

Facebook isn't dead and buried, but dodgy journalism lives on

December 31 2013, by David R Brake



Dead and buried? 1.2 billion users say otherwise. Credit: dullhunk

When I saw the recent eruption of stories claiming Facebook is "dead and buried to teens" I was at first intrigued, but, once I had read through to their original sources, quickly disappointed – though not, I am afraid, surprised. Once again there has been an outbreak of "[churnalism](#)" – lazy journalists half-reading a source, misreporting its findings and copying each others' errors across the web. Here's how we got there and an overview of the evidence of what's really going on with Facebook and teens.

The story starts in May, when the respected [Pew Internet and American](#)

[Life Project](#) reported that focus groups of American teens told them they had "waning enthusiasm" for the site. In July, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg denied there was any decline in teenage usage and while three months later David Ebersman, Facebook's [chief financial officer](#) admitted, "we did see a decrease in daily users specifically among younger teens", he went on to note the trend was of "questionable statistical significance" because of teens' tendency to lie about their ages when joining social network sites. He insisted that the overwhelming majority of US teens still have Facebook accounts. This did not prevent the story of the site's "decline" from continuing.

Which brings us to the central quote from the respected anthropologist Daniel Miller, who claimed on The Conversation that Facebook is "basically dead and buried" among 16- to 18-year-olds in the UK. Publications across the world picked up Miller's quote and ran with it. But was this based on a nationally representative sample of the UK population? Was it perhaps based on, as the Guardian went on to report, "comprehensive European research"?

Well, certainly Miller's Global Social Media Impact Study is a large and potentially very useful piece of comparative social research but as Miller has been making clear on Twitter, the origin of this particular finding is ethnographic research among 16- to 18-year-olds in three schools in "the Glades" – a pseudonym that refers to two small villages north of London.

None of this invalidates what Miller found, but like any scientist, when writing where journalists are likely to find his work he should have realised the need to spell out any reservations or limitations in flaming letters ten feet high. It would be fairer to summarise his findings by suggesting that Facebook may be becoming uncool among some UK teens; a recent American market research survey seems to back him up, finding Twitter is seen as more "important" by teens than Facebook is for the first time.

Crucially, however, even among fickle teens there is likely to be a big lag between disenchantment and abandonment. As the Pew study which appears to have started this whole discussion noted, the same teens who found their enthusiasm waning also said that they would "keep using it because participation is an important part of overall teenage socialising". More strikingly, the same report that unveiled US teen attitudes also unveiled nationally representative survey data from mid-2012 showing that 94% of teen social media users used Facebook (compared to only 26% who used the "cooler" Twitter) and 81% said they used Facebook most often (compared to 7% who used Twitter most often).

In the UK, 90% of internet-using [teens](#) used some social networking site in 2013, a greater proportion than any other age group, and the average UK Facebook user spends about eight hours a month on the site compared to the average Twitter user who spends half an hour.

So what can we safely say about Facebook adoption? Overall, in the countries where it is already dominant the site appears to be reaching a plateau (though globally user numbers have risen by 20% this year to 1.2 billion and will continue to rise because more people are coming online). Where it has been widely adopted for a few years, there is some evidence that younger users may be tempted to reduce their use from a currently dominant position in favour of newer, "cooler" services.

In chasing novelty, journalists and academics are in danger of exaggerating the speed that media use is changing (partly, perhaps, because we are among the most intensive media users ourselves). But before we focus our attention on Snapchat, Twitter or Instagram, let's pay a bit more attention to the fifth of the UK population that does not use the internet at all – including 61% of over those 65 and older – and the majority of the UK public who are not on any kind of social network.

More information: Read the report: www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2013-12-facebook-isnt-dead-dodgy-journalism.html

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