

Why you shouldn't use Facebook

We all have varying understandings and concerns about society. This often evolves around different ecologies. Economy, equality, privacy, discrimination, and freedom of speech, are just a few examples.

Along with these issues there is sometimes a concern for the direction things are going in and how far that will go over time. This is tied in with the quarter degree concept, where things happen slowly and no point is reached where there is sufficient concern to object to, or reject, the status quo. It is a difficult problem because as humans it is not easy to get an understanding of the history of all the things that we are involved with. Thus we sometimes cannot get a sense of whether something is getting better or worse, or if it is even changing at all. A particularly human aspect of this is that we often have a general optimistic feeling because we feel good now. However this can give a sense of things getting better, despite any actual data or real information being taken into account.

In such an environment it is difficult to explain why you shouldn't use Facebook or similar services. These services are part of an ecology which few have much knowledge about, and therefore not everybody is able to grasp the relevance to their own fundamental social concerns.

Let me start by explaining a few things that happen with, or as a result of, using Facebook. Some of these might in themselves trigger an understanding, but later I will explain what is particularly wrong with them when seen within the ecology of communications and society.

Facebook is owned and led by Mark Zuckerberg. It is not under any government control and is not a public space. In order to participate within the Facebook site, you have to sign a terms of service contract (TOS) which is legally binding. If you have any legal disputes regarding that, they are to be adjudicated in a Californian court, although as of January 5, 2011, this requirement has been removed for Government agencies.

At this point in its development the company has almost one billion users. About each of these users they have much information, private and otherwise. All this data is correlated, and forms an immense data base. In fact this is the largest and most detailed database of people and their interrelations with each other ever compiled and, perhaps significantly, available to one particular government.

The volume and depth of the material collected is quite considerable. One 24 year old Austrian on Facebook was able to get some of the information that was kept about him. He received a CD filled with 1,222 PDF pages of data. The filelog included deleted private messages, deleted pokes, deleted relationships statuses, deleted friends, applications that his friends use, old chat conversations, past GPS coordinates, and more.

Facebook gets their input from the people themselves as well as "friends", vendors, and miscellaneous other sources. A significant commercial resource which is coming on-line is the tracking of individuals across the internet. Through "cookies" placed on your computer, they can gather data on every place you go on the net that integrates Facebook, and that is probably the majority of them. Whether or not you are a Facebook member is not relevant in this case. If you have ever visited a Facebook page, you will get a number of cookies which are used to track you. Incidentally, there are a surprising, and growing, number of Facebook provided web pages out there - perhaps for this purpose.

As a test, I just went to a Facebook public page, making sure to first delete any Facebook cookies. After landing on the page I checked again and there were six (6) cookies from Facebook. I then deleted those and left the page. Checking again I see that they gave me another cookie "to go", so that I wouldn't leave empty handed. From this experience, it would be reasonable to assume that most computers in the world have Facebook tracking cookies on them regardless of whether the owners are Facebook members or not.

Inadvertently sharing private information with other members or the public is another issue, although perhaps a smaller one. What does stick out in this regard is that the frequent changes to the interface seems to be designed to catch users off guard. Only the more technically savvy are able to protect themselves, and it should be noted that the coders who write this software are among the world's best. Whatever the software does is because of what it was intended and directed to do, not because of errors or lack of skill - Facebook's protestations to the contrary.

Zuckerberg, as he related at a recent developers' conference, hopes that we'll soon live in a world where everything anybody does on the internet will be shared with his company. There is indeed much to say about Facebook's data gathering. The sources vary considerably and in addition to your online browsing, such things as book, music, or video purchases, are tracked. In a few cases this can be damaging to individuals, although this information when part of your more personal data is generally only available to those you chose. However, advertisers can make use of it and this is where the money is.

Facebook is in the business of selling what they know about you. Last year their revenue was well in excess of 4 billion dollars. The quality of their product is high and worth a good price. It is clear that the users are not getting their services for free. In fact it could be said that they have given the company 4 billion dollars worth of their private intellectual property. It is estimated that Facebook will make almost 6 billion in advertising revenues in 2012.

