

*Good or bad, it's everywhere, watching you, me, everyone*

## Fleeing Facebook

Few words can describe just **how big** Facebook is. The social media monolith has *2.13 billion* users. Every day, *1.4 billion* check the site, staying on an average of *20 minutes*. *Every minute*, *136,000* photos are uploaded and *510,000* comments are made.

Facebook's problems just keeping up with all that are equally ginormous. With *5 new user profiles* being created every second, it's not surprising that *83 million* of them are fake. **Recent revelations** of how the data of over *50 million* users was allowed to be taken and used by a firm to sway the 2016 election have many wondering if Facebook has gotten too big.

**Cambridge Analytica**, a political data firm, got the information from quizzing Facebook users, but were also able to access and harvest that of all their Facebook friends through a feature the site had supposedly disabled years before. Originally thought to be in the tens of thousands, the figure was upped to *50 million*, and lately to **87 million**. The site admitted however, that **public data** on most of its users could have been improperly accessed in a similar way.

In the wake of the fiasco, a **#deletefacebook** movement has sprung up. So far it's resulted in billions lost on falling stock prices, various **celebrities**, **Playboy** and even **Elon Musk** have left, and **Apple's and IBM's CEOs** have called for better data protection.

The story is changing hourly, but already the site faces a huge amount of criticism. Yet CEO **Mark Zuckerberg** has given few apologies beyond **self-serving explanations**, and **refused** for the third time to testify before the British Parliament. He has **reluctantly agreed** to testify before Congress soon, though.

He has **called** the leak "a huge mistake" and admitted his fault. As usual in these situations, Zuckerberg did not express any sorrow or regret. But Facebook finally fixed the flaws responsible, threw out another **138 Russian troll pages**, and **announced** other restrictions to limit access without **hurting data collection**.

It may not be enough. Already, half of Microsoft's technical employees have **said** they will delete the platform, as well as **38%** of Google's staff and even **2%** of Facebook's *own* tech workers. Morale within the

company is said to be **declining** as doubts about the real value and purpose of their work increase.

Facebook seems far too huge to ever fail, but other giant companies that have likewise been sturdy pillars of the internet, such as MySpace and AOL, have fallen. The platform is **still strongly growing** among older users over 55, but younger ones, especially teens, are ditching it for sites like Snapchat. In fact, Facebook is well on its way to becoming a **digital graveyard**, full of memorials for **dead users**.

So Facebook is desperately scrambling to make its **privacy settings** easier to use, and at least appear to be more transparent and giving users more control over their own data. It remains to be seen how committed the platform is to real change, and if the steps taken are enough to stem the exodus.

This article will not attempt to cover the rapidly-changing current state of the crisis, but to look at the reasons that already exist to leave Facebook. The key issues are what information the company collects on users and what it does with all that valuable data.

### Reasons to run away

Much of what is happening seems due to the sudden public awareness of what has been going on all along. All these wonderful "free" services that Google, Facebook, and Apple offer are *not* free, but are paid for with the **data they collect from users**.

How much money? Last year, Facebook made almost **\$40 billion** in **ad revenues**. While that comes to less than \$20 per user, all those users are also busily **working** for the company for free, too, generating *all* its content and links. **Facebook addiction disorder** is real for the company **works hard** to make people spend as much time on the site as possible, too.

Why? Because Facebook is **starving** for ever more data. Mining is constant, relentless, and burrows ever deeper into users' lives. They sell the data to advertisers, who can use the information not only to guess users' desires, but to subtly manipulate them.

To learn everything about its subjects, Facebook collects no less than **98 categories** of user information. This includes things one might not expect, like the square footage of the home, and how long they've lived there. It also has how much booze they buy, what kind of groceries, games, cars, and clothes they get and when, charities donated to, whether they invest, adopt technology early, and so forth. A num-

ber are devoted to life events, such as those who are about to go or just returned from a trip, or personal preferences, like those who are receptive to offers, the kinds of stores they shop at, and on and on.

