

Ethics of Facebook: Analyzing the Social Network and Global Leader

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Engineering and Applied Science University
of Virginia • Charlottesville, Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree Bachelor of Science, School of
Engineering

Selwyn Hector

Spring 2020

On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this
assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

Signature _____ Date _____

Selwyn Hector

Approved _____ Date _____

Michael Gorman, Department of Engineering and Society

Ethics of Facebook: Analyzing the Social Network and Global Leader

Introduction

As computing technology has grown, the internet and computers have become an essential part of people's daily lives. According to data from the US Census, 81% of United States homes had a computer with internet access in 2016 and 76% of households had at least one smartphone.¹ Facebook is one of the internet's largest services with 1.59 billion daily active users and 2.41 billion monthly active users as of June 2019.² Facebook's massive user base gives it a platform to influence many parts of the world. Facebook began as a platform for connecting college students but now is a behemoth in entertainment, news, advertising, and more. Small decisions in how content is prioritized and what content is allowed to be posted have consequences across many cultures. This enormous power makes Facebook not only a social network that connects friends but a global leader that shapes the future.

Unfortunately, the platform has been at the center of many controversies related to user privacy, misinformation, and hate speech.^{3,4} Facebook's culture has developed to allow these issues to occur and only mitigate them when absolutely necessary. Through examining Cambridge Analytica, fake news, and the Rohingya Genocide, Facebook's actions can be explained through normalized deviance in their culture. Utilitarian ethics and rights based morality can then be used to critique the thoughtfulness of their methods.

1

The Growth and Culture

Facebook.com was registered in 2004 after Mark Zuckerberg had created the site as a student at Harvard University with a number of his classmates. The purpose of the website was to act as a public, online version of paper directories that gave information and pictures of all Harvard students. While the site was initially only available for Harvard students, it was quickly expanded to include universities and high schools across the world. It surpassed 1 million users in December 2004 and then in September 2006, would be open to all people age 13 and older with a valid email address.⁸

As Facebook's user base grew, so did its employee base, rising from 150 employees in 2006 to 3200 in 2011, and over 35,000 in 2018.⁹ Facebook is routinely labeled as one of the best working places, recently being crowned as the best place to work in 2018 by Glassdoor.

According to Gillett, The site uses factors like CEO popularity, compensation, benefits, culture, and values to determine rankings. Employees also cited they felt inspired by the company's mission of connecting the world and felt motivated by their coworkers.¹⁰ Despite these praises, some executives and outsiders feel the leadership of Facebook may need to be adjusted.

Whatsapp co-founder Brian Acton ended up leaving Facebook in 2018 after his app was acquired by the company in 2014. He stated "they are good businesspeople. They just represent a set of business practices, principles and ethics, and policies that I don't necessarily agree with."¹¹

Acton had felt pressure from CEO Zuckerberg and COO Sandberg to increase monetization of the messaging app by allowing ads and removing some encryption features. He also felt pressure to lie to European officials on how the two apps' data would be integrated¹¹ Ultimately, Acton chose to leave about \$850 million worth of stock options behind and terminate his employment

with Facebook. Fellow WhatsApp co-founder and former CEO Jan Koum also departed from the company in 2018 for similar reasons stating that the company wanted WhatsApp to remove its \$1 annual subscription fee and instead focus on partnering with businesses. It was reported there was talk of a feature that allowed businesses to read user messages to incentivize them to advertise on the app.. Acton and Koum are well-known privacy advocates and Facebook's demands were enough to make them walk away from the company. As of 2020, WhatsApp is ad-free and requires no subscription cost.

In addition to Acton, Roger McNamee, one of Facebook's earliest investors has warned that Facebook's huge user base grants them enormous power and that Zuckerberg and Sandberg hold "the most centralized decision-making structure I have ever encountered in a large company."¹² McNamee argues 30,000 employees cannot possibly manage over 2 billion users across the world. He has written that he believes Facebook should be broken up to keep its power in check. McNamee writes that Facebook's issues do not stem from "overtly wicked intent" but that it must recognize its power and focus on being more than "a product and monetization scheme."

