

Dr. Mercola: Is It Time to Forget Facebook?

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- As of December 31, 2018, Facebook had 2.32 billion active users around the world, up from 2.27 billion at the end of the third quarter that year. This includes an estimated 83 million fake profiles
- Your hobbies, habits and preferences are meticulously tracked by the site, and your personal data is then sold to whomever wants access to it – ostensibly for targeted marketing purposes, but there are no safeguards in place to prevent scammers and even political agents from using the data, as detailed in Frontline’s “The Facebook Dilemma”
- A front-runner to Facebook was a “hot or not” site called FaceMash, where people voted on the attractiveness of Harvard students’ photos – photos Zuckerberg obtained and used without permission
- Two former Snopes employees quit after discovering Facebook was paying Snopes, and pushing fact-checkers to debunk information that might hurt its advertisers
- NewsGuard, clearly influenced by Wall Street and indebted to big industries through its funding, is being positioned to eliminate competition, which will allow Big Industry to reign as the leading shaper of public opinion and government health policies

Written by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](https://www.mercola.com)

Despite the controversy swirling around Facebook and its founder Mark Zuckerberg in recent years, the social media

platform keeps growing. As of December 31, 2018, Facebook had 2.32 billion active users¹ around the world, up from 2.27 billion² at the end of the third quarter that year.

This does include an estimated 83 million fake profiles,³ though, which is just one of the many [hazards of Facebook](#). It should come as no surprise at this point that Facebook is monetizing your involvement with the site.⁴ As the saying goes, “There’s no free lunch,” and this certainly applies here.

Facebook Primary ‘Product’ Is You

Your hobbies, habits and preferences are meticulously tracked by the site,⁵ and your personal data is then sold to whomever wants access to it – ostensibly for targeted marketing purposes, but there are no real safeguards in place to prevent scammers and even political agents from using the data, as detailed in Frontline’s “The Facebook Dilemma,” featured above.

In it, Frontline PBS correspondent James Jacoby investigates Facebook’s influence over the democracy of nations, and the lax privacy parameters that allowed for tens of millions of users’ data to be siphoned off and used in an effort to influence the U.S. elections.

The problem is, Facebook has repeatedly been caught mishandling users’ data and/or lying about its collection practices, and it seems precious little is being done to really correct these shortcomings.

Its entire profit model is based on the selling of personal information that facilitates everything from targeted advertising to targeted fraud. For individuals who start using Facebook at a young age, the lifetime data harvest is likely

to be inconceivably large, giving those who buy or otherwise access that information an extraordinarily comprehensive picture of the individual in question.

Facebook even has the ability to access your computer or smartphone's microphone without your knowledge.⁶ If you suddenly find yourself on the receiving end of ads for products or services you just spoke about out loud, chances are one or more apps are linked into your microphone and are eavesdropping.

The Origin of Facebook Speaks Volumes

While Zuckerberg insists that Facebook was created “to make the world more open and connected,” and “give people the power to build community,”⁷ his early foray into social media could hardly be called altruistic.

A front-runner to Facebook was a “hot or not” site called FaceMash,⁸ where people voted on the attractiveness of Harvard students' photos – photos which, according to Tech Crunch, were obtained and used without permission.⁹ As noted in Tech Crunch:¹⁰

“Blogging about what you were doing as you did it, you wrote:¹¹ ‘I almost want to put some of these faces next to pictures of some farm animals and have people vote on which is more attractive.’ Just in case there was any doubt as to the ugly nature of your intention.

The seeds of Facebook's global business were thus sown in a crude and consentless game of clickbait whose idea titillated you so much you thought nothing of breaching security, privacy, copyright and decency norms just to grab a few

eyeballs ...

[T]he core DNA of Facebook's business sits in that frat boy discovery where your eureka internet moment was finding you could win the attention jackpot by pitting people against each other."

Indeed, the Frontline report starts out showing early video footage of Zuckerberg in his first office, complete with a beer keg and graffiti on the walls, talking about the surprising success of his social media platform. At the time, in 2005, Facebook had just hit 3 million users.

The video also shows Zuckerberg giving an early Harvard lecture, in which he states that it's "more useful to make things happen and apologize later than it is to make sure you dot all your i's now, and not get stuff done." As noted by Roger McNamee, an early Facebook investor, it was Zuckerberg's "renegade philosophy and disrespect for authority that led to the Facebook motto, 'Move fast and break things.'"

While that motto speaks volumes today, "It wasn't that they intended to do harm, as much as they were unconcerned about the possibility that harm would result," McNamee says. Today, one has to wonder whether lack of concern is truly the core problem. Increasingly, it appears Facebook's leadership know exactly what they're doing, and the harm – especially the harm they expose users to – appears intentional.

