

Debate

Facebook: Social Good or Social Dysfunction?

ISSUE: Is Facebook leading to more positive social movements or to negative social dysfunction?

Once you are a member, Facebook can be hard to avoid. In addition to networking with new people and re-connecting with long-lost friends, Facebook has hundreds of social applications, from games to photo sharing tools, which members can use to pass the time. These social applications have fueled Facebook's popularity. Today, Facebook has over 350 million members.

Facebook is so attractive that more and more of the population is spending time on its site. According to the research firm Nielson, members spend approximately 4 ½ hours on the site each month. Smart marketers are taking advantage of Facebook to reach customers and fuel interest in their products or services. With all the opportunities that Facebook provides to connect with others, members are using Facebook in a myriad of ways. However, the increasing popularity of Facebook has both positive and negative implications, leading to unity and action on the positive end and prompting addiction and disorder on the negative end.

Facebook is becoming a tool to spark, stir, and set in motion social movements. Proponents argue that Facebook is encouraging young people to become involved like never before. For instance, one 17-year-old boy turned to Facebook in order to reach supporters in a movement to create a skate park for his city. Facebook quickly demonstrated itself as a powerful grassroots organizing tool. One day after an update was posted, 60 of 1,085 followers confirmed that they would attend a City Council meeting on the proposal. The council approved \$500,000 for the skate park and indicated that the Facebook community's support for the project played a role in their decision.

Facebook is also having a dramatic influence on another area that youth have traditionally shied away from: political activity. College students in particular are using Facebook to support or protest certain political issues and/or candidates. As a result, both Republicans and Democrats are using Facebook to connect with their constituents. For example, President Obama used Facebook and other social media sites to rally support for his Presidential run. As politicians and businesspeople are starting to realize, Facebook represents a lucrative avenue for connecting with people of all ages.

However, Facebook does have significant downsides as well. Some of these could, and in some cases are, creating social disorder. For instance, ownership of content is becoming more ambiguous. In 2009, Facebook updated its terms and deleted the provision stating that users could remove their content at any time. (The previous terms stated that at the time of deletion, the licenses would expire). Facebook added language stating that it would retain users' "content and licenses after an account was terminated." After many protests to the updated terms, Facebook withdrew the new clause. Yet future updates to the terms and to users' privacy settings may once again skew ownership rights, which could cause a problem for businesses using Facebook as a marketing tool.

As Facebook becomes more popular, so does Facebook Addiction Disorder. Users suffer from this addiction when they spend more time on Facebook than interacting with people in the real world. Some Facebook users are spending as much as 20 hours a week on Facebook. Such addictive behavior is said to be leading to social dysfunction and a replacement of the real world with the euphoric Facebook world. Facebook represents a world that is fun and happy because people are able to see what is seen about them; thus, only the best parts of people are showcased. This world is “seductive” to people, especially when or if their real lives are not going so well. Adding to the social dysfunction attributed to Facebook, the openness of the social media site is also causing problems. Because people are careless or forget to block certain messages, information is becoming available to the wrong people—in some severe cases, leading to divorces or job loss. Lastly, Facebook is encountering the ongoing problem of Internet predators, stalkers, and fraudsters, who are cashing in on Facebook’s popularity and connections.

Obviously, not all of these issues are Facebook’s fault. Yet the social media site will have to take some responsibility over the ways in which it can be misused. Some have even suggested a “social media detox” program, similar to a step reduction and recovery program for addicts. Despite the negative influence Facebook has had on some people’s lives, the site is also causing more people to feel empowered, especially among demographics who have traditionally felt helpless. With thousands of Facebook proponents and critics, along with the numerous uses that companies and individuals can make of Facebook, it is small wonder that the social networking site remains a controversial subject.

There are two sides to every issue:

1. Facebook offers a positive avenue for marketing and movement creation.
 2. Facebook is leading to social dysfunction, including ambiguity over content ownership, addictions, and opportunities for predators and fraudsters to harm others.
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