Modern Controversies

Cambridge Analytica

In March 2008, it was reported that Cambridge Analytica used data improperly obtained from Facebook's API to build voter profiles and access the information of users without their knowledge. Cambridge Analytica developed a survey that was said to be for academic use but it would secretly gain personal information of not only the user who completed the survey but all

their friends as well. Cambridge Analytica then sold that information to the political campaign of Texas Senator Ted Cruz.¹³ Data included the users' current city, location check-ins, and likes, which was enough to build psychological profiles of users.¹⁴

Facebook initially apologized for the incident and said it needed to better police how people used its services. It has since implemented stricter app review process, gotten a new chief technology officer, and reworked company priorities to shift towards strong data protection and privacy.¹² Zuckerberg was then brought in to testify in front of both Congressional Houses and cooperated in answering many questions. However, it was also revealed that Facebook had known about the data incident and use as early as 2015 but chose not to make it public. Zuckerberg claimed Facebook “took immediate action” and “demanded[ed] that Kogan and each party he had shared data with delete the data.”¹⁵

This scandal led directly to a popular movement to Delete Facebook. #DeleteFacebook was trending on Twitter with over 10,000 mentions 2 hours after the story broke.¹⁶ Congress also moved forward with the CLOUD (Clarifying Lawful Overseas Use of Data) Act which could force technology companies to hand over data stored on servers regardless of whether that information was stored in the United States. This was signed into law on March 23, 2018, as part of Congress' effort to reign in the ever-changing technology sphere. Ultimately, the company is still repairing its reputation from the incident and is working to regain user trust and ensure privacy for its users.

Fake News

Another controversy Facebook is continually struggling with is misinformation and content moderation. According to a Pew Research Study, More than 45% of Americans report that they use Facebook as a news source and 17% claim it is their primary news source. The company has said while it does work to reduce the distribution of inauthentic content, they do not stipulate information posted to the website must be true.¹⁷ This has led the site to be a platform for many different conspiracy theorists to spread misinformation often dubbed “Fake News”.³ Initially, the company took a more passive approach by advising users to fact check and seek out correct information on their own. However, they received heavy criticism after the 2016 presidential election. According to CNN, about 2 months before the election it was found that more than a third of the top 200 stories about the two U.S. presidential candidates were from fake news sites during the two months before the election.³ This has led some to say that fake news played a part in deciding the winner of the election.^{18 19}

Since then, Facebook has cracked down more on accounts, partnered with fact-checking news sites like PolitiFact to investigate claims, and banned accounts that consistently spread fake news like Alex Jones, founder of InfoWars. According to Levine and Others, as Facebook advances its effort so do bad actors. Misinformation takes many different forms whether it be bots, partisan citizens, or paid humans. They are more skilled at impersonating reputable sources and creating posts that seem human than in 2016. Also, the litigation is difficult because domestic actors can obscure their fake news as mudslinging politics which have been prevalent

in our nation for years.²⁰ Facebook will have to continuously dedicate resources to fighting fake news as it advances on its platform.

Rohingya Genocide

As of October 2019, the Rohingya Genocide is an ongoing crisis taking place in Myanmar where the Burmese government is committing many human rights violations against Muslim Rohingya to drive them out of the country. This has spurred a refugee crisis with most fleeing to other parts of Southeast Asia like Bangladesh, India, and Thailand.²¹ The government has used Facebook to post thousands of messages acting as propaganda to incite violence against the Rohingya people. These messages go back as early as 2013 with examples like “We must fight them the way Hitler did the Jews” and “We need to destroy their race.”^{22 23} Facebook heavily relies on users to report inappropriate content and outsources content moderators to a consulting firm of mostly English speakers. Reuters reports in 2015, Facebook only had four employees that could speak Burmese and accurately moderate the content while Myanmar had 7.3 million active users.²²

Facebook also had trouble automatically detecting Burmese hate speech due to the way Burmese fonts are rendered on screens. Reuters interviewed former content moderators for the company who said they “sometimes had as little as a few seconds to decide if a post constituted hate speech.” According to a New York Times report, it was often military officials who had spurred campaigns of hate speech and this resulted in Facebook removing the accounts of over 20 military officials who were reaching 2.5 million unique users.^{24 25} These officials had created

fake accounts of popular national figures to post anti-muslim rhetoric. By pairing hate speech along with military power, the government was able to unite citizens against the Rohingya people and murder 20,000 people as well as displace an estimated 700,000. While Facebook is not to blame for the incident, they were lackluster in their response concerning the resources they chose to dedicate to the issue. They also retain the core problem of not being able to properly moderate content in Myanmar.

