

Facebook isn't dying but it needs to evolve more

January 29 2014, by Patrick Kelly



Facebook has changed much since the early days but it needs to do more. Credit: Flickr/niallkennedy

Researchers John Cannarella and Joshua Spechler from Princeton University made headlines last week when [they predicted](#) that Mark Zuckerberg's almighty Facebook would shed 80% of its users by 2017.

The study follows [reports](#) that more than 11 million young people have left the social media giant since 2011.

Facebook uncool?

Apparently parents have spoiled the fun, making the social network "uncool". These revelations seem disastrous for Facebook, especially when one considers the way Cannarella and Spechler, who are mechanical and aerospace engineering academics, equated the rise and fall of Zuckerberg's empire to that of a disease.

(Check out Facebook's [blistering comeback](#).)

Nevertheless, debate has been rampant in the past week as to how valid these claims are: will the great and all-powerful Facebook burn out in just a few short years?

Contributing factors to the notion that users are abandoning the site are most certainly people's concerns over privacy and advertising. This is not surprising at all.

As the internet progresses from a Web 2.0, driven by communication between its users, to a Web 3.0, which will be driven by cooperation with the system itself, we are increasingly foregoing the control we once had over our machines and our online selves.

We are told by experts such as artificial intelligence guru [Ray Kurzweil](#) that the more we use systems like Facebook, the more these systems will learn about us, thereby enhancing our own personal online experiences.

Tailored ads and privacy

Such automation means that we are starting to see advertising directed in a more sophisticated way, taking into account what we already "like" when we're online. For instance, the more you "like" engagement announcements and wedding photos, the more ads you'll see telling you where to buy wedding dresses online.

For some, this is a good thing. If we are going to be bombarded by advertising, why not make it advertising that is in line with our interests? For others, it feels like an invasion of privacy, where one cannot shake the feeling that their every move is being watched.

This feeling has only increased during the US National Security Agency ([NSA](#)) surveillance disclosures. In a recent update, Facebook even announced its [new right to read](#) Multimedia Messaging Service (MMS) messages on its users' mobile devices.

Add to these insecurities the forthcoming auto-play, full screen [video advertisements](#) that Facebook will use on mobile devices and we are starting to get an idea of how these revelations of the network's demise came about. What began as an innovative way to connect with friends, family and colleagues seems to be flying too close to the sun.

Beyond advertising and privacy concerns is what Facebook is doing to our everyday behaviour and demeanour. The University of Michigan recently found through a [study](#) that

the more people used Facebook at one time point, the worse they felt the next time we text-messaged them; the more they used Facebook over two-weeks, the more their life satisfaction levels declined over time.

Put simply, Facebook is making us sad. The only way to avoid this sadness, apparently, is to keep the social network out of our lives.

It all sounds rather dire. Why would we continue using a platform that seems to only use us for ad revenue and in return gives us the gift of depression? Maybe Cannarella and Spechler were right in equating Facebook to a disease.

One argument in favour of Facebook's survival is that, while the Western

world is starting to opt out, more and more users are emerging in [Asia and Africa](#) as access to technology grows in these regions.

Last week, Bill Gates pointed to the [benefits](#) of the digital revolution in areas currently affected by poverty, saying that such developments will help countries to "learn from their most productive neighbours and benefit from innovations".

Such regions will develop quickly, partly as a result of the adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as Facebook, and this is a major area where Zuckerberg and his colleagues could do some good.

Not dead yet

It seems, then, that Facebook might not be going away any time soon. While its saturation of the Western world might be dropping, its presence is expanding in the East.

As we head towards Web 3.0, however, Facebook must engage with the best characteristic of new technology:

- It must find a way to use automation to the advantage of us all
- It must overcome the challenge of making us feel comfortable with a lack of privacy
- It must be there when we need it, but stay out of our lives the rest of the time, thereby making us feel better about our own lives
- It must invest in the wellbeing and future of citizens in developing nations
- It must not force-feed us advertisements
- It must act as both a safe and fun environment for parents and children alike
- It must evolve with developments in technology, while also

meeting the wants and needs of its users.

Only then will it ensure its own future. That sounds pretty easy, doesn't it?

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