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Facebook at the Crossroads and the Future of Metaverse

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Introduction

Facebook is the world's largest social network, with more than 2.91 billion users around the world.[1] Facebook has become one of the principal giants of the digital age challenging companies like Google and Amazon with its vision of the Internet tied together by personal relationships and recommendations, rather than by search algorithms. The Facebook experience is built around the people you know. Facebook users flood the social network with their thoughts, commentaries and photos on a daily basis. Facebook is available in over 70 languages. An estimated 36.8% of the world's population use Facebook monthly.

Facebook is first and foremost, the world's leading social networking site. Facebook is an example of an intelligent network. An intelligent network can be described as any system of communication that organizes, transmits and displays information with the goal of providing information and/or entertainment. What gives a network its unique intelligence are the people and users of the system and the value added contributions they make via critical gateway points (e.g., desktop/laptop computers, smart phones, electronic readers etc.). What do we mean by value-added contributions? They represent the kind of user generate content (UGC) that add value to the overall system design of the network.[2]

A second assumption is that intelligent networks do not operate in a vacuum. Rather, the use of intelligent networks are an integral part of any human or organizational decision-making process or initiative. As Internet pioneer Tim Berners-Lee points out, the Internet is as much a social creation as it is a technical one.[3] This is particularly true for Facebook which harnesses the power of the Internet to help advance an innately human activity: the desire to socialize with one's friends, family, colleagues and acquaintances. Hence the term, *social networking*. A social networking site allow individuals to present themselves and maintain connections with others. Facebook was once described by its founder, Mark Zuckerberg, as a mathematical construct that maps the real-life connections between people. Each person is a node radiating links to other people they know. As friends and acquaintances join Facebook, they become part of a larger social grid that matters to the individual. It creates value to the individual by adding to one's social capital.[4] Since that person's friends are connected to other friends on the network, there is the opportunity to virtually expand one's circle of friends and acquaintances.[5] Each new person and extended link adds value and dynamism to the overall network. The Facebook network has grown exponentially over time and become greater than the sum of its parts.

Political Activism and the Power of Social Media

If Facebook was a country, it would have the third largest population in the world, trailing only China and India. Facebook's estimated users suggest that one out of every fourteen people around the world has a Facebook account. The challenge, of course, is that not all countries, and by extension - political power structures - are equally enamored by Facebook's grassroots mobilizing capability. Quite the opposite. The lessons from the 2011 Arab spring in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen demonstrated the important role that social media like Facebook and Twitter, played in helping to mobilize street demonstrations. To be clear, Facebook and other social media did not create the revolutions that took place in these countries. Rather, Facebook in combination with cell phones, video cameras, blog posts as well as traditional media outlets like Al Jazeera, set into motion a flood of inflammatory information and images.

Facebook provided a common space where people were able to watch shocking pictures and sometimes gruesome videos of fellow protesters being brutalized by police and military authorities. Facebook and its numerous special interest sites provided a political platform for people to express their solidarity, both within the country and with others in the region and beyond. The power of instantaneous communication made it possible to mobilize large numbers of people in just days and sometimes hours – simply because someone knew someone on Facebook, and the word spread from there. This became grassroots, collective mobilization in its purest form. The lessons of the Arab spring have not been lost on the country of Russia that has made it a point to shut down Facebook and other social media sites at the start of its invasion of Ukraine. Already, the Russian government has blocked Facebook and Twitter and signed into law a bill that would criminalize the intentional spreading of what Moscow deems "fake news."[6] By that, they mean anything that is critical of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The same Russian authorities have banned words like *war* or *invasion* to describe what they want to call a "special operation" in Ukraine.[7]

Privacy Concerns

Privacy worries have been a source of major concern for Facebook since the company's very beginning. The problem is understandable. In order to have a true social network, the user must be willing to share select details of one's personal life. If there is a single quality or feature that separates Generation Z and Millennial's from previous generations, is their apparent willingness to broadcast the details of their private lives to the general public. The give and take exchange between Facebook and its users over privacy is gaining importance as the company's growth continues unabated. From New York to sub-Saharan Africa, Facebook's 2.91 billion worldwide users vary in their degree of knowledge about what it means to be a part of a social network.

Facebook's policies, more than those of any other company, are helping to define standards for privacy in the Internet age. The issues vary in size and complexity from personal, demographic data being shared with third party advertisers to the use of facial recognition technology to identify people in photographs. Implicit in these discussions are the challenges

brought on by the company's success. Facebook has struggled to find a balance between giving users too little control over privacy and giving them too much, for fear they won't share much at all. Every time a Facebook user makes a comment, adds a picture, or initiates any other change to their profile page, the user potentially loses some degree of control in terms of who can see the information whether it's specific Facebook friends, prospective advertisers, political and social advocacy groups, foreign nations as well as anyone else who has access to the Internet. Privacy settings, of course, make a difference.

