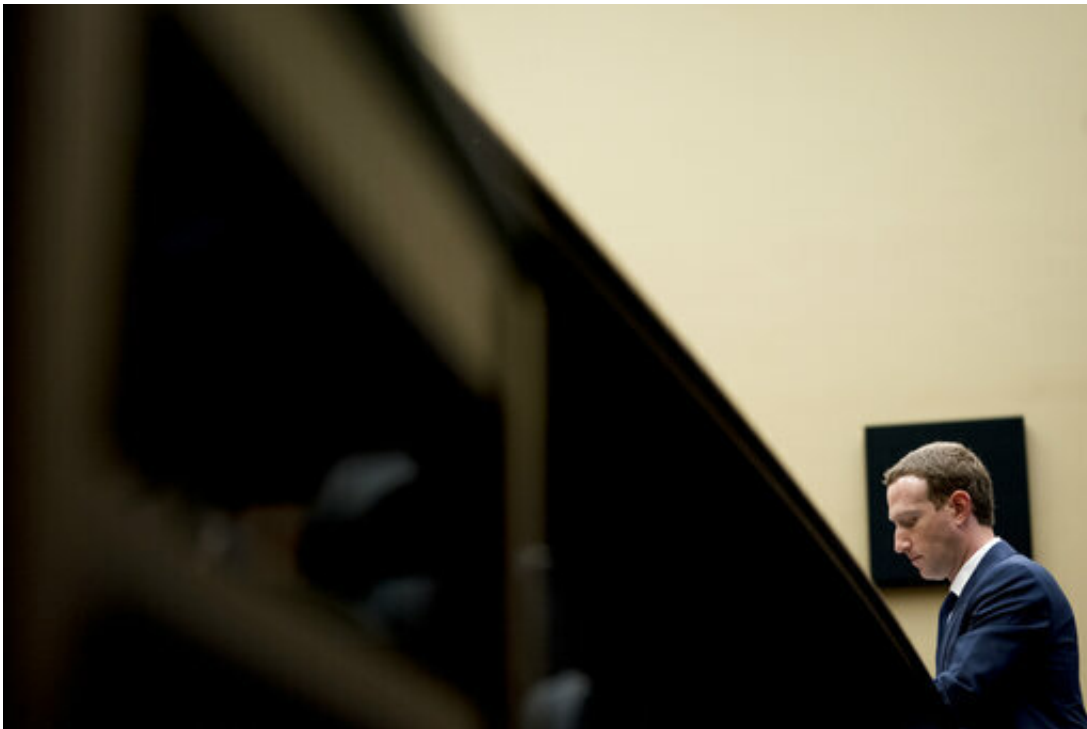


Can Zuckerberg really make a privacy-friendly Facebook?

March 7 2019, by Michael Liedtke



In this April 11, 2018, file photo Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg pauses while testifying before a House Energy and Commerce hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington. Zuckerberg laid out a new "privacy-focused" vision for social networking on Wednesday, March 6, 2019. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik, File)

After building a social network that turned into a surveillance system, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg says he's shifting his company's focus to messaging services designed to serve as fortresses of privacy.

Instead of just being the network that connects everyone, Facebook wants to encourage small groups of people to carry on encrypted conversations that neither Facebook nor any other outsider can read. It also plans to let messages automatically disappear, a feature pioneered by its rival Snapchat that could limit the risks posed by a trail of social media posts that follow people throughout their lives.

It's a major bet by Zuckerberg, who sees it as a way to push Facebook more firmly into a messaging market that's growing faster than its main [social networking](#) business. It might also help Facebook ward off government regulators, although the Facebook CEO made clear that he expects the company's messaging business to complement, not replace, its core businesses.

But there are plenty of obstacles. Facebook has weathered more than two years of turbulence for repeated privacy lapses, spreading disinformation, allowing Russian agents to conduct targeted propaganda campaigns and a rising tide of hate speech and abuse. Zuckerberg submitted to two days of grilling on Capitol Hill last April. All that increases the challenge of convincing users that Facebook really means it about privacy this time.



In this May 1, 2018, file photo, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg makes the keynote speech at F8, Facebook's developer conference in San Jose, Calif. Zuckerberg laid out a new "privacy-focused" vision for social networking on Wednesday, March 6, 2019. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File)

Encrypted conversations could alleviate some of those problems, but it could make others worse. Security is an "admirable goal," said Forrester Research analyst Fatemeh Khatibloo. "I'm just not sure it addresses the bigger issues Facebook is facing right now."

