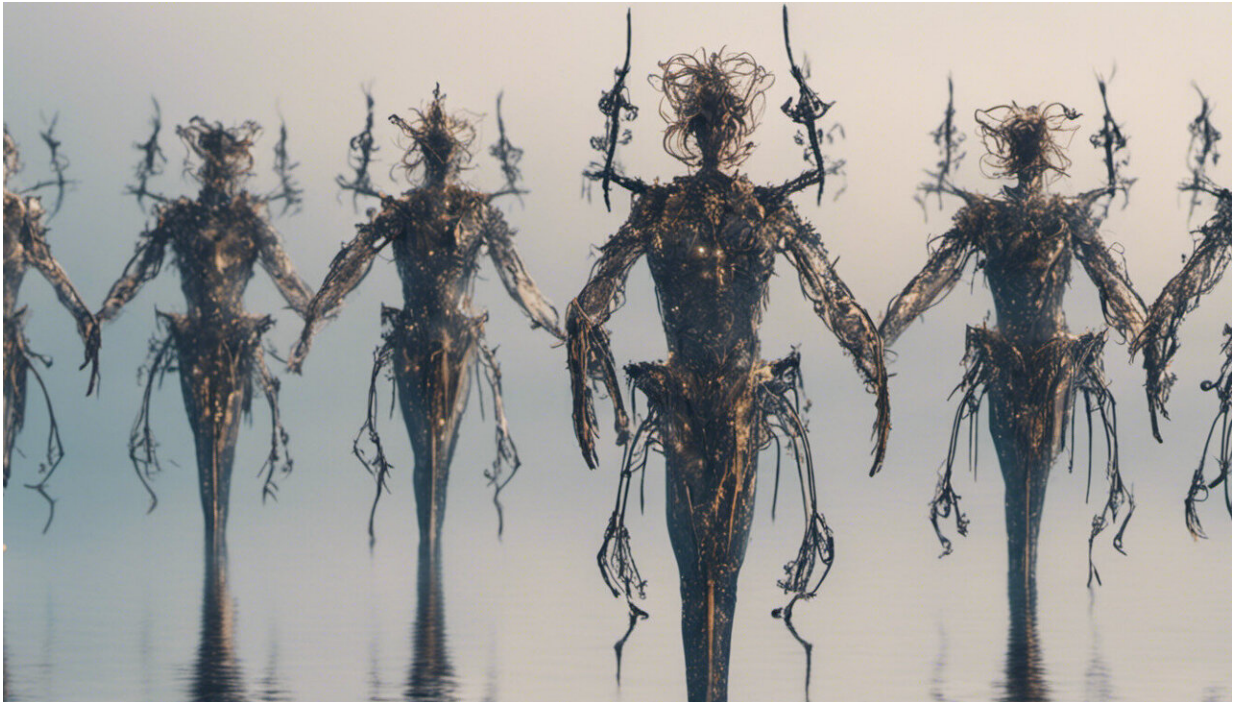


# How Facebook went from friend to frenemy

January 30 2019, by Elizabeth Stoycheff

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

As Facebook celebrates 15 years of virtual friendship, social science has compiled an [expansive body of research](#) that documents the public's love-hate relationship with its best frenemy.

What many once viewed as a confidant has devolved into a messy codependence, mired by ambiguity and [mistrust](#). It's a relationship that's both taken for granted, yet extremely high-maintenance, leaving users to

wonder whether they should just move on with healthier friends.

But it wasn't always like this.

