tracks massive users' data and sells the data to advertisers to make money. As a data-driven company, Facebook relies on people's data to make revenue. Because of the data scandal, Facebook needs to provide more transparency on how it makes money to shift people's attitudes from doubts and resistance to trust. In Zuckerberg's congressional hearings, he repeatedly uses denying strategies Act-denial (46 instances) and Intention-denial (4 instances) to alter people's perceptions of Facebook's business model.

Act-denial means *I did not do that or say that*. According to US lawmakers, selling people's privacy to make money violates the law. Compared with other blames, blame on Facebook's business model touches upon the key issue of whether or not Facebook violates the law. Therefore, Zuckerberg repeatedly denies the act of selling people's privacies. The other frequently-used denial is Intention-denial, which means *I did not mean that* or *You got me*

wrong. In Zuckerberg's discursive presentation of Facebook's business model, he also denies the bad intention of violating people's privacy for money. Intention-denials could be quite useful because an action is theoretically recognized as an integration of an intention and an activity. In other words, an actor could do something bad based on a good intention. By emphasizing the good intention, the actor could make his or her action less blameworthy, thus avoiding criticism. In the practical use, intention-denials could be quite effective because it seems almost impossible for blamers to offer any hard evidence that the blamed ones have bad intentions (Hansson 2015b). In Zuckerberg's congressional hearings, US lawmakers perceive Facebook as an untrustworthy company that sells users' privacy for money. To eliminate their doubts and speculations, Zuckerberg denies both the act as well as the intention.

Using denying strategies to reconstruct an acceptable business model is not enough to convince US lawmakers. Therefore, Zuckerberg applies shifting strategies to altering the perceived nature of the business model. Through shifting strategies, a seemingly bad consequence or an action can be presented as the result of a good intention. By emphasizing the good intention, blamed ones could be discursively constructed as heroes who sacrifice themselves for good deeds. When justifying Facebook's business model, Zuckerberg emphasizes the great intention of connecting the world and bringing people together. Some examples are as follows:

1. We think offering an **ad-supported service** is the most aligned with our mission of trying to help connect everyone in the world, because we want to offer a free service that everyone can afford.
2. In general, where — we believe that the ads model is the right one for us because it aligns with our social mission of trying to connect everyone and bring the world closer together.
3. But overall, the — I think that the ads experience is going to be the best one. I think in general, people like not having to pay for a service. A lot of people can't afford to pay for a service around the world, and this aligns with our mission the best.
4. I mean, this is **ad-based business models** have been a common way that people have been able to offer free services for a long time. And our social mission of trying to help connect everyone in the world relies on having a service that can be affordable for everyone…

In contrast to the ill-perceived business model, Zuckerberg nominates the model as the positive "ad-supported service" and "ad-based business model". To shift people's perceptions, Zuckerberg repeatedly emphasizes the benefits of this business modal, e.g., "connect everyone and bring the world closer together". Meanwhile, he also attributes this business model to people's preference for free service, thus blaming the consumers themselves rather than the business model.

In the meantime, Zuckerberg acknowledges that people are reluctant to share their data with Facebook. However, this kind of reluctance is presented to be incongruent with most people's needs, as in the following:

5. **Zuckerberg**: And while there is some discomfort for sure with using information in making ads more relevant, the overwhelming feedback that we get from our community is that people would rather have us show relevant content there than not.

In this example, Zuckerberg downplays people's discomfort with Facebook's business model with the uncertain expression *some* but dramatizes the feedback it receives from the community with the intensifying expression *overwhelming*. In other words, he underlines that Facebook's business model meets the demands of the majority.

When it comes to blames on Facebook's act of tracking and collecting users' data, Zuckerberg applies different strategies to justify the act. First, Zuckerberg denies that Facebook was tracking phone calls and messages, as in the following:

6. we don't have anything that is trying to listen to what's going on in the background.
7. We're not collecting any information verbally on the microphone, and we don't have contracts with anyone else who is.

In responding to questions that are related to Facebook's collecting and tracking users' data, Zuckerberg claims ignorance to avoid being held accountable. Some examples are shown in Table 2. Starting with "how many" or "how long", these questions concern the absolute knowledge that requires Zuckerberg to give clear answers.