Now that we have a little understanding of how Facebook works, we can discuss how this relates to the ecology of the rest of the internet, society, and world economy.

I hope you took note that participation is not limited to those who chose to do so. Everybody using the net is prone to picking up Facebook cookies just like a virus. Although it is apparently legal for them to do this in the United States, the practice has been questioned elsewhere. Other policies are also legally questionable and under close scrutiny, particularly in Europe where they have more extensive privacy laws than on this continent. However, because of the size of the Facebook corporation it is difficult for governments to stand up to them. This is a problem which will only increase as the number of members grows and the company gets richer.

The fact that this database of personal information is the largest and most detailed ever collected in the history of mankind is worrisome. One can form all kinds of ideas about the evil lurking in this scheme, but the reality is that because of its value, we cannot be sure that it will not fall into the wrong hands at some point in the future. Right now it is mostly used by advertisers. I don't know if we can assume that those have the best interests of the public in mind. I would suggest that the ever more effective advertising poses a potential risk of even more damage to the environment by stimulating more consumerism of questionable goods.

As mentioned, you can buy the data that Facebook gathers. Even though these are aggregate reports and individual users are anonymously presented, it can be argued that they nevertheless represent the personal information of your particular target group. In a contemporary business environment this would be labelled "intellectual property", or IP.

The user experiences the market application when they receive their own individually targeted ads. In a less obvious way, everyone on the net is involved with the commercial use of the database. For example, when you click a Like button, you become associated with that product, and so do all your friends. Since user's personal purchases and likes are so well correlated with those of their friends it is no surprise that Nielson is partnering with Facebook to improve their measurement of advertising campaigns and reach online. Even without paying the company the site can be a very useful resource, and the rising use by insurance companies (particularly health insurance) is causing both grief and controversy. Many types of organizations use Facebook for researching clients.

User information can also be accessed by signing up as a developer of software. Anybody can do this, but you need to have, or hire, rudimentary coding skills. Yes, members have the opportunity to accept or reject the request for basic information when they install an "app", but it won't install if you say no. Do you know where that information goes or what other uses it is put to? Remember that "basic information" includes name, gender, profile picture, networks, User ID, list of friends, and public information. The dangers inherent in this are perhaps no

more than the kinds of dangers we face elsewhere, although the scale and availability is astounding when compared to what could be done even just 10 years ago.

In this country, personal information is usually not that dangerous in the hands of others, however there are historical examples in the West where it has been unsafe. The German situation 60 years ago, and the more recent McCarthy era in the US come to mind. The current era of terrorism with its multi billion dollar "security" budget is also suspect in the eyes of some people. Actually there are many countries today where anonymity is extremely important, particularly for some people. In those countries one cannot participate normally in Facebook. Those that do will have to break the TOS and lie about their real name and likely other personal submissions as well. Even then there is a danger of getting "friended" by the wrong people. The fact that Facebook puts many people in the predicament of having to compromise their ethics and personal integrity in order to join and participate, does not sit well with some people.

Despite what is happening in other countries, the important thing is we can never be entirely sure of how the political environment will develop in the future. That said, this enormous data base of people from all over the world which we are discussing here, is situated in the United States - and available to that government by warrant at any time. The warrants typically demand a person's "neoprint", or their "photoprint" which is Facebook jargon that has quickly made it into security enforcement circles and now appears in their manuals on how to request data from Facebook. Notably, there is no legal obligation under US law that either Facebook, nor the US Government inform the user of such a warrant. Although it may not be very important in the current political environment, we have no proof that our profiles are not available with even less effort. Also, Canadians and other nationalities should be aware that they are considered aliens under US law, and your rights to protection of your personal information would be extremely limited, or nonexistent. Remember that you agreed in the TOS to have your information transferred and processed in the United States.

