

How Google And Facebook Drove Social Media's Transition from Novelty to Malignancy

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Once Facebook escaped the cloistered world of mere campus life, it's all been downhill—unless of course, you are one of those who invested in or went to work for the company early on. The company has endured a year of data breaches; privacy scandals; mismanagement; controversy over whether the company responded responsibly to the [posting of a doctored video](#) of Nancy Pelosi; and, finally, the largest fine ever imposed by the Federal Trade Commission, a whopping \$5 billion. Co-founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg has delivered seemingly endless public *mea culpas* and pledges to do better.

How did we get here? What made sense as a communications vehicle for a diverse but circumscribed group of people sharing many life experiences on campus and later as a helpful tool for the larger world, has transformed benign to malignant as fast as rapidly improving technology could take it there.

Students moved off the campus into the “real world,” taking Facebook with them. In those early days of social media, many Facebook competitors failed because they had developed neither the necessary campus constituency nor the needed degree of habituation among users, prior to graduation. In any case, as the graduates' life experiences diverged, the nature of the communications was able to evolve along with them on Facebook.

Unlike on campus, where myriad shared activities were constant, for many the world of work just wasn't as engrossing or dynamic and offered far less commonality of interests among friends than the world of college. Therefore, the communications rapidly turned to social life and the truly banal, like what a person was cooking for dinner, or the family dog's Halloween costume.

Two critical, and probably unintentional, implications of this evolution were the slow but steady relinquishing of privacy and the concomitant compulsion to keep the interactive momentum going.

It was during this period that networks of "friends" ballooned, as friend-of-friends and friends-of-friends-of-friends connected. Of course, a social media "friend" was not necessarily somebody you knew at all outside of the online environment, but this phenomenon became accepted, then appreciated, and finally, valued for the sheer weight of numbers. The Follower was born.

Needless to say, this evolution did not escape the notice of advertisers and marketers, who recognized the access and information offered by the networks; in the process, the networks became rich and powerful from monetizing the access and data. Celebrities, who traffic in "fame," were quick to enlist, and their numbers of followers skyrocketed. Politicians jumped on the bandwagon, albeit more slowly than those in the corporate world; after all, people buy things every day, but vote only once every two years. A new, social media relationship became significant: poster-to-follower. Genuine friendliness had nothing to do with this.

Somewhere during this phase of social media development, a crucial transformation began. Because individuals were revealing increasingly personal experiences and thoughts, and advertisers were simply and transparently hawking their wares, credibility was pretty much taken for granted. (At least to the extent that the advertising of well-known products could be believed.) Welcome to the age of gullibility.

When a "friend" expressed an opinion on just about anything, his or her sincerity, if not rectitude, was taken seriously. The foundation had been laid, and that led to more and more exchanges about politics, current affairs, and other people. Many of the postings were impulsive, because the distance afforded by internet-based exchanges allows them to be more impersonal than face-to-face or telephone conversations, and passions often ran high when there was disagreement.

Gradually, there appeared a kind of vacuum—the absence of ability to judge, or confirm, credibility. Just because it was posted didn't mean it was true. It could be misguided, false, or part of a hidden agenda. But we weren't ready for that quite yet.

Politicians, in particular, grew to understand this peculiar characteristic of social media, and in the mid-2000s began to exploit it. By then, the tools existed to micro-segment the now-enormous population of users; and messages could be tailored to these niche groups. Spin had advanced a quantum leap; targeted individuals could be told exactly what they wanted to hear, sometimes even by people they knew. Their gullible and conditioned minds could be penetrated. Obama campaign strategists understood these phenomena and used them to great advantage, as did many who followed.

The most recent and troubling development in social media is the mob mentality. Often the sharing of an opinion elicits a storm of response, and vastly wider distribution, via a person's now-expanded network of friends and followers. Far from sharing ideas and feelings frankly and spontaneously, many people now assiduously avoid triggers, anything remotely resembling

judgments of others, and even witticisms that might offend. In a [commentary](#) comparing today's state of affairs to the Cultural Revolution in China during the Mao Zedong era, Columnist Peggy Noonan lamented:

The air is full of accusation and humiliation. We have seen this spirit most famously on the campuses, where students protest harshly, sometimes violently, views they wish to suppress. Social media is full of swarming political and ideological mobs. In an interesting departure from democratic tradition, they don't try to win the other side over. They only condemn and attempt to silence.

We now have a kind of Online Stockholm Syndrome. You tread lightly with your social media audience or risk caustic online retribution and even real-world consequences like shunning, loss of a job, having your business boycotted, or worse. Having a big audience is a status symbol, but it can also be a straitjacket—a constraint on speech that veers from orthodoxy.

By promoting confirmation bias—the seeking out of information and sources, reliable or not, that reinforce your own already-held views—social media and the segmentation of cable “news” are major contributors to the much-commented-upon polarization of our society. As *New York Times* writer Charlie Warzel [observed](#), “The distribution mechanics, rules and terms of service of Facebook’s platform—and the rest of social media—are no match for professional propagandists, trolls, charlatans, political operatives and hostile foreign actors looking to sow division and blur the lines of reality.”

There is another insidious, long-term effect of having people’s lives promiscuously exposed. Not everyone consistently acts with decorum and honesty (to state the obvious), and we fear that increasingly, the long-past indiscretions of public figures will be uncovered and widely reported. Will we arrive at some sort of consensus about a “statute of limitations” on bad behavior, as exists in law even for many serious crimes, or will youthful lapses destroy promising careers? Or will we simply become inured to behavior that is deplorable?

Only time will tell, but in the meantime, to strike a blow for moderation, high standards, and tranquility, maybe we should just delete our social media accounts.

Photo Credit: *Alastair Pike/AFP/Getty Images*

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