Normalized Deviance in Software

Facebook is at the intersection of Technology and Society naturally because of its mission to “give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together”.² From a technological standpoint, they are a massive success and have scaled to be able to serve their product to billions of users across many services with many features. From a business standpoint, they were able to monetize their product through advertising, have the 4th largest IPO ever, and acquire multiple companies to continue their innovation. However, like any engineer they must realize the societal impacts their work has. As their controversies presented have shown, there are many use cases for Facebook beyond connecting family members or college friends. Thanks to its scale both users and nonusers are forced to become stakeholders as they feel the effects of the platform on relationships, media cycles, politics, and so much more.

Recognizing its great power, how does Facebook repeatedly become embroiled in these issues? According to Williams, Normalized Deviance is the phenomenon when people within an organization become so insensitive to deviant practice that it no longer feels wrong. It was originally used to describe the Challenger disaster and is widely applied to civil engineering,

healthcare, and mechanical engineering. It is rarely applied to software engineering practices. On the surface, it seems a website failing is much less dangerous than a bridge or plane. However, Facebook's impact is global and so its practices can and should be held to the same engineering standards. According to Luu, a number of reasons as to why these technical failures happen include onboarding towards the status quo, and leadership diluting problems.²³

Onboarding toward the status quo is the process in which outsiders are taught to adjust their own views to the deviance as they join an organization. It is how normalized deviance continues. For example, a new hire at a company may see problems within an organization but are taught that is simply the company's way of doing it. Eventually, these processes will become ordinary and that new hire will become a senior reteaching this bad process. Facebook's fact checking philosophy acts as an example of this. Their refusal to forcibly remove political misinformation¹⁷ is largely harmful but continues on. Engineers and managers may see this as harmful from the outside but are taught the full reasoning from the company and then become heavily invested in that process. The same can be taught about content moderation since it can be simply explained as being outsourced to "experts". Onboarding is a process of becoming acclimated to company culture and that process can easily be shaped to include normalized deviance.

Another factor that can create normalized deviance is leadership diluting problems coupled with workers not speaking out. As noted by Acton and Koum upon exiting Facebook, Facebook's strategy and planning largely comes from CEO Zuckerberg and COO Sandberg, exclusively. It was noted in the Cambridge Analytica scandal that Zuckerberg knew about the issue years before but did not consider it an issue of privacy that Facebook's third-party

applications could be abused so heavily. The company did not take action and edit their own systems and policies until 2018 when they received large amounts of negative press. Internally, they refocused towards different issues and then by setting the direction had workers participate in this deviance. An individual software engineer does not have the power to affect the strategy beyond a suggestion to a high-ranking manager. Employees get promoted by making their managers happy not by suggesting sweeping changes. Therefore, workers do not have the ability to speak out and leadership can reduce the importance of any issue.

These issues along with others combine to allow a company culture where these issues continue to occur. Normalized deviance allows the company to focus on other tenants of business and then use their financial success as justification they are making correct decisions.

Ethics Moral Reasoning

Is Facebook truly acting immorally in their decision making? One way to critique their ethics is through Utilitarianism. According to Gorman and others, Utilitarianism weighs decisions by looking at the range of people that are affected by a decision and maximizing the well-being of those people or inversely minimizing harm²⁴. Facebook as a company not only connects families like those in Myanmar but also generates jobs, supports small business, and allows worldwide organizations and movements to come together. It is highly reliable and scalable. Conversely, it also has leaked the information of millions, allowed companies to read users private messages and been a tool for the promotion of genocide²². In the complex network of users, a Utilitarian could argue that the ability to contact or connect does not exceed the harm done through genocide or targeted political manipulation. Especially with other methods of

communication available such as email, skype, and a plethora of other popular social media websites. Other S&P 500 companies can offer similar economic benefit while also generating unique products or services. Additionally, this analysis fails to consider possible negative mental health effects such as addiction and low self-esteem.²⁵ Verily, utilitarian ethics could be applied much more rigorously in economic cost-benefit analysis, but even at a surface level, there is an argument that Facebook does more harm than good.

