

## Q&A: To like or not to like—Facebook at 20

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Those who are old enough might remember when "The Facebook" was a more exclusive club—one where only American college kids could post raucous party pix, browse through a crush's public photo albums or track

down childhood friends with a few clicks. Twenty years after the social media juggernaut's launch, Facebook users can still do all that—except now they're 40% of the world's population.

That massive user base powered the pioneering social media company's evolution from a way to connect with friends to a force in the political world as well: first for organizing against oppressive regimes, but then co-opted as a tool of extremists and trolls to disrupt democratic elections and spread conspiracy theories.

Despite its diminished popularity and reputation in the United States—it lost daily users for the first time in late 2021—Facebook remains a formidable global influence. As of 2023, it had 3 billion monthly active users and nearly a billion more across parent company Meta's other platforms, which include WhatsApp, Instagram, Messenger and Threads.

As Facebook turns 20 on Feb. 4, information studies Assistant Professor Cody Buntain, an expert on how people use social media during crises and [political unrest](#), spoke to Maryland Today about how the website transformed our societal interactions while squandering its potential as a force for positive change—and how more transparency could help it find a way back.

## **What was the internet landscape like in 2004, and what made Facebook stand out?**

It was a much less interactive place. Some news sites had rapidly updated pages, but most didn't. There was no reason to go to the same site later that day, or even a few days later. Facebook was one of the early movers where you could go and see what people were posting very quickly. There was a clear social element that wasn't available before: You didn't have to directly engage with someone to see what they were talking

about or doing. It lowered the barrier for connection in many ways.

## **What has been its global impact?**

As Facebook extended beyond the borders of the United States, Canada, Western Europe, it filled the same sort of niche: social connection. But as it grew into developing nations, you see a blurring of the lines between Facebook and the (broader) internet. For example, in countries like India or Myanmar, or throughout Latin America, the company would subsidize the rollout of internet infrastructure to villages, or pay mobile phone providers so users could access Facebook without being subject to data limitations; then you're incentivized to check it first for news or buy a product. It becomes your window to the world.

## **Since the 2016 election, Facebook's reputation has taken a hit, at least in the United States. What has been Facebook's trajectory over its history?**

From around 2005 to 2008, after it opened to the general public, it became more and more popular. Then around 2008, the major media elite and politicians start to use it, realizing its power. Around 2011, the Arab Spring happens, and you see it become a tool of the masses to push back against power. There was a motto at the time: We use YouTube to broadcast the revolution, Facebook to organize it and Twitter to share it.

But by 2014, we start to see social media isn't the beacon of liberalization it might be. The countries that experienced uprisings generally didn't come out well in the end. And in the U.S., you start to see divisiveness in the online political space. One of the values that social media provides is that people who need social support, who are marginalized, can find it. But it also allows people on the political extremes to find their brethren. By 2016, it's clear that platforms,

including Facebook, are being used by active foreign nations, like the Russians, to influence the U.S. presidential election. It's a bellwether moment.

## **Has Facebook lost influence in recent years?**

Since the mid-2010s, there's been a proliferation of other platforms, from Snapchat to Instagram to Reddit, and younger users are choosing those. As Facebook grew, people became more concerned about privacy. In 2005, if you post a picture of your friends doing something stupid in college, nobody cares, but in 2015, your employer is potentially looking at it. People are opting for less public conversations.

If you look at advertising or internationally, Facebook—now Meta—is still a major influence. It has acquired other platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp, so it continues to have major financial value in terms of advertising. And internationally, the number of users continues to grow, including during COVID.

## **What is Facebook's legacy at 20?**

It's a technology that we thought would be extremely valuable and powerful and positive for society, but has turned out to very much not be that. There are benefits: It's empowered grassroots movements, given non-incumbent politicians a way to build an audience, and has become really important during disasters to help people prepare and to tell their friends they are safe. But since around 2015, Facebook has been actively used to propagate extreme partisan ideals has become an exposure on-ramp for extremely racist groups.

One big problem is that Facebook doesn't allow researchers access to its data. Right now, for every neo-Nazi or superfascist private group, there

could be a group for parents of young trans kids in Texas just trying to survive. We just have no idea what it looks like. Society needs to have a conversation about what our technology should be doing for us and the types of regulations needed. But it's unclear if there's political will in the halls of Congress or the boardroom of Meta to do that. The EU recently passed a law requiring platforms with more than 500,000 monthly users to open their data to researchers, so we'll see what Facebook is willing to do to maintain relevance in a huge market.

Provided by University of Maryland

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