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You Are the Product

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Take-Aways

- Facebook's two billion active users are unaware of the company's true business purpose, which is to sell ads.
- Facebook has shown little determination to crack down on fake news, as its presence on the network has had no negative impact on the company's ability to promote advertisements.
- Facebook has been contributing to the fragmentation of the US electorate by connecting people with similar political preferences and feeding them information that reinforces their biases.
- The company has acquired unprecedented surveillance capabilities by matching users' personal data with information obtained from credit card firms and people's phone ID.
- Facebook will only be able to exert its powerful influence over people's lives as long as the company remains popular among users and advertisers.

Recommendation

Facebook claims that it seeks to “bring the world closer together.” But according to award-winning British journalist John Henry Lanchester, the company’s true purpose is much more mundane: to grow as a business and make as much money as it can. To that end, Facebook has acquired unprecedented capabilities to monitor and influence its two billion users. Will users and regulators rein it in? *getAbstract* recommends Lanchester’s devastating critique of one of the world’s most valuable companies to Facebook users, policy makers and political activists.

Summary

Most of Facebook’s two billion active users poorly understand the company’s business model and its ethical implications. The company’s self-proclaimed mission to “give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together” obfuscates the company’s real driving principle: to grow and to make money.

“No company better exemplifies the Internet-age dictum that if the product is free, you are the product.”

Facebook has come under fire for its role in influencing voters during the 2016 US presidential elections. By connecting people with similar backgrounds and political preferences, Facebook has been contributing to political polarization. Facebook’s algorithms make users particularly susceptible to fake news – especially if those stories confirm the users’ biases. By feeding fake news stories to select audiences only, Facebook multiplies their impact, as people familiar with the facts won’t have a chance to publicly challenge them as fake. Facebook has little incentive to monitor whether ads appear on fake or legitimate news outlets. In fact, Facebook has been much more proactive about removing sexual content, as it is more damaging to the reputation of companies that advertise. In its quest to maximize the revenue it makes from targeted ads, Facebook has become “the biggest surveillance-based enterprise” in the history of society. The company supplements the profile information of its users with purchased datasets from consumer research and credit card firms that provide information such as purchasing preferences. Facebook also has access to people’s phone IDs via the Facebook app. It can then link that data with users’ browsing history since the Facebook button embedded on most websites is an omniscient tracking device that monitors Facebook users’ online moves whether they click it or not.

“I am scared of Facebook. The company’s ambition, its ruthlessness and its lack of a moral compass scare me.”

However, companies that thrive uninhibited will encounter dampers. Advertisers might gregariously turn to other platforms, especially when they realize that much of what they pay for comprises fraudulent clicks rather than visits from target customers. Besides, Facebook remains vulnerable to US antitrust legislation, especially if courts decide that individualized pricing programs that can result from targeted advertising are illegal. Facebook users might start losing interest in or boycott the site should the general consensus emerge that the company’s broad surveillance activities are unacceptable. Contributing to the disenchantment

effect may also be a growing body of research suggesting that frequent Facebook use leads to increased unhappiness.

About the Author

John Henry Lanchester is an award-winning British journalist and novelist.



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