Facebook's data collecting is so thorough and instant that **rumors** that the site uses its audio recognition capabilities to secretly record users through the computer's microphone refuse to die. Yet the site has been **logging all calls** and phone numbers from Android phones for years through their app, which Google allowed. Zuckerberg **shrugged** it off, saying that users had agreed to it and could turn it off.

But even without that, the platform knows almost everything about its users. Several years ago, a researcher using data from 58,000 Facebook volunteers showed that just from the "likes" they chose, it is **possible to predict** their personalities.

Highly personal attributes could be discovered, including "sexual orientation, ethnicity, religious and political views, personality traits, intelligence, happiness, use of addictive substances, parental separation, age, and gender" with a high degree of accuracy – up to 95% in some cases.

While Google is said to be even **more invasive**, Facebook has taken more fire, possibly because they are slightly more open about their practices. Cambridge University now offers a tool called "**Apply Magic Sauce**" that Facebook or Twitter users can use to see what their own "psycho-demographic" profiles look like. Users can now **control what data** is shared with advertisers, and **download** a copy of their Facebook data from their general account settings page. Many users will likely be surprised at its size, as it may run to hundreds of megabytes and thousands of pages.

Zuckerberg finally **announced plans** to globally implement the **privacy protections** that Europe demands. But Facebook is now **under investigation** by the European Parliament, several states' attorneys general, and the Federal Trade Commission. The last one may be most significant, as back in 2011, Facebook was **charged** by the FTC on 8 counts of having "deceived consumers by telling them they could keep their information on Facebook private, and then repeatedly allowing it to be shared and made public."

The stakes are not insignificant for each violation of the agreement could result in a \$40,000 per day fine. The company is also being **sued for data mining**. But Facebook has even **experimented on users** – once by changing the news feed to optimistic or pessimistic stories to see the effect. All this is troubling because it shows a persistent pattern of very irresponsible attitudes towards their members' data.

And that is the real problem. Time and again, the company has **blundered**: with the launch of their newsfeed, opting-in to services by default, leaving privacy holes so advertisers could harvest personal information, and even subjecting users to **reliving their worst moments** from the previous year.

Last week the platform was found not to be removing **videos deleted** by users, blaming it on a bug. Each time, the eternally-boyish CEO Mark Zuckerberg apologies, blithely explains it was unintentional and promises to do better. While he **admitted** that the Cambridge Analytica fiasco was "a major breach of trust," he offered few solutions. This might be acceptable for a site run out of dorm-room, but it is totally inadequate for a firm with vast global responsibilities.

### Ranking popularity for fun and profit

Facebook did indeed begin in a dorm, and in many ways is still run that way. Originally conceived as a Harvard student "hotness" rating site, Zuckerberg **hacked** other dorm websites to steal the first batch of profiles. Collaborators sued him, **claiming** that he lied about the purpose and stole code.

His basic attitude may have been **revealed** years ago in an online chat. Bragging about all the data Harvard students gave him, he wrote: "People just submitted it. I don't know why. They trust me. Dumb f\*\*\*s."

Homeland Security now **demands** social media info from immigrants. And at this point, Facebook access is required for many jobs, and the pressure to use it for self-promotion and to connect to communities is enormous. But such self-hyping is **annoying** and it has been shown that the more time spent on Facebook, the more **depressed** users tend to be.

Breaking up is hard to do, but actually leaving Facebook is **nearly impossible**. The site is embedded in a thick tangle of third-party applications as well as modern culture. The site makes it **even more difficult** with a complicated maze of privacy settings. Even if users follow all the steps, the site **pushes them** to "deactivate" their account, which simply renders it dormant. If one is still heartless enough to "delete" the account, it takes a chat with a Facebook employee to authorize it, and at least 14 days to do, in case the user changes his or her mind.

Yet there's no guarantee that it really is deleted. After all, Facebook follows and gathers **data on non-users** from around the web, even though condemned in Europe. However, going through the process may be worth it. **Studies report** that former users are **much happier** from not comparing their own lives to the false images of others' success and happiness.



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