

Billions of eyes watching everything all the time

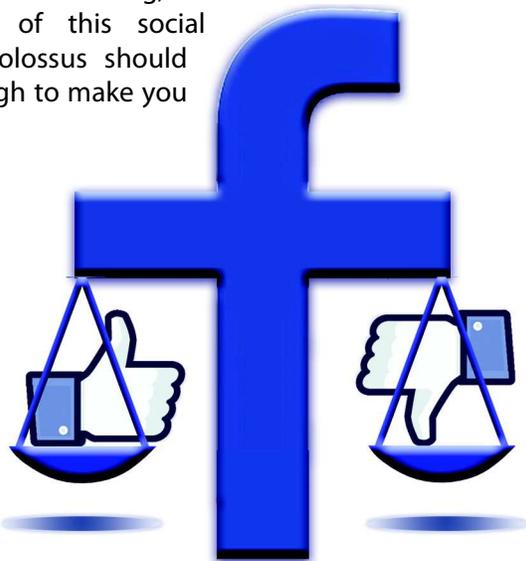
Facebook: Friend or Foe?

You can't avoid it; that bland little blue icon seems universal, inviting participation from almost every webpage. Why not? **Facebook** is one of, if not *the*, **most popular sites** in the US, with almost *one and a half billion* users worldwide and still growing.

As *the* **largest social networking site**, Facebook has become the default town plaza of the Internet. It's a place to see and be seen, where you can look up old friends not seen in years, keep track of the doings of current acquaintances, and make new ones. **Facebook offers** not quite as many services as **Google** does: but your own page and profile are just the start. You can send messages, chat, participate in groups, tell the world of the notable events in your life and get their attention in various ways, post ads, buy things with virtual currency, and so on.

And just like Google, it's all *free* in exchange for information about you: your likes, dislikes, interests, friends, personal history, and online life in general. It almost sounds too good to be true.

Is it? Given the thick secrecy surrounding what it does with all that data Facebook constantly vacuums up, there's no way to objectively answer that yet; you have to decide for yourself. But what is known of the **history**, functioning, and purpose of this social media colossus should be enough to make you wonder.



Facebook isn't just about individuals; companies and products can have their own profiles, too. For its real business is **selling advertising**. The social information it harvests is to provide marketing data – just how and to what individual level is not entirely clear. The platform itself is monolithic, based originally on PHP, the same language powering WordPress blogs. Its data centers gobbling down gigabytes are so massive that their **power usage** – historically dependent on coal – has become an environmental issue.

Facebook is big and important enough that it's in the news virtually every day. Though less than twelve years old, it has grown astonishingly to the point where it is an **official means** for the delivery of legal summons to Australian courts, and the site is often the first place journalists the world over now look for information on perpetrators or victims of crimes.

And not just them. Much to many young persons' dismay, parents and employers also have been known to check up on them there. So much so that Facebook instituted **privacy settings** to restrict access to individuals' profiles, so that posted content is only seen by those known and approved by the user.

However, the **account controls** are complicated and occasionally change as features are added or modified without fanfare on the site, so users have to stay alert. New features are almost always added already enabled by default, so those who don't want them have to deliberately search out how to turn them off.

This has caused an on-going chain of mistakes. Possibly the most shocking and painful to the greatest number was when to celebrate this year's start, Facebook decided to use their new timeline format of profiles to treat users to their own **Year in Review**. So **mourning parents**, grieving pet-owners and others suddenly found themselves confronted again with their worst moments, graphically displayed right there on their own pages for all the world to see.

For this blunder, Facebook issued an **apology** that really wasn't, excusing the company's innocent lack of foresight on their zeal to provide a better experience and promising to do better. But whether the company will or not is doubtful; Facebook rarely seems to significantly alter its behavior.

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Eternally boyish CEO and co-founder **Mark Zuckerberg** has apologized enough that there is a **pattern**. Many of these have been due to company policies others perceive as problematic; such as their insistence on the use of **real names**, which, among other things, got them into trouble with **drag queens**. More troubling is that Facebook is so insistent that they require photo ID **proof of identity** from suspect users to not be booted off the service.

Problems constantly occur because of glitches that expose too much information to other users, or just as bad, send lots of data to advertisers – so many that Facebook now offers small **“bug bounties”** to finders. Other things they’ve had to apologize for range from not taking **death threats** seriously enough for the sake of free expression, blocking **breastfeeding pictures** because of nudity concerns as well as certain **fundraising campaigns** while serving ads with photos of **cyberbullying and suicide** victims. And Facebook has been criticized for allowing **“pro-rape”** groups, and not being active enough against **pro-anorexics, stalkers, trolls, terrorists**, even **mafiosi**.

Of course, many of these complaints come about because many seek to use this immensely popular site for their own ends. One measure of this is that despite its strict policies, up to 8.7% – possibly as many as *83 million* – account profiles are **fake**.

Complaints have come from blocked individuals; also about transferring ownership of pages, effects of spam and antispam efforts, news feed errors, unexplained deletions, refusal to accept ads, **mining users accounts** for ads and so on. The website has been accused of **censorship** a number of times. The site itself has been **banned** by Syria, China, and Iran, and even for spamming by **UNM** briefly early on.

Mark Zuckerberg’s life reveals a string of dubious practices, even before the social media site became Facebook. Originally conceived as a Harvard student “hotness” rating site, he **hacked** dorm websites to steal the first batch of profiles. Collaborators sued him, **claiming** he lied about the purpose and stole code. Other suits have followed, including one over the invention of the **timeline and “Like” button**.

One big settlement was with the FTC over charges Facebook **deceived users** about their privacy. They also got caught using a public relations firm to **spread criticism** of Google. But the most controversial practices are about them using their platform’s immense database for **sociological experiments** – for instance, trying to modify users’ moods by posting positive or negative news feed stories to them.

The results of this and other such trials were inconclusive, but the company was widely criticized for

messing with the site’s membership. After all, studies have shown that just using Facebook creates **stress**. Since most members pose themselves in the best light, use can lead to significant negative effects on **self-esteem**. Being **“unfriended”** can also hurt. And people can become **addicted** – **almost half** of all young adults check Facebook right upon awaking.

Privacy issues are the leading reason why people quit. If you do, you do may delete your visible profile and even your trail somewhat, but it does not seem like the data will ever actually be erased. For one thing, it contains many connections to other people.

In fact, Facebook’s ambition to record everything about everybody is one of the most disturbing things of all. They’re known to **track non-users** across the web with friends’ tags and cookies. Even if you steadfastly avoid Facebook, when somebody you know joins, you’re likely to get an invitation in their name which will include a list of other members Facebook *thinks* you know. This is proof that no matter who you are, the site is tracking and fitting you into its database, and there’s *nothing* you can do about it, either.

Even Facebook’s positive efforts are **suspect**. Is their initiative, at first called **“Internet.org”**, to push a low-cost walled-garden variety of Facebook to the third world, a way to bring the Internet to those who can’t afford it, or an insidious means of corralling them?

The mere question shows the kinds of doubts that swirl about Facebook, because we have no way of knowing the real power of all that data and its ultimate usage. The power’s growing too: their automatic **facial recognition program** doesn’t need tags to work anymore. Only one thing’s for sure: all those juicy flowing bits would be a **treasure trove** for spy agencies or anyone surveilling the population.

The **NSA** thinks so – which is why it was delighted to include Facebook in the list of companies participating in their **PRISM spy program** along with Apple, Microsoft, Sprint, and others. It’s no secret, though it still seems to come as a shock to dumb crooks, that Facebook freely cooperates with **law enforcement**. So why wouldn’t they help the spooks out, too?



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