Facebook: A community like no other. Should you leave it?

March 21 2018, by Ted Anthony

In this June 7, 2013, file photo, the Facebook "like" symbol is on display on a sign outside the company's headquarters in Menlo Park, Calif. On a day when our virtual friends wrung their virtual hands about whether to leave Facebook, a thoroughly 21st-century conundrum was hammered home: When your community is a big business, and when a company's business is your community, things can get messy. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File)

Sure. Take that quiz about which hair-metal band is your spirit animal. Share a few snaps of your toddler at the beach and watch the likes pile

up. Comment on that pointed political opinion from the classmate you haven't seen since the Reagan administration.

Just remember that your familiar, comforting online neighborhood—the people you care about most and those you only kinda like—exists entirely on a corporate planet that's endlessly ravenous to know more about you and yours.

On a day when our virtual friends wrung their virtual hands about whether to leave Facebook, a thoroughly 21st-century conundrum was hammered home: When your community is a big business, and when a company's biggest business is your community, things can get very messy.

You saw that all day Tuesday as users watched the saga of Cambridge Analytica unfold and contemplated whether the chance that they had been manipulated again—that their data might have been used to influence an election—was, finally, reason enough to bid Facebook goodbye.

Not an easy choice. After all, how would Mom see photos of the kids?

"Part of me wants Facebook to go down over the Cambridge Analytica scandal but the other part of me has no other way to know when any of my friends or family have a birthday," Chicago Tribune humorist Rex Huppke tweeted Tuesday—and cross-posted on Facebook.

Facebook, which began as a social network for college students and the academic community, has experienced exodus before, albeit usually more gradually.

Young people have edged away from it in favor of other platforms such as Snapchat, WhatsApp and Instagram (the latter two are owned by

Facebook now), and many maintain a presence but use it rarely. Internationally, while Facebook remains widespread, insurgent social networks built around messaging, such as Line in Japan and Thailand, WeChat in China and KakaoTalk in South Korea, have supplanted it.

But as the granddaddy of the major social networks, Facebook boasts more than 2.2 billion users—nearly 30 percent of the world's population, a community vastly larger than any nation. That's an irresistible target for advertisers and, it turns out, for people who want to do some sketchy things with data and even influence elections.

And for users, anyplace brimming with lots and lots of interesting people is often—just by virtue of that fact—the place to be.

But when you really think about it, what, precisely, IS that place?

Most of us, as end users, interact with Facebook as the global equivalent of a neighborhood or a town square—Mayberry meets Bedford Falls from "It's A Wonderful Life," but with the miles that separate so many of us compressed to mere inches.

Friends stop by to chat and catch up. They show us some photos, catch up with our lives and move on. Sometimes you'll overhear neighbors talking about something and you'll wander over to chime in. You know some people better than others, some barely at all. Some are looking for approval. Some want to pick a fight. Some just want to play a game on the green and move on.

Trouble is, what in the real world is legit social interaction with few strings attached becomes, in the virtual one, an intricate and heavily mediated transaction.

Or, put another way, the community itself is authentic, but the town

square is rigged with booby traps and there's no mayor or police patrolling on our behalf.

"When we go to, say, a party, the analog parameters that define the social space in which we're celebrating the community are visible. You know who's there and what the outcomes of your interactions are," says John Drew, who teaches digital media at Adelphi University in Garden City, New York.

Facebook, he says, "created a system that's inherently social—your friends are there posting—but while you're doing that posting and looking at other people's posts, they have been building an advertising empire," he says. "The people who are throwing the party—that's Facebook. And they're controlling the rules."

On Tuesday, angst was popping up all over as people discussed the virtues and drawbacks of leaving Facebooktown forever.

One common response to people who said they might go: Don't—how will I see your kids growing up? Other would-be exiters wondered how they'd keep track of THEIR kids if they quit. Still others expressed the perennial wish of Facebook users when confronted with contentious debate: Can't we all just post nice things and stay away from politics?

And finally, the payoff question: Will Facebook even LET me quit? (Yes, but they don't make it particularly easy.)

The doubt is entirely understandable.

This is—in America, at least—an era where the pillars of community have crumbled. Polls show Americans trust institutions less and less. Membership in unions and civic organizations—longtime community glue—is also sharply down, and job transfers and increased mobility can

cleave in-person friendships like never before.

Is it any wonder, then, that so many people covet the bonds of community—even virtual community—and the reinforcement that accompanies them? Is it a surprise that people struggle about whether to give up this fixture of their lives that, yes, features some unpleasantly aggressive tentacles but also serves up the miniature dopamine rushes of approval from those we care about? Isn't that, in essence, one of community's key functions?

"One of the reasons Facebook is so popular is that it feels to people like it's free. They have no sense that they're giving anything up, or what they're giving up," says George Loewenstein, a behavioral economist and the Herbert A. Simon professor of economics and psychology at Carnegie Mellon University.

"Generally, people detest the feeling of being a sucker. They detest the idea that someone else has taken advantage of them. But so far, it's too intangible to people," he says. "If we had a beer and someone took it away from us, we'd be very upset. But if it's information, people get a whole lot less upset."

We're only a quarter century into the internet, really. We may not yet be wired for the conditional communities that something like Facebook offers—a community like no other in history.

The notion of being handed a multimedia pass to all your friends, wherever they might be, for free, holds immense appeal—even if "free" turns out to mean "we're watching you and making money and maybe pulling some of your psychological chains to our own ends."

The question that faces all of us who contemplate our Facebook departures comes down to this in the end: Is rejecting this particular

corporation important enough to you to reject the community that it serves up? How much are your "friends" worth?

Also: Def Leppard is your spirit animal. Carry on.

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