

Why People Love (and Hate) Facebook

You got a problem with Facebook? Go ahead. Think of what it is. Say it loud and proud. It is probably one of the one thousand or so common complaints listed at the book-length Wikipedia page: [Criticism of Facebook](#). It's been heard before. A thousand times.

You get the impression that this must be the most hated company in the history of humanity. Every hour, every minute, Facebook stands accused of promoting fake news, swaying whole elections, suppressing news, spying on your face, mining your data, causing divorce, wrecking the meaning of friendship, displaying nudity and not displaying nudity, censoring speech and spreading moral filth, giving voice to Nazism while deprecating the alt-right, ruining careers, fueling envy, causing personal depression, inciting violence, downplaying anorexia, disparaging breastfeeding, promoting extremism, creating opinion bubbles, profiting from Facebook addiction, infringing on intellectual property, giving voice to trolls, tolerating prostitution, inciting anti-semitism and blocking anti-Zionism, enabling harassment, crashing unexpectedly, locking out unpopular opinions, banning certain words, tracking user behavior, skewing the search function, permitting too many accounts to use offensive words, cooperating with despotic governments, sharing too much data, failing to share enough data, not complying with the Americans with Disability Act, being a shell for the CIA, wasting electricity, gobbling up too many servers, permitting advertising fraud, engaging in uncompetitive practices, as well as tolerating and promoting racism, sexism, ageism, religious bigotry, and everything else that some human being somewhere in the planet is against or failing to sufficiently push something that some human being is for.

You read through the list of complaints and conclude: whatever this thing is, humanity has surely faced no greater blight apart from the Black Death. Every complaint is backed by a strange presumption of intentionality. Facebook is a conspiracy to do bad things! Facebook hates x, y, and z, and is working with a, b, and c, on a plot to ruin my life! My life!

At the very least, you get the impression that this must be the most hated company in the history of humanity. It might, in fact, be just that. And that's the greatest compliment possible, because, after all, it is also the most successful company in history too. These go together. Everyone has an opinion because everyone is on it.

Okay, not everyone. Just one-fifth of the human race. I have friends who refuse it, and that is their right. But for those on there, it operates as the first global phone book. Individuals are not just a line in a book, as in the old days. The best government could do was dump that gigantic pile of dead trees on your doorstep. Your entry in the private-sector, digital-age version includes everything and anything: your entire life timeline! And get this sci-fi wonder: anyone can do an audio or video call with anyone else.

By the way, just as aside, it's free, as in no charge. Nada!

The Impossible Possible

How can any company make money this way, providing awesome free stuff to the whole planet? Through many fits and starts, Facebook figured it out. It sells the scarce space on your home feed and sidebars to institutions and individuals who are desperate for eyeballs. And through this tactic, the company now has a market capitalization of a quarter of a trillion dollars.

Not bad for a technology that, in my memory, has been put down, disparaged, denounced, debunked, and dismissed at every

single step of the way. And it's all happened in ten years of public use – a decade to change our very conception of what is and is not valuable in this world. Facebook has proven that your attention – just your eyes and mind space – is the most valuable and commodifiable thing that humanity has to offer.

Ten years ago, no one would have believed it. I can recall speaking at investment forums about Facebook and inspiring derisive laughter by daring to suggest it is actually producing value. Somehow all the smart people in the room had already concluded that this technology was a catastrophically stupid thing that would eventually collapse into a giant heap of absolutely nothing.

It didn't collapse. Facebook just kept moving from awesome to more awesome. Did you see that you can make a live video to show the world in real time, effectively creating your own television channel for the whole world to watch? I mean, speaking as someone who was born into a world with 3 channels, I find it awesome to live now in a world where every individual has become a producer with global video reach.

So, surely, the critics could stop for a few minutes and express some sense of awe. But no!

All the Troubles in the World

All frenzied theories aside, Facebook is a business, which means it is mainly focussed on endlessly tweaking the user experience to maximize the value that the platform can bring to you and all your friends. This is the only way it can really protect its income stream and keep the competition at bay. It is not a conspiracy; it is a ridiculously subservient digital platform that desperately, constantly, unrelentingly, and slavishly caters to the common person.

As for its social impact, Facebook is the leading player for enabling the liberation of communication for the whole of the human family, one person at a time. Think of this: not one

profile is exactly like any other. Fully 1.6 billion people are empowered to realize their own unique identities in this space, and communicate in every way possible with everyone else.

Another under-appreciated point: Facebook has taught people to take responsibility for their public personas. You have to curate what people see and not see, how you present yourself, what you want to see and what you do not want to see. This is your responsibility. No one can do it for you. Your mistakes are your own. Your successes are too. In this way, Facebook has taught a whole generation to be better managers of their own lives. Few experiences in history have been as great a classroom for the development of wise and disciplined public behavior.

It has also taught people to better manage their personal networks, and become wiser about navigating the undulating patterns of familiarity and unfamiliarity that characterize life in society. We've learned to extract cues from language, post timing, topic, and degrees of separation to discern just how close or far we want another person to our lives. It has taught us to be careful in what we show others, and crystallized a point we only vaguely knew before: we show different parts of ourselves to different sectors of our personal network. We speak differently to parents, pastors, coworkers, and drinking buddies. Yes this can be stressful; it is exactly the kind of stress that we need to become better friends, family members, and workers.

Incredible Bread Machine

Just say it, as much as it might hurt: "Facebook is kind of cool." Facebook is a kind of society. But whereas in society, no one manages the whole, there are people at the helm of Facebook, people who must endlessly tweak the rules and algorithms that cause the technology to behave in ways that seem natural, normal, and expected. They are not central

planners; they are rule makers and rule watchers. The users themselves create the content.

I can only imagine what it must be like to work for Facebook. You know in your heart you are doing good. Your every hope is to make dreams come true. You are living on the technological edge, improving user apps every day. Then you look at the floods of complaints and see the nonstop attacks in the press and, especially, on Facebook itself. It must be demoralizing at some level.

It all reminds me of the old story of "[Tom Smith and the Incredible Bread Machine](#)." Smith creates a machine that makes bread that sells for less than a penny. Humanity is saved! But actually, the government backed by mass opinion turns against him for every possible reason you can imagine, and the machine is shut down.

So, sure, complain about Facebook. It is your right, and, both benevolently and in its own interest, Facebook wants to hear your complaints. But with the other part of your brain, remember to be grateful for the visionaries, workers, investors, advertisers, programmers, and your fellow members of the human race who have worked to make this platform – released to the public a mere 10 years ago – one of the wonders of the world.

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This article was originally published on [FEE.org](#). Read the [original article](#).

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