

Losing Connection: The Facebook Controversy

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Introduction

Social media has become a tool that spans across the globe, helping people connect with one another in various ways. This includes businesses and organizational groups developing social media pages as a way to reach customers and supporters (Bingol, Samii, Shakar & Karakaya, 2023). While focusing on innovation and next steps, organizations must consider many factors that impact their ability to reach broader targeted audiences including cultural background, age, and gender. Having 2.11 billion users in 2023, Facebook is the top social media platform worldwide (Tidy, 2024). Once thought of as innovative and useful, the social media giant has grown into one of the most powerful and valuable organizations in the world (Volmar & Helmdach, 2018). Starting out with the purpose of helping people connect with one another, Facebook has turned into a two-sided platform that works to serve both users and advertisers. Recent controversies involving Facebook, such as the case with Cambridge Analytica, have created feelings of distrust among its users, organizations and social systems alike. Throughout this discussion, I will explore how a lack of integrity and civic engagement was at the basis of the controversy between Facebook, Cambridge Analytica and global relationships. As Facebook gained more power, made more money and acquired more businesses, the purpose of its work shifted, putting its users' privacy on the chopping block.

Behind the Facebook Organization

Making a Connection

Launching in 2004, Facebook became a staple of teenage life (Tidy, 2024). Its popularity quickly spread as people were able to post photos, "tag" their friends, comment and "like" one another's posts. The initial goal of this social media platform was to help people connect with

one another online. In 2015, Facebook shared its mission with the world stating their intent was “to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together.” Facebook created 5 core values that helped guide their work, make decisions and achieve their mission (Facebook, 2015). These core values included be bold, focus on impact, move fast, be open and build social value.

As time has passed, Facebook has remained at the forefront of social media due to their ability to focus on continued innovation and adaptability. This approach by Facebook leadership has helped the platform meet the demands of their users, and stay ahead of emerging competition. Part of being an effective leader is having the ability to adapt to change. Meyer and Kirby explained how capitalists are able to adapt to their changing environment by sensing and acting on information that is impacting stakeholders in a nonfinancial way (2012). With growth and change, came merger acquisitions, partnerships and stakeholders. It appeared that the desire and need to remain relevant came at a price. Leaders began making choices that ushered away from the protection of civic engagement, focusing more on the bottom line and less on human connection.

Discovering a Disconnect

Leadership requires having the ability to factor in various aspects when making decisions that will impact the organization as a whole. Leaders are continuously being pulled in different directions, feeling the pressure to follow the rules yet navigate future possibilities that will impact the definition of organizational ethics (Gundling, Caldwell, & Cvitkovich, 2015).

Facebook has always been a social media platform that is free to its users, and makes all of its money from advertising (Tidy, 2024). For over a decade, Facebook leaders were having to make

decisions that impacted the platform's overall success and continuation of growth. This included how advertising was going to be utilized and reach their users.

Facebook's ability to make ethical decisions came into question during March of 2018 when news broke regarding Cambridge Analytica's access to 30 million Facebook profiles (U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, 2019). Cambridge Analytica was a British organization that utilized a tool known as API, Application Programming Interface, that allowed one application access to the data or features of another. By using this tool, developers were able to see social connections that were made between people, as well as the connections people might have had based on their interests and likes (Harbath & Fernekes, 2023). Cambridge Analytica paid an academic researcher to collect and transfer data from Facebook including names, gender, locations, "page likes" and more. This information was then used in connection with its political advertising activities (U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, 2019).

Brown discussed how organizational integrity needs civic and mutual relationships while working towards a shared purpose (2006). Those who work towards developing these types of relationships are also leading with integrity. However, Facebook modeled the exact opposite of what Brown discussed. Instead of being upfront with their users, Facebook misled them with inaccurate disclosures (U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, 2019). For over two years, Facebook provided disclosures to their users regarding the risk of data misuse as only hypothetical, however it was not hypothetical at all. Facebook knew that a third-party developer was misusing user data and did not correct their disclosure agreements for over two years. Rather, leaders of the organization continued telling investors that their user data may be improperly accessed, used or disclosed, keyword being may. When leaders of a global

organization choose to partake in decisions that are considered unethical from across various social systems and societies, their integrity comes into question and trust is broken.