Beyond utilitarian ethics, which are limited in their moral characterization since they focus more on outcomes than original actions, is moral imagination. According to Mark Johnson moral imagination is defined as “envisioning the full range of possibilities in a particular situation in order to solve an ethical challenge.”²⁶ Moral imagination goes beyond analyzing the impact of a chosen action, but also envisions multiple scenarios and weighs their costs. In a way, it is a more creative, expanded version of utilitarianism. Everytime Facebook is presented with a challenge or issue, especially those stemming from outside the United States, this process could be used to inform decision models. In the fake news controversies an appropriate application would be to have the leadership analyze not only the immediate problem, but also future ways fake news could be abused. They could also analyze how it would affect not only the site’s own users but those within users' immediate friends, public health in regards to vaccinations, scientific discovery with flat earth circles and so much more. Another tenant of moral imagination could be expanding leadership to make it more diverse. Then leadership could use the more diverse pool of culture and experience to see more possibilities and preemptively solve more issues. The rigorous application of this process along with a willingness to change can

combat normalize deviance and begin to shift the companies total mass of action towards doing more good.

Conclusion

Ultimately Facebook is a technological giant whose reach affects the entire world. They are the most profitable social media company by far²⁶ and currently a core piece of the internet. Through examining multiple incidents, it is clear that the platform can affect people's lives across the world. Despite this power, Facebook is often underprepared and uninterested in intervening in issues until they are publicly pressured to do so. They prioritize profits and focus on achieving business growth. Normalized deviance in their company and across their field have led to these patterns being seen as acceptable and continuing on. As leaders dilute problems and new members are onboarded to the status quo, a culture is developed that creates room for the issues Facebook experiences. Facebook can be interpreted as contributing more harm than well-being to the world and introspection along with change are required to fix these issues. Ultimately it is concluded that Facebook has a moral responsibility to ensure its various services not only work technically and economically but also allow for healthy connections with minimal human suffering.

References

- Arthur, C. (2009, February 12). *Facebook paid up to \$65m to founder Mark Zuckerberg's ex-classmates*. The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2009/feb/12/facebook-mark-zuckerberg-ex-classmates>
- Association for Psychological Science. (2012, January 30). *Facebook is Not Such a Good Thing for Those with Low Self-Esteem*. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/releases/facebook-is-not-such-a-good-thing-for-those-with-low-self-esteem.html>
- Bissell, T. (2019, January 29). *An Anti-Facebook Manifesto, by an Early Facebook Investor*. New York Times. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/29/books/review/roger-mcnamee-zucked.html>
- Cadwalladr, C, Graham-Harrison, E, & Rosenberg, M. (2018, March 17). *How Trump Consultants Exploited the Facebook Data of Millions*. New York Times. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/17/us/politics/cambridge-analytica-trump-campaign.html>
- Cadwalladr, C, Graham-Harrison, E, (2018, March 17). *Revealed: 50 million Facebook profiles harvested for Cambridge Analytica in major data breach*. The Guardian. Archived from the original on March 18, 2018. Retrieved from

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/cambridge-analytica-facebook-influence-us-election>

Confessore, N. (2018, April 4). *Cambridge Analytica and Facebook: The Scandal and the Fallout So Far*. New York Times. Retrieved from

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/04/us/politics/cambridge-analytica-scandal-fallout.html>

Dildar, B (2019, December 2). *UN Official Cites Horrific Crimes against Rohingya*. Transcend Media Service. Retrieved from

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/un-official-cites-horrific-crimes-against-rohingya/1390565>

Facebook: From Harvard Dorm To 35,000 Employees. (n.d.) Statista. Retrieved from

<https://www.statista.com/chart/16054/the-number-of-full-time-facebook-employees/>

Facebook: Transparency and use of consumer data. Hearings before the Committee on Energy and Commerce. House of Representatives, 115th Cong. (2018).