Table 2. Examples for MZ's claiming ignorance

Q: On — on the points that you collect information, if we call those categories, how many do you store of information that you are collecting?	A: And I can make sure that we follow-up with you afterwards to get you
Q: How many chunks of Facebook pixel code are there on non-Facebook Web page?	A: Congresswoman, you're asking some specific statics that I don't know off the top of my head, but we can follow up with you and get back to you on all of these.
Q: How many share buttons are there on non-Facebook Web pages?	A: I don't know the answer to that exactly off the top of my head either, but that's something that we can follow up with you on.
Q: How many Facebook like buttons are there on non-Facebook Web pages?	A: I don't know the answer to that off the top of my head, but we'll get back to you.
Q: how many points of data that Facebook has on the average non-Facebook-user?	A: Congressman, I do not off the top of my head, but I can have our team get back to you afterwards.
Q: How long do you keep a user's data, once they — after — after they've left? If they — if they choose to delete their account, how long do you keep their data?	A: I don't know the answer to that off the top of my head. I know we try to delete it as quickly as is reasonable.
Q: On average, how many data points does Facebook have on each Facebook user?	A: I do not know off the top of my head.

This can also be witnessed in Zuckerberg's use of personal pronouns. He prefers to use the first-personal plural pronoun *we* to refer to Facebook and attributes the positive properties to *we* (see Table 3).

Table 3. Collocates of *we*.

1	The second category is around specific data that **we collect** in order to make the advertising experience…	Actor
2	**we use** that in order to also inform how we rank services like news feed and ads to provide more relevant experiences.	Actor
3	...**we keep track of**, to make sure that people aren't abusing the systems.	Actor
4	And we — **we try to make** the controls as easy to understand as possible.	Actor
5	…**we collect** information to make sure that the ad experience on Facebook can be relevant and valuable to small businesses ...	Actor
6	…**we can measure** that you actually — that the — that the ad worked. That helps make the experience more relevant and better	Actor
7	Senator, I believe **we do link** people's accounts between devices in order to make sure that their Facebook and Instagram and their other experiences can be synced between their devices.	Actor
8	there may be some data that is necessary to provide the service that **we do**.	Actor
9	**we collect** information to make sure that the ad experience on Facebook can be relevant and valuable to small businesses ...	Actor
10	**We do** that for a number of reasons, including security, and including measuring ads to make sure that the ad experiences are the most effective	Actor

As Table 3 shows, *we* frequently occurs with action verbs to underline the action taken by Facebook. Each action is justified by the positive intentions, as can be seen from such expressions as "in order to…", "to make sure that…", "to…", "for a number of reasons", "That helps…" and "is necessary to...". Hereby Zuckerberg shifts people's focus from Facebook's act to its positive intention and underlines Facebook as an inherently good actor.

Meanwhile, he uses the pronoun *you* to refer to Facebook users. Among these pronouns, *you* (78) is most frequently used, followed by *they* (20). An examination of the collocates of *you* finds that *you* frequently collocates with *can* to underline users can make their own choice in using Facebook (see Table 4). In other words, he puts the responsibility for data privacy on Facebook users themselves.

Table 4. Collocates of *you*

1	you can choose not to share any content or information
2	We've had it for years. You can go to it in your settings…
3	you can look up the information that people have control
4	…that second type of data. You can turn off the ability…
5	you can turn that off, and then we won't…
6	you can — you can turn that off, and then to do ranking
7	around advertising, you can — you can turn that off, and then we...

5.2.2 "Cambridge Analytica". In the Facebook data scandal, Cambridge Analytica is the key actor who bought 87 million user data from an app developer on Facebook. For Zuckerberg, Cambridge Analytica is an ideal actor to scapegoat. In Zuckerberg's testimonies, he attributed many negative properties to Cambridge Analytica. This can be revealed through a transitivity analysis of his words (Halliday 1994). There are altogether 22 instances of material processes and 5 instances of verbal processes. Material process underlines the process of "doing", i.e., how some social actors "do" something to others. The involved participants are Actor and Goal. In the Facebook data scandal, a commonly shared perception is that both Facebook and Cambridge Analytica are bad Actors who do harm to Facebook users, the Goals. The other process in Zuckerberg's presentation of Cambridge Analytica is Verbal process. Verbal process is the process of "saying". It concerns the activity of Who speaks What (to Whom). Its participants are Sayer and Receiver. An examination of these processes can reveal what roles are assigned to Cambridge Analytica and Facebook in his presentation of the data scandal. Tables 5 and 6 illustrate the material and verbal processes respectively in his defence.