Facebook grew into a colossus by vacuuming up people's information in every possible way and dissecting it to shoot targeted ads back at them. Anything that jeopardizes that machine could pose a major threat to the company's [share price](#), which would also affect its ability to attract and retain talented engineers and other employees.

In a Wednesday interview with The Associated Press, Zuckerberg

predicted Facebook's emphasis on privacy will do more to help the company's business than hurt it. While most of the [stock market](#) slipped in Wednesday trading, Facebook's shares gained \$1.25 to close at \$172.51.

The Facebook CEO has been telegraphing some of these changes to investors for the past six months, but his Wednesday blog post is the first time he has explained the idea to the more than two billion people that use Facebook's services and look at its ads. Those ads are expected to generate \$67 billion in revenue this year, according to the research firm eMarketer.



In this Jan. 9, 2019, file photo, a man checks his phone inside Facebook's new 130,000-square-foot offices, which occupy the top three floors of a 10-story Cambridge, Mass. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg laid out a new "privacy-focused" vision for social networking on Wednesday, March 6. He is promising to transform Facebook from a company known for devouring the personal

information shared by its users to one that gives people more ways to communicate in truly private fashion, with their intimate thoughts and pictures shielded by encryption in ways that Facebook itself can't read. (AP Photo/Elise Amendola, File)

If everything falls into place, Facebook will also display similar advertising on the privacy-protected messaging services. Those services are also likely to offer other moneymaking features, such as a digital wallet, as Facebook attempts to build something similar to Tencent's popular WeChat service in Asia.

"If you think about your life, you probably spend more time communicating privately than publicly," Zuckerberg said during the AP interview. "The overall opportunity here is a lot larger than what we have built in terms of Facebook and Instagram."

That's far from proven. While Facebook has already tried to show ads in the Messenger app, it's seen only limited success. It hasn't even tested the concept in WhatsApp since it acquired that service for \$22 billion in 2014.

"There are some huge unknowns about how successful Facebook is going to be rolling advertising into a more private messaging environment," said eMarketer analyst Debra Aho Williamson.



In this April 10, 2018, file photo, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg testifies before a joint hearing of the Commerce and Judiciary Committees on Capitol Hill in Washington, about the use of Facebook data to target American voters in the 2016 election. Zuckerberg said Facebook will start to emphasize new privacy-shielding messaging services, a shift apparently intended to blunt both criticism of the company's data handling and potential antitrust action. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik, File)

Some critics are convinced that Facebook has become so powerful—even a threat to democracy as well as to people's privacy—that it needs to be reined in by tougher regulations or even a corporate breakup.

But unraveling Facebook could become more difficult if Zuckerberg can successfully stitch together the messaging services behind an encrypted wall.

"I see that as the goal of this entire thing," said Blake Reid, a University of Colorado law professor who specializes in technology and policy. He said Facebook could tell antitrust authorities that WhatsApp, Instagram Direct and Facebook Messenger are tied so tightly together that it couldn't unwind them.

Combining the three services also lets Facebook build more complete data profiles on all of its users. Already, businesses can already target Facebook and Instagram users with the same ads, and marketing campaigns are likely coming to WhatsApp eventually.



In this April 11, 2018, photo, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg listens to a question as he testifies before a House Energy and Commerce hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington, about the use of Facebook data to target American voters in the 2016 election and data privacy. Zuckerberg said Facebook will start to emphasize new privacy-shielding messaging services, a shift apparently intended

to blunt both criticism of the company's data handling and potential antitrust action. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

Facebook's focus on messaging privacy raises other concerns. Messaging apps have in the past helped fake news and rumors spread fast, sometimes with deadly consequences. A report from University of Oxford researchers last year found evidence of widespread disinformation campaigns on chat applications like WhatsApp. In one particularly brutal example, the Indian government last year accused WhatsApp of fueling rumors that led to lynchings and mob violence that wounded dozens.

Facebook responded by restricting the number of groups to which a message could be forwarded and labeling forwarded messages as such. On Wednesday, Zuckerberg said that Facebook needs to protect both privacy and safety as it encrypted messaging services, although he noted to an "inherent trade-off" between security and safety, simply because Facebook won't be able to read encrypted conversations.

And in some cases, Facebook could allow some content to automatically disappear in a day or two, as if it were a fleeting mirage.

"Some people want to store their messages forever and some people think having large collections of photos or [messages](#) is a liability as much as it is an asset," Zuckerberg told the AP. "Figuring out the balance is a really important one."

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