Hate Speech and Misinformation

The obvious problem for Facebook is the responsibility in monitoring the use of its platform for those intending to disseminate false and misleading information. Micro-targeting is the process of slicing up Facebook users into distinct niches and then appealing to them with precisely tailored digital messages. The weaponization of Facebook (or micro-targeting) was pioneered in large part by the data scientists at Cambridge Analytica. This effort became especially pronounced during the 2018 U.S. Presidential election. Having gathered massive amounts of data from Facebook, without the users' consent, Cambridge Analytica built and designed psychographics profiles for every voter in the U.S. with the goal of microtargeting specific voters for the 2018 Presidential election. The messages were purposely designed to play to the said voter's innate fears and prejudices.[8] At issue, was the fact that Cambridge Analytica acquired the private Facebook data of tens of millions of users; the largest known leak in Facebook history, and sold this information to then Presidential candidate Donald Trump's political campaign team.[9]

Redefining the Role and Responsibilities of Social Media.

Former President Donald Trump's use of the social media platforms Twitter and Facebook proved to be both a strength and a liability. He often used both platforms to provide general commentary about his administration's various policy initiatives, praise those people and organizations who were his supporters while disparaging his critics and political opponents. At the same time, President Trump learned the hard way that when things go viral on the

Internet, the results can be immediate and explosive. This was certainly the case on January 6, 2021 when a mob of Donald Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol building, involving a riot and violent attack in an attempt to overturn his defeat in the 2020 Presidential election. Among the many consequences was a decision by social media platforms Facebook and Twitter to suspend the accounts of then President Donald Trump. Both companies decided that Trump's attempts to incite violence and undermine the democratic process were grounds for an indefinite suspension. The Facebook and Twitter suspensions proved to be a defining moment for America's social media giants and a clear recognition of their far-reaching power. With a quick and unilateral set of decisions, a small group of media tech. executives deprived the President of the United States access to one of his most influential communication tools; thereby, curtailing his ability to command public attention from his mobile phone at a moment's notice.

Similarly, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has challenged both social media and big tech. companies to think about their information role and responsibility in a time of global crisis. Companies like Facebook, Google, You Tube and Twitter, have worked jointly to minimize Vladimir Putin's heavy handed political rhetoric in various parts of the world. At the urging of both Ukraine and European governments, they have restricted posts and accounts run by Russian state media. Both Facebook and Twitter have blocked advertising from Russian-backed media.[10]

Repositioning Itself for the Future

There comes a time in the history of any organization when it must reassess its strategic position and plan for the future. This is that time for Facebook. When Facebook renamed itself Meta in 2021, the company was repositioning itself for the future. The metaverse is a vision of what many in the media and computer industries believe is the creative next step in virtual reality design; specifically, a shared, immersive 3 dimensional space where users can engage in simulated experiences, involving gaming, spaceflight, education, combat, fictional storytelling and so forth.

Science fiction often provides a useful lens by which to judge the future direction of a promising technology. Film producer/director Steven Spielberg once said that science fiction

often provides a "kind of first level alert to think about things to come." One such example can be seen in the holodeck found in the television/film series Star Trek developed by writer/producer Gene Roddenberry. The 24th century holodeck can be found aboard all Galaxy-class starships where it provides a space that allows crew members can run training exercises, engage fictional characters inside recreational novels, relax on paradise islands and hang out with AI-powered approximations of their favorite historical figures. The holodeck manipulates 3D depth perception and spatial awareness to give the user a sense of being in a sprawling, fully-explorable environment without running into the holodeck's solid and immovable walls.

The metaverse virtual world is facilitated by the use of virtual reality and augmented reality headsets. Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg has described it as a "virtual environment" in which you can immerse yourself instead of just staring at a screen. To accomplish this, will require a major investment on Meta's part. To date, the company has already invested more than $10 billion in its Reality Labs segment, which includes its virtual reality (VR) headsets and augmented reality (AR) technology.

Starting in early 2022, the Oculus Quest VR headset will become Meta Quest and the Oculus App. will be renamed Meta Quest as well. One of Meta's main goals is to use the power of artificial intelligence (AI) to create a more powerful personal digital assistant (PDA) design that goes beyond present day examples of Amazon's Alexa and Google's Siri PDA services.   The challenge going forward is to improve the interface point between humans and the PDA so that it understands the needs and requirements of the person. The operative word is assistant. To accomplish that, the PDA must have a solid grasp of the person's general lifestyle; specifically, likes/dislikes, professional contact list, appointment calendar, reading and music interests etc. Consider, for example, a PDA with a personalized name like Marco or Greta who does the automatic scheduling of appointments or lets the person know about a recently published book or upcoming sale based on that person's lifestyle and reading interests. As part of that effort, Meta is developing a project called CAIRaoke, a self-learning AI neural model (a statistical model based on biological networks in the human brain) to power its voice assistant. This model uses self-supervised learning; that is, the AI can essentially teach itself. Stated differently, as the PDA intelligent network grows and evolves, it must be able to develop self-learning qualities

in adapting to that person's lifestyle. The combination of Facebook and Instagram coupled with Meta's current and future work with AR &VR is helping to expand the definition of what it means to be a part of a social network.

Endnotes

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