

Cambridge Analytica scandal—Facebook's user engagement and trust decline

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Facebook has been hit with the biggest trauma in the company's 14-year history in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, but it's far from dead – as a public utility it is as relevant as ever.

While space baron Elon Musk may have made the social network's boss Mark Zuckerberg wince with his laconic "what's Facebook?" [tweet](#) as he [removed his SpaceX and Tesla brands](#) from the site, reports of Facebook's death are premature.

It's popular to say that "[Facebook is just for the oldies now](#)". And Zuckerberg's purchase of [Instagram](#) and [WhatsApp](#) and his [failed attempt to buy Snapchat](#) for US\$3 billion demonstrates how Facebook has – for years – been pursuing more engagement from younger people.

But the real picture is more complicated than a simple ageing market.

Evidence suggests that plenty of [young people](#) are still using Facebook – which claims to have [1.4 billion active daily users](#). According to [Pew Research](#), 88% of Americans aged between 18 and 29 have a Facebook account, far more than Instagram's 59% or Twitter's 36%. It also beats Snapchat and Wickr, which between them are used by 56% of young people in the US. And 18 to 29-year-olds don't just have Facebook accounts: 49% of them check the site or app when they wake up. It remains, by a long distance, the most popular social network overall: 79% of online adult Americans hold accounts, and three quarters of these users check it in every day.

But as the numbers also show, Facebook is no longer the only player. Young people in particular have little loyalty, typically holding accounts on at least two other networks. And now other services are available, the way they use Facebook has changed.

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Facebook used to be the place for in-jokes, flirtations, hot gossip, pokes. It was [developed by Zuckerberg and three co-founders](#) on a campus at

Harvard, and it felt like it. I was working at a British university when Facebook first rolled out beyond the US. I once horrified an entire lecture theatre by Googling a couple of student names on the big screen in 2008, to prove what they were doing was more public than they thought.

But there's no need for shock tactics now. Young people know their future employers, parents and grandparents are present online, and so they behave accordingly. And it's not only older people that affect behaviour.

My [research](#) shows young people dislike the way Facebook ties them into a fixed self. Facebook insists on real names and links different areas of a person's life, carrying over from school to university to work. This arguably restricts the freedom to explore new identities – one of the key benefits of the web.

The desire for escapable transience over damning permanence has driven Snapchat's success, precisely because it's a messaging app that allows users to capture videos and pictures that are quickly removed from the service.

Meanwhile, Facebook's user engagement has fallen through the floor. After a conservative decline, it [dropped significantly by almost a third](#) between 2015 and 2016, research shows. This matters because user posts drive about six times more engagement than public posts made by companies on Facebook. In that same period comments, "likes" and shares on the network also fell by a third.

Other [researchers](#) have found a similar trend.

The drop in user engagement – even before the Cambridge Analytica scandal, in which it was alleged that the British company had [harvested](#)

[the data of 50m Facebook profiles](#) to try to manipulate election campaigns – is clearly bad news for the multi-billion dollar business. In the past few years, Facebook has routinely played around with its algorithm to improve engagement by prioritising video, or people over pages and more recently it began testing ["trusted sources"](#).

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Zuckerberg has [said](#) that it was better for users to connect with friends and family than to passively consume content. But the tweaks are also an effort to make Facebook matter on a personal level again, by rewarding people who drive engagement.

However, it's worth noting that trust in Facebook has waned – so improving user engagement could continue to be problematic. According to a recent [Reuters/Ipsos online poll](#), carried out after the Cambridge Analytica scandal struck, only 41% of Americans trust Facebook to abide by privacy laws.

Mingling in social networks

Meanwhile, different social networks continue to pop up. The latest is [Vero](#), which [claims](#) not to use algorithms to promote content, instead serving up a simple timeline. It has copied Facebook's divisions of friends into varying degrees of intimacy, but appears to have made selective sharing of content much easier than Facebook's notoriously complex privacy settings.

It makes money from affiliate sales on the site and it's highly likely that Vero will bring in a subscription charge. It has no adverts and promises never to sell a user's data. There's also an [outright ban on content](#) that is racist, invasive, physically or mentally harmful, "threatening, profane,

obscene or otherwise objectionable".

But Facebook isn't over yet – it's ubiquity means we can find almost everyone there, which makes it a handy replacement for the phone book, trade directories and large chunks of the postal service. Facebook groups also create a real sense of community and build relationships. And Facebook is also a huge content referral agency, in which advertisers are its customers.

So despite a decline in engagement and Musk and others switching off in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, its huge userbase means there's plenty to keep Facebook going for a long time because it's very successful in its true business as a data broker.

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