Fiegerman, S (2017, May 9). *Facebook's global fight against fake news*. CNN. Retrieved from

<https://money.cnn.com/2017/05/09/technology/facebook-fake-news/index.html>

Gorman, M, Mehalik, M & Werhane, P. (1999, November) *Ethical and Environmental Challenges to Engineering*

Gillett, R. (2019, December 7). *7 reasons Facebook is the best place to work in America and no other company can compare*. Business Insider. Retrieved from

<https://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-best-place-to-work-in-america-2017-12>

Green, J. (2018, March 23). *#DeleteFacebook Highlights The Benefits Of Blockchain*. Forbes.

Retrieved from

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/jemmagreen/2018/03/23/deletfacebook-highlights-the-benefits-of-blockchain/#296757c26824>

Kerby, J. (2017, May 16). *Here's How Much Facebook, Snapchat, and Other Major Social Networks Are Worth*. Social Media Today. Retrieved from

<https://www.socialmediatoday.com/social-networks/heres-how-much-facebook-snapchat-and-other-major-social-networks-are-worth>

Levine, A, Overly, S, & Scola, N| (2019, December 1). *Why the fight against disinformation, sham accounts and trolls won't be any easier in 2020*. Politico. Retrieved from

<https://www.politico.com/news/2019/12/01/fight-against-disinformation-2020-election-074422>

Mahdawi, A. (2018, December 21). *Is 2019 the year you should finally quit Facebook?*. The Guardian. Retrieved from

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/dec/21/quit-facebook-privacy-scandal-private-messages>

Moral Imagination. (n.d.). Retrieved from

<https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/glossary/moral-imagination>

Mozur, P. (2018, October 15). *A Genocide Incited on Facebook, With Posts From Myanmar's Military*. New York Times. Retrieved from

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/technology/myanmar-facebook-genocide.html>

Olson, P. (2018, September 26). *Exclusive: WhatsApp Co-founder Brian Acton Gives The Inside Story On #DeleteFacebook And Why He Left \$850 Million Behind*. Business Insider

Retrieved from

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/parmyolson/2018/09/26/exclusive-whatsapp-cofounder-brian-acton-gives-the-inside-story-on-deletefacebook-and-why-he-left-850-million-behind/>

Pew Research Center. (2017, September). "News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2017"

Pitman, T. (2017, October 17). *Myanmar attacks, sea voyage rob young father of everything*

Associated Press. Retrieved from

<https://apnews.com/8972bde7517d4e7aba770fb124a40726/Myanmar-attacks,-sea-voyage-rob-young-father-of-everything>

Price, M. R., & Williams, T. C. (2018). When Doing Wrong Feels So Right. *Journal of Patient*

Safety, 14(1), 1–2. doi: 10.1097/pts.0000000000000157

"Removing Myanmar Military Officials From Facebook". August 28, 2018. Facebook.

Ryan, Camille, "Computer and Internet Use in the United States: 2016," American Community Survey Reports, ACS-39, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2017.

Scola, N (2019, May 24). *Facebook on fake Pelosi video: Being 'false' isn't enough for removal* Politico. Retrieved from <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/05/24/facebook-fake-pelosi-video-1472413>

Shahani, A. (2016, November 17). *From Hate Speech To Fake News: The Content Crisis Facing Mark Zuckerberg*. NPR. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/11/17/495827410/from-hate-speech-to-fake-news-the-content-crisis-facing-mark-zuckerberg>

"Stats". (2019, June 30). Facebook.

Statt, N. (2018, April 30). "WhatsApp co-founder Jan Koum is leaving Facebook after clashing over data privacy" Retrieved from <https://www.theverge.com/2018/4/30/17304792/whatsapp-jan-koum-facebook-data-privacy-encryption>

Stecklow, S. (2018, August 15). *Inside Facebook's Myanmar Operation: Hatebook*. Reuters. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/myanmar-facebook-hate/>

"Welcome to Facebook, everyone." (2006, September 26). Facebook.