Facebook Fact-Checkers Have Lost Trust in the Site

In a December 2018 article in The Guardian,¹² Sam Levin reported that a number of journalists hired as fact-checkers for the site have quit, saying "the company has ignored their concerns and failed to use their expertise to combat

misinformation.”

One of them, Brooke Binkowski, told Levin that Facebook is “not taking anything seriously,” and “are more interested in making themselves look good and passing the buck.”¹³ She also said she “strongly believe[s] that they are spreading fake news on behalf of hostile foreign powers and authoritarian governments as part of their business model.”

Binkowski used to be the managing editor of [Snopes](#), a fact-checking site partnered with Facebook for two years. She has since quit Snopes and started her own fact-checking site. Another Snopes content manager also left the company due to frustrations over Snopes dealings with Facebook, saying she thought Facebook was trying to give the “appearance of trying to prevent damage without actually doing anything.”

She also discovered Snopes was being paid by Facebook, which she felt was “really gross,” as the two companies “have completely different missions.” The fact that Snopes employees are disgusted over Facebook’s apparent disinterest in the facts seems ironic in and of itself, considering Snopes itself has repeatedly come under fire for being ill-equipped to discern facts from lies due to apparent biases.

Most recently, [Snopes’ fact-checking of a vaccine injury report](#) by former CBS correspondent Sharyl Attkisson got an “F,” as they were clearly going to great lengths to simply discredit the report and not actually looking at the factual basis behind it.

According to Attkisson, “[T]he Snopes article debunks claims that were never made and uses one-sided references as its sources – other propagandists – without disclosing their vaccine industry ties.”¹⁴ The fact of the matter is, Snopes engages in massive censorship of natural health, and promotes industry talking points regardless of what the scientific reality is.

Facebook Accused of Creating Propaganda

Facebook is also accused of hiring Definers Public Affairs, a PR firm whose use of “anti-Semitic narrative to discredit critics” – in this case a group of protesters called Freedom From Facebook – created “the same kind of propaganda fact-checkers regularly debunk.”¹⁵

According to The Guardian,¹⁶ Facebook’s media partners (about 40 in all, located across the globe) are split in their views about their fact-checking relationship with Facebook. While some believe it’s a positive step, others claim to have:

” ... [G]rown increasingly resentful of Facebook, especially following revelations that the company had paid a consulting firm to go after opponents by publicizing their association with billionaire Jewish philanthropist George Soros.

The attacks fed into a well-known conspiracy theory about Soros being the hidden hand behind all manner of liberal causes and global events. It was later revealed that Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer, had directed her staff to research Soros’ financial interests after he publicly criticized the company.

‘Why should we trust Facebook when it’s pushing the same rumors that its own fact-checkers are calling fake news?’ said a current Facebook fact-checker ... ‘It’s worth asking how do they treat stories about George Soros on the platform knowing they specifically pay people to try to link political enemies to him?’”

A November 15, 2018, article in Tech Crunch reported on the PR scandal, saying:¹⁷

“Facebook is facing calls to conduct an external investigation into its own lobbying and PR activities by an aide to billionaire George Soros ...

The call follows an explosive investigation, published yesterday by the New York Times based on interviews with more than 50 sources on the company, which paints an ugly picture of how Facebook’s leadership team responded to growing pressure over election interference ... including by engaging an external firm to lobby aggressively on its behalf.”

Facebook leaders deny the allegations – Zuckerberg going so far as to claim he didn’t even know his company was working with Definers, or who had hired them.¹⁸ Facebook reportedly severed ties with the PR firm shortly after the publication of The New York Times article.

This call for an investigation into Facebook’s PR activities came on the heels of a call for a privacy audit by the European parliament, following the revelation that Facebook allowed Cambridge Analytica to misuse users’ data in an effort to influence the U.S. presidential election. November 16, 2018, Wired added to the ongoing story, stating:¹⁹

“Freedom From Facebook has garnered renewed attention this week, after The New York Times revealed that Facebook employed an opposition firm called Definers to fight the group Definers reportedly urged journalists to find links between Freedom From Facebook and billionaire philanthropist George Soros, a frequent target of far-right, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.

That direct connection didn’t materialize. But where Freedom From Facebook did come from – and how Facebook countered it – does illustrate how seemingly grassroots movements in Washington aren’t always what they first appear.”

According to Wired, Freedom From Facebook was the idea of former hedge fund executive David Magerman, who approached the Open Markets Institute, a think tank headed by Barry Lynn, an outspoken critic of monopolies such as Google and Facebook.

The group has also formed coalitions with other progressive groups, including Citizens Against Monopoly (a nonprofit founded by Open Markets Institute), Jewish Voice for Peace and the Communications Workers of America. In all, the Freedom From Facebook coalition now includes a dozen groups, all of which, according to Open Markets Institute director Sarah Miller, “organize around this fundamental principle that Facebook is too powerful.”