Table 5. Material processes in MZ's presentations of Cambridge Analytica

Rank	Participant	Material	Participant
1	we [Actor]	did take action	
2	We [Actor]	took down	the app [Goal]
3	Cambridge Analytica [Actor]	had bought	data [Goal] from an app developer on Facebook
4	We [Actor]	shut down	the app [Goal]
5	We [Actor]	got in touch	with them [Goal]
6	We [Actor]	Shouldn't have taken	their word [Goal] for it
7	we [Actor]	've updated	our policies [Goal]
8	we [Actor]	need to make sure	
9	we [Actor]	're going to operate	company [Goal] to make sure that we don't make that mistake again.
10	the app developer, Aleksandr Kogan [Actor]	had sold	data to Cambridge Analytica [Goal]
11	we [Actor]	reached out	to them [Goal]

12	we [Actor]	made	a series of changes [Goal] that culminated in the major change in 2014
13	we [Actor]	're now going to investigate	every single app [Goal]
14	[...], we [Actor]	will ban	them [Goal]
15	we [Actor]	're going to verify	the identity and location of every advertiser [Goal]

Facebook is primarily represented as Actor in these processes, while Cambridge Analytica is primarily represented as Goal in these processes. They underline what Facebook has done to Cambridge Analytica and the remedial action it takes to avoid the manipulative use of personal data, as can be seen from such verbs as *did take action, took down, shut down, got in touch with, updated, will ban,* and *made a series of changes*. They contribute to constructing an active, innocent and responsible image for Facebook. Only two processes have "Cambridge Analytica" and "the app developer" as the Actor. They are used to emphasize the business activity that happened between them. It further emphasizes that Facebook is not involved in this activity.

Table 6. Verbal processes in MZ's presentations of Cambridge Analytica

Sayer	**Verbal**	**Participant**
their chief data officer [Sayer]	told	us [Receiver] that they had.
they [Sayer] all	represented	to us [Receiver] that they had.
They [Sayer]	told	us [Receiver], at that point, that they had done that.
we [Sayer]	announced	a change in how we're going to review ads and big pages

Zuckerberg foregrounds Cambridge Analytica as Sayer and Facebook as Receiver (see Table 6). They further underline that it is Cambridge Analytica that should be responsible for the issue because it lies to Facebook. In other words, he blames Cambridge Analytica and constructs Facebook as a passive receiver in this incident. Therefore, Facebook has no idea about what is going on.

6. Conclusion

This study combines the blame theory (Hood 2010) with CDA (Wodak and Meyer 2009, 2016b) to give a critical examination of the blame-avoiding strategies used by Mark Zuckerberg in two Congressional hearings. An integrated analytic framework has been established by identifying four main blame-avoiding discursive strategies and several sub-strategies. A close examination of these strategies by Mark Zuckerberg finds that he shows an overwhelming preference for downplaying strategies. Nevertheless, Mark Zuckerberg features a systematic choice of different strategies for different topics. Denying strategies are used for these topics which might result in serious legal and economic consequences, while accepting strategies are used for topics that are general and less blameworthy. Meanwhile, denying strategies seldom occur alone, and they are often immediately followed by shifting strategies to shift the blame on others. Downplaying strategies are often used for topics that are indefensible and involve hard evidence. A close analysis of the discursive constructions of Facebook and Cambridge Analytica has further revealed that many linguistic features have been used for the positive constructions of Facebook and negative constructions of Cambridge Analytica.

This study has further revealed how discourse can be used strategically to construct social reality and manipulate public perceptions (Fairclough 1995; Wodak and Meyer 2016a; McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton 2020; Wodak 2021). A critical examination of the blame-avoiding strategies at different levels of discourse can reveal not only the topics involved but, more importantly, the specific strategies used and the linguistic means and realizations for these strategies. In an increasingly digitalized economy, how to escape from public blames and justify the inherently flawed business models have become an issue of paramount importance

for digital corporations, and a close examination of Mark Zuckerberg's Congressional hearing has thus provided significant implications for both the public and digital corporations (Boatwright and White 2020; Hansson 2015b). However, the critical analysis of the specific strategies employed by Mark Zuckerberg and their linguistic realizations in this study can only be illustrative rather than exhaustive given the limited space of this article.

In a "risk society", how to manage potential risks and avoid public blames is essential to business success and corporate image management (Hood 2002: 15). Hansson (2015b) argues that "discourse analysis needs a more sophisticated understanding of blame avoidance as a dominant and frequent (if only implicit) theme of executive government communication" (p. 298). Due to the prevalence of blame games in institutional and organizational contexts, more sophisticated analytic frameworks can be proposed to describe and explain the blame-avoidance strategies in different socio-political contexts (Hansson 2015b, 2017, 2018a). The framework established in this study can also be applied to investigating blame-avoiding strategies for other topics in congressional hearings and investigations or other contexts (Wodak 2021; McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton 2020). It can contribute to more studies on the critical analysis of blame-avoiding strategies in different socio-political contexts and more illuminating findings on the choice and efficacy of different blame-avoiding strategies by different agents in a certain context.

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