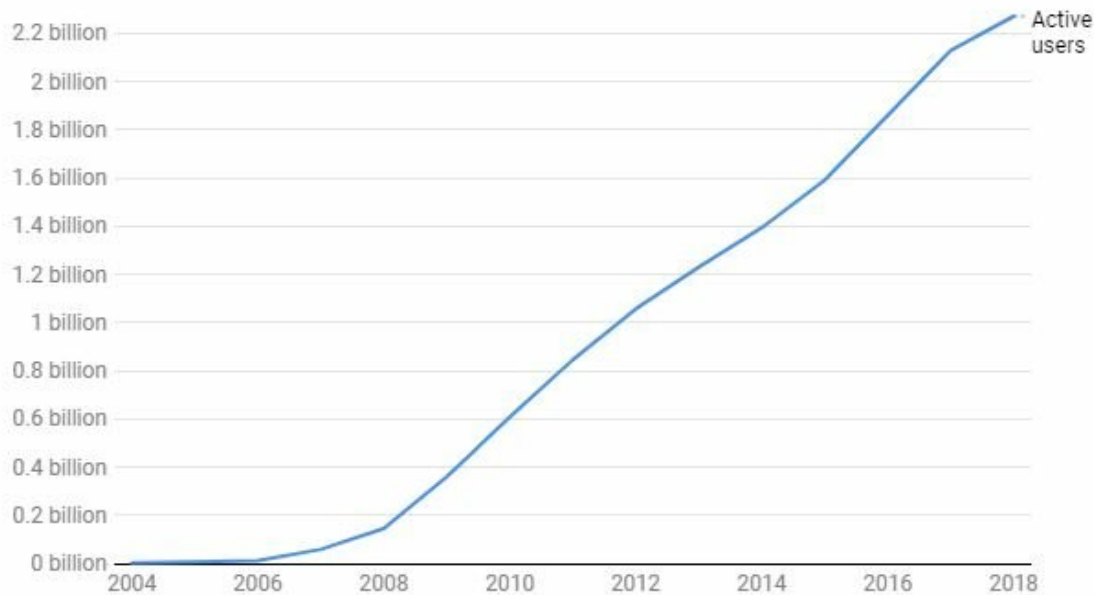
## **Friendly beginnings**

At its launch, Facebook was one of the most authentic social networking partners. Existing online networks, like MySpace, had [influential parent companies](#) that chaperoned their platforms, pestering users with ads and gimmicks. But Facebook promised something different: a genuine connection. It was an unexploited social space to live your best life – well before anyone hashbragged it.

Still today, a friendship with Facebook comes with plenty of perks. Most importantly, it is the friend who brings everyone together. Participating in this community is shown to [strengthen relationships](#) between close friends and casual acquaintances. Individuals can bond over community causes, shared identities and amusing videos. Facebook has been credited for helping organize coalitions that [took down dictators](#) and [raised millions to fight disease](#).

## Facebook's growth

More people have joined Facebook every year since its founding.



2018 data is for September; all other years' data is from December. Credit: The Conversation

Adding to Facebook's popularity, it lets users carefully curate a public image, [emphasizing the best parts of their lives](#). The site has become a central source not only for information about one another, but also the world. Social sharing is up, such that [two-thirds of U.S. Facebook users report consuming news on the platform](#).

Academics friended Facebook, too. I led a study revealing that it is [the most researched subject](#) in the field of information and communication technology since 2005. This focus has led to advances in understanding [online interactions](#), [digital activism](#) and [human psychology](#).

## Undermining trust

But Facebook's stunning success has now [come at the expense](#) of the privacy of its virtual friends. Its "[we sell ads](#)" business model [may sound benign](#), but the platform [collects more data and information](#) about users than they may consciously [know about themselves](#).

By sharing users' data, [enabling disinformation campaigns](#) and election interference, Facebook has revealed its allegiances – and they don't involve protecting users. Carelessness, or what increasingly looks like intentional abuse, of user data has made it difficult to trust the platform with people's most intimate relationships.

These scandals have consequences. Research finds that users can be [emotionally manipulated](#) by changes to Facebook's algorithm. This has made the public more [politically polarized](#) and [less likely to share minority views](#) – implications that may derail democracy.

### Americans' changing relationship with Facebook

Between 2017 and 2018, more than half of U.S. adults who use Facebook changed their privacy settings on the social media site. Four in 10 took an extended break from using the site, and 1 in 4 deleted the app from their smartphone. Overall, nearly three-quarters made a significant change in how they use Facebook.



Credit: The Conversation

Algorithms that foster day-to-day social comparison have also taken a toll on mental health. Recent research convincingly shows that Facebook use [dampens individuals' happiness](#) – both immediately and over the long term. Using Facebook has been linked to depression and so many other negative psychological outcomes that it inspired a [summary report](#) of 56 studies on the topic.

## **Frenemies for now**

Despite widespread calls to #DeleteFacebook in 2018, most users have maintained their profiles. Why? Because abstaining from Facebook means giving up a network that has social currency and value. The site boasts [2.2 billion users](#), nearly 30 percent of the global population. [As members of Congress recently pointed out](#), Facebook has few market competitors, meaning it serves as a primary, if not the only, way for large groups to connect. It holds users together (or sometimes hostage) by maintaining relationships with all their friends.

For those who prefer Instagram or WhatsApp, know that Facebook owns those too, and is working to [consolidate the technology behind them](#). Even people with the willpower to de-friend Facebook will [still find their data swept up](#) in content that others add to the platform and its affiliates. It's nearly impossible to escape Facebook's orbit.

In advance of its anniversary this month, Facebook attempted to restore fond memories by encouraging users to reminisce with the [#10YearChallenge](#). The award for biggest transformation goes to Facebook itself – from altruistic friend to cagey frenemy.

Recapturing the public's trust will require significant changes. Options for unaltered news feeds, transparent advertising, and user control of data and metadata would be good places to start. But currently, it's unclear whether Facebook will make these changes to salvage its billions

of friendships.

In the meantime, most of Facebook's friends are [updating their privacy settings](#) and just trying to coexist.

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