Facebook Fact-Checkers Charged With Protecting Views of Advertisers

According to Binkowski, Facebook was also “pushing reporters to prioritize debunking misinformation that affected Facebook advertisers.”²⁰ This comes as no surprise to me, seeing how my site has been on the receiving end of that agenda.

Below is a screenshot of a Facebook post for one of my Splenda articles, which based on “fact-checking” by Snopes was classified as “False,”²¹ thereby reducing its potential views by an average of 80 percent.²² This despite the fact that I’m reporting published, peer-reviewed science.



Dr. Joseph Mercola shared a post. ...

May 7 at 14:16 • 🌐



Mercola Peak Fitness
shared a link.

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SNOPE.COM **Fact-Checker**

FACT CHECK: Is Splenda Inadequately Tested and Unsafe?

NewsGuard – Another Biased Arbiter of Truth

Another fact-checking site that is positioning itself as a global arbiter of credibility is NewsGuard. A recent article²³ in Slate highlights the ramifications of getting a poor NewsGuard rating, as the company has partnered with Microsoft to incorporate its ratings as a feature in Microsoft's Edge browser.

If a user has the setting enabled, each and every search result, plus all media posts in their Facebook and Twitter feeds, will display NewsGuard's credibility rating of the site in question. NewsGuard has also partnered with the public library system, so that all library computers will display the ratings.

The Daily Mail Online – one of the world's largest online newspapers – scored just 3 out of 9 possible criteria, earning them a “red” NewsGuard label, which warns readers that “This website generally fails to maintain basic standards of accuracy and accountability.”

A spokesman for the Daily Mail said, “We have only very recently become aware of the NewsGuard startup and are in discussions with them to have this egregiously erroneous classification resolved as soon as possible.” As noted by Slate:

“[W]hat does it mean if NewsGuard, or another fledgling credibility-rating project, begins to wield outsize influence over which news organizations garner the most trust on the internet? ...

[T]he Mail's run-in with NewsGuard may presage a new phase: one in which the big tech platforms' algorithms begin to incorporate measures of a news outlet's trustworthiness, while a handful of startups and nonprofits vie to be the arbiters behind those ratings.

The trust industry is quietly taking shape. Should we trust it? ... It's ... possible to imagine a nightmare scenario in which the ratings authorities become too powerful, their subjective decisions baked into every algorithm and profoundly shaping what people read.

Media companies would try to game the green shields the same

way they gamed Facebook's algorithm – or worse, curry favor or influence behind the scenes.”

The Credibility War – The Latest Attempt to Stifle Big Business Competition

Indeed, I would argue there's simply no way one can trust any given organization or company to dictate credibility and preside over what's true and what's not. There are typically two or more sides to any story, and money can easily tip the scales on which side gets to be “true” and which is deemed “false.”

In the case of NewsGuard, one does not need to have prophetic vision to see the future writing on the wall. All you have to do is take a look at where its funding is coming from, and you'll realize the organization is ripe with bias already.

Aside from internet giants Microsoft²⁴ and [Google – one of the largest monopolies in the world](#) – NewsGuard is backed by companies that are involved in advertising and marketing of pharmaceutical products, cigarettes and unhealthy junk food to kids.^{25,26,27,28,29,30,31,32,33} (To learn more, see [“The New Plan to Censor Health Websites.”](#))

Are we really to believe that the profit preferences of such entities will have no influence on NewsGuard's ratings of individuals, organizations and companies that criticize the safety or effectiveness of those products?

In the final analysis, it appears NewsGuard is just another big business aimed at keeping the chemical, drug and food industries, as well as mainstream media, intact by discrediting and eliminating unwanted competition, which

likely includes yours truly and many others who empower you with information that helps you take control of your health.

Is It Time to Forget Facebook? Take the Survey Below and Let Me Know.

Over time, I've become increasingly disenchanted with Facebook myself, and I wonder if perhaps I'm doing more harm than good by being a part of it. There's no denying that by being on Facebook, you're exposing yourself to privacy intrusions.

Then again, as described by Tech Crunch,³⁴ these intrusions will continue to occur even after you close your Facebook account, and take place even if you never had one in the first place. In the end, it seems the very existence of Facebook is the problem. As Tech Crunch notes, "Essentially, Facebook's founder is saying that the price for Facebook's existence is pervasive surveillance of everyone, everywhere, with or without your permission."

You may want to consider taking a sabbatical from Facebook. According to a recent study³⁵ by researchers at New York University and Stanford, Facebook users report feeling happier and more satisfied with life after leaving the platform for a month. They were also less likely to report feelings of [anxiety](#), [depression](#) and loneliness – a finding that supports the idea that social media is a poor substitute for actual face-to-face interactions.

Still, I'm seriously considering leaving the platform, and devising other ways to stay in touch with readers. Before I do that, however, I am conducting a survey below to get a feel for what you think about my presence there. Take the survey now to let me know your thoughts.