There is nothing wrong with sharing about yourself. In fact this is the great thing about the internet, and Facebook too. That is why so many people are drawn to it. The problem is Facebook's technological design of being the man in the middle. Not only that, but by sharing with our friends we involve those friends in exactly the same way we involve ourselves and to the same extent. This is how Facebook has gained so much momentum and the more data they get, the larger they become. Unfortunately, users freely giving away personal details about themselves makes it so that advertisers can better take advantage of them. That leads to more social inequality in the end. The users are essentially victims, even though most don't see themselves that way.

Not everybody is concerned about privacy issues, or a company selling other people's intellectual property and getting rich. Public safety in the future is not even a worry for many. However, there are other issues which are more serious. One is the long term impact on freedom of the internet and it's availability to all people. After all, being able to publish what you know about what is going on is a great counter balance to those who would seek power at the expense of other people or society. The internet may be our last chance at a truly democratic organ of free speech. Can we afford to lose that? Perhaps more importantly right now, can we afford to lose even a quarter degree of that?

The internet started as a very egalitarian medium available to anybody who would take the time to understand it. Newspapers used to be like that. Radio was like that. Unfortunately where there is money to be made by controlling a communications media, someone will eventually gather it all up. Minorities will lose control, and for the most part unencumbered access as well. This is what happens when we let it happen. The end result is that the companies become more politically powerful, and the users become less politically empowered.

We are starting to see a few entities dominate large and strategic areas of the internet. Not just the carriers such as AT&T or Bell (here in NA), but the providers of other services. Google is rapidly taking over the whole search market. In the future it might be difficult to avoid their particular choices of how we get news, media, and even e-mail. Everything is processed by them for their purposes which, like Facebook, is marketing.

If a monopolistic company changes public access in some way that is disadvantageous to us, we cannot object by changing to another service. We frequently see this happen through the use of closed source protocols or restrictive legal requirements in the terms of service and copyrights. If, in order to use their services, we need proprietary software available only from one source (them?) we won't be able to do anything about it. Software only runs on specific hardware, so that is another way to control, dominate, or even exclude specific groups. In contemporary IT business practice these techniques are the rule and not the exception, but can obviously be dangerous to public freedom if employed by gatekeeping monopolies like the ones we are nurturing here. The historical worry is that once a monopoly gets large enough, they can do what they want in many respects. We have already seen "free" services transition into charging money once they became successful and large enough to do that. In that context, it is interesting to note how Google is buying up anything that has to do with communications.

Facebook is also working toward domination. They are gathering an extraordinary proportion of internet users into their walled garden and forcing them to play by their rules. You can only participate if you agree to their terms, and your participation is only as a user since there is nothing public, free, or open about the company itself. We will not be able to do (even say) what we want if we are dependent on them in the future. They could easily become a gatekeeper of internet communication. Yes, there are ways around all that for those few who care or have the technical skills. That is not the issue here. What is important is

the ability of all people to have a voice and be able to speak to the world, and the precious future of the internet ecology. Not just what some individuals can or will do among themselves.

In my personal experience the openness of the internet, indeed the freedom of computing, has declined dramatically since it started. If we don't take some personal responsibility for this, we will lose our freedom to use both as we wish - just the way we have with past communications technologies. The trend is already clear, information is turning from something we must learn into something we must buy. The movement in all media over the centuries has always been toward excluding people from participation, and that is because communications companies (in their many historical forms) get very large and end up with an economic strangle hold on the situation. Perhaps where we have gotten to with television at this point in history can best illustrate this. Too few people took ownership of the technology, and too many people were content with the trivial aspects. The result is that the public lost control of it - and the most shocking reality was that it happened very quickly.

I will finish this little explanation by pointing out that the problem with Facebook is not so much what it has done to society, it has done much good, but rather the effect it will have on the ecology of the internet and our freedoms in the future. I argue that although it seems good at first, it will eventually be a significant nail in the coffin of the internet and free on-line speech. Most certainly our original internet freedoms will not be with us for long if we continue to allow the growth of huge controlling services like Facebook and Google. These are my main concerns. You may wish to look into other harmful aspects of the situation. There are many.

Ole Juul

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