The Impact of Facebook's Dishonesty on a Global Scale

The Unraveling of Organizational Ethics

As a global leader in social media, Facebook's actions caused people from around the world to second guess the integrity of the organization. Paine discussed how leaders must be aware of the role they play in shaping an organization's ethics, seizing the opportunity to produce an environment that is capable of improving relationships and reputations that play into the organization's overall success (1994). It is when these ethics are ignored that leaders and organizations have a much higher risk of facing tough legal battles (Paine, 1994). This is exactly what Facebook was about to find out.

Facebook's engagement with Cambridge Analytica impacted countries and social systems around the world, including the U.S. and the European Union. Carole Cadwalladr discussed how votes for Brexit were heavily influenced by what users were being exposed to on Facebook (2019). There was no way of tracking Facebook activity, including what was being advertised, who was being targeted or how much was being spent (Cadwalladr, 2019). When asked to talk to the British Parliament, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg refused. Britain has strict laws that limit how much can be spent in an election, however these laws could not be applied to this situation because no one was able to see how much was actually spent on political advertisements being placed on Facebook. Cambridge Analytica worked closely with political campaigns in both the U.S. and Britain as a means to profile people politically as way to better target them with Facebook ads. Cadwalladr (2019) posed a question that should be alarming to

any democracy; “is it possible to have a free and fair election ever again?” This question alone shakes the foundation of trust between the organization of Facebook, its users and social systems around the world.

Putnam explored a variety of areas within social capital that have been declining throughout the years, including trust (1995). There is a strong correlational between social trust and civic engagement (Putnam, 1995). When trust is lost, people are unable to work effectively with one another. Putnam went on to further discuss how “electronic technology enables individual tastes to be satisfied more fully, but at the cost of positive social externalities associated with more primitive forms of entertainment,” (1995). This relates back to Cambridge Analytica targeting Facebook users with certain ads based on data that was not obtained ethically. Rather than conducting research on state, national and global issues themselves, people used social media platforms, such as Facebook, to get their “facts” (Cadwalladr, 2019). However, these “facts” that appeared on their newsfeed were based on data collected from their interests and “likes” on the platform. While the intent may be to adjust the platform to individual likings, it is isolating people from one another and causing social divide.

Picking Up the Pieces: The Future of Facebook

Years following the discovery of Facebook’s engagement with Cambridge Analytica, Facebook users are now able to apply for their share of a \$725 million privacy lawsuit settlement (Archie, 2023). The organization also had to pay a \$643,000 fine to the U.K.’s Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO) due to its engagement with Cambridge Analytica (Zialcita, 2019). This was the highest possible penalty the ICO could impose due to the Data Protection Act 1998, and the actions Facebook participated in with Cambridge Analytica took place in 2015. However, under new data protection laws that were passed in the U.K. in 2018, Facebook could

face a maximum fine of up to \$22 million for the same offense. Facebook is now working with the ICO, the U.S. Senate and Congress and other global governments to create new controls to help protect people and manage their information.

Facebook needs to find ways to reconnect with their stakeholders including users, shareholders, employees and its advertisers. Before the investors and global interest, Facebook had a common purpose to help people engage with one another on a digital platform. Maxine Williams, Facebook's global head of diversity, framed "discussions of diversity around what she calls cognitive diversity – in other words, engaging people with different perspectives and approaches to problem solving" (Gundling, Caldwell, & Cvitkovich, 2015, p 87). Facebook leadership needs to engage in inclusive conversations with diverse groups of people as a way to earn trust back. According to Meyer, inclusion is influenced by what our values are, and where our level of trust is at when it comes to welcoming people into our circle (2012). Facebook should shift its focus on the number of users and investors it has to fully leveraging diversity through inclusive leadership practices (Gundling, Caldwell, & Cvitkovich, 2015). This includes making connections with others through civic engagement, and approaching their work together as citizens (Brown, 2006).

Conclusion

Throughout this discussion, I explored how a lack of integrity and civic engagement on Facebook's behalf set into motion a series of events that societies around the world had never faced until now. With money came power and partnerships that influenced the leaders of Facebook to shift their focus away from one of their primary stakeholders, their users. As we look ahead to the next 20 years, people cannot help but wonder where Facebook will be (Tidy, 2024). While it is clear social media is here to stay, there are other interests that the parent

company of Facebook, Meta, is interested in. Artificial intelligence has made a breakthrough in terms of the public's access to it on a digital platform. Perhaps Facebook will be a thing of the past someday. However, it still has a strong presence in our everyday lives across the world. If they want to remain relevant, Facebook will have to continue to work on their civic relationships with stakeholders across the globe by creating an inclusive organization that is based on transparency, diversity and trust.

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