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Facebook

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Abstract:

Facebook is an online social networking site, which as of spring 2018 had over 1.45 billion daily active users and 2.2 billion monthly active users, built over 14 years. It is America's most popular social media site. The platform aims to foster interactions between "friends" through updates, sharing content, and playing games together. Facebook has become a household name, not only because of its ubiquity, but also its prominent use/notoriety in social movements (including the Arab Spring in 2012), elections (e.g., the 2016 American presidential election and allegations of Russian interference), disasters (e.g., Facebook's use in volunteer rescues during Hurricane Harvey in 2017 and citizen reporting (e.g., Philando Castile's killing on Facebook Live)). Though Facebook initially began as a social network for college students, it has become ubiquitous among diverse demographic groups both in developed and developing countries. This growth is not without issue, however. The platform's high level of knowledge of users has made it a tempting target. In 2018, Facebook made world headlines as it became known that 50 million personal profiles were harvested and sold to Cambridge Analytica, leading to Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg testifying for US Senate and House hearings.

Entry:

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14 years. The site seeks to foster interactions between “friends” through updates, sharing photographs, and playing games together. Facebook has become a household name, not only because of its large user base, but also its prominent use/notoriety in social movements (including the Arab Spring in 2012), elections (e.g., the 2016 American presidential election and allegations of Russian interference), disasters (e.g., Facebook’s use in volunteer rescues during Hurricane Harvey in 2017 (Robertson et al., forthcoming) and citizen reporting (e.g., Philando Castile’s killing on Facebook Live (Brown 2017))). Though Facebook initially began as a social network for college students, it has become ubiquitous among diverse demographic groups both in developed and developing countries. This growth is not without issue, however. The platform’s high level of knowledge of users has made it a tempting target. In 2018, Facebook made world headlines as it became known that 50 million personal profiles were harvested and sold to Cambridge Analytica, leading to Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg testifying for US Senate and House hearings.

Facebook, like other online social networking sites, is built upon “profiles” which contain photographs, basic to detailed demographic data, employment and educational history, relationship information, and information about a user’s hobbies, musical preferences, favorite movies, and other social preferences. The medium has made commonplace the term “friending,” which involves inviting someone to connect with you on the medium. Friends on Facebook are able to see each other’s profiles as well as any “status updates,” usually one- to two-line social updates. Facebook relies on the production and consumption of large amounts of “user-generated content” which ranges from low-effort content such as clicking a button to “like” a photograph to extended uses such as more long-standing group-based discussions, including videos, images/GIFs, and text.

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Targeted advertising and marketing are absolutely central to Facebook's revenue and one's experience of Facebook involves the consumption of "dynamic ad insertion" (Okazaki and Taylor 2013). Though some techniques grew from the medium's historical skew toward younger users, hyper-targeted forms of product marketing are now seen successful across the platform as a whole and sometimes a source of scandal or contention for the platform.

Some critics of Facebook view the medium as placing primacy on a multitude of information being disseminated "second-hand" at the expense of singularly directed communication. This has led to some commentators seeing the platform as a waste of time (Robinson 2017). Others argue that it creates a social pressure toward self-disclosure and that Facebook may be a site of shifts in social communication from the private to the public (Lange 2007). One's existence on Facebook usually ranges in a spectrum between semi-public to public. For many years, the fact that friends or friends of friends had open privacy settings allowed some level of public access to their profiles, both directly and through third-party apps (most famously Cambridge University's Aleksandr Kogan's personality app which harvested 50 million Facebook profiles and led to the 2018 US Senate and House testimony by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg). One implication of this existence is the decrease of exclusivity of "personal" information (e.g. one's love life). Additionally, Facebook applications and linked websites can post automatically on one's wall, sharing location information, current activity, or a purchase, with friends. These have fostered electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) consumption, where friends are encouraged to endorse products and activities to their friends. Facebook is second only to Google in digital ad spending in the US (Koetsier 2018).

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Because of this push toward disclosure, Facebook profiles tend to be quite contemporaneous. These very regular interactions can foster what Licoppe (2004) describes as a “connected presence.” The perception that others are always there as a listening audience helps Facebook build a perceived community. For critics, this could be viewed as troublesome in that it places primacy on the seemingly banal. For proponents, this can be viewed as a means for one’s extended friend network to gain access to what Goffman referred to as a person’s “backstage,” a part of their life which is normally not on public display.

Ultimately, Facebook has tremendous influence on what content is being consumed locally and globally. For example, the 2018 Women's March in Pakistan, the first ever, credits Facebook as the key avenue organizing it. “If there was no Facebook, there wouldn't have been any opportunity for us to convey our message to the people.” states Mohsin Dawar, a Pakistani feminist activist (Hadid 2018). Facebook’s social spaces have become particularly important across many demographic lines, and one third of US adults get their news from Facebook. However, there are also segments of backlash that date from the early days of Facebook, as illustrated by movements such as the 2010 “Quit Facebook Day” to the 2018 #Deletefacebook campaign. However, the latter movement was unsuccessful, even with the immense data breach around the Cambridge Analytica scandal (where the data from Kogan’s app was sold to a private data analytics firm, leading to Zuckerberg’s testimony mentioned above); users of the platform actually went up (Roettgers 2018), highlighting’s Facebook’s rootedness in our everyday lives. Though survey research found that Facebook is the most popular social media site in America (Smith and Anderson 2018), some fear that “Facebooking” may be affecting the interaction of co-present individuals, in that they may place priority on Facebooking the moment rather than “living” in it. Facebook has also been criticized for the ease of its use

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in cyberbullying and its circulation of controversial videos (including beheading videos). Regardless of the potential downsides surrounding Facebook, the medium has become ubiquitous for many and has profoundly shaped economic, political, and cultural consumption.

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