



The Facebook Phenomenon

As everyone knows, Mark Zuckerberg, the 26-year-old originator of Facebook, was chosen by Time magazine to be its 2010 Person of the Year. The reason is obvious. In 2004, when he was a 19-year-old sophomore at Harvard, he created a social network on the Internet to give college students a means of keeping in touch with their friends. A simple, collegiate idea.



But what neither he nor anyone else suspected was that this electronic means of keeping in touch with people would develop, in only seven years, into a single worldwide social network embracing 500 million members, a twelfth of the entire human race. Indeed, it is now being called a “social utility,” permitting people worldwide to post an unlimited number of photos and information they wish to disseminate among friends all over the world.

Zuckerberg’s genius is not in some original grandiose vision to change the world. His genius is in his technical ability to use the computer to make all of this benign electronic networking possible. He is, in short, a programming genius. Born in 1984 and brought up in Dobbs Ferry, New York, in a family of professionals (father a dentist, mother a psychologist), he began writing computer programs before he was even a teenager. At the age of 12 he created a program for the family home called ZuckNet. He also wrote computer games. He attended the local high school and then went on to Phillips Exeter Academy, the prestigious prep school in New Hampshire. There he became interested in fencing and classical literature.

He then entered Harvard, where he majored in psychology and computer science. Being gregarious, highly social, and a practical joker, he created a website called Facemash where Harvard students could compare the relative attractiveness of their peers. He started Facebook with a more practical purpose in mind: a friendly place on the web where old school chums could keep track of one another over the years.

As an 84-year-old senior citizen, I lost track of my high school and college pals a long time ago. So I can see the practical value of Facebook and why Zuckerberg and his associates created it. In trying to explain the philosophy behind Facebook, Zuckerberg told *Time’s* reporter: “We’re trying to map out what exists in the world. In the world there’s trust. I think as humans we fundamentally parse the world through the people and relationships we have around us. So at its core, what we’re trying to do is map out all of those trust relationships, which you can call, colloquially, most of the time, friendships.”

Sounds nice, but it’s really a very convoluted way of saying that we all like having friends we can trust. I guess he wants Facebook to serve some sort of higher benevolent purpose by bringing the world’s



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people together.

But not everyone sees it that way. In fact, in June 2010, Deputy Attorney General Muhammad Azhar Sidiqqe of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan launched a criminal investigation into Zuckerberg and his co-founders Dustin Moscovitz and Chris Hughes after a “Draw Muhammad” contest was hosted on Facebook. The investigation also named the anonymous German woman who created the contest.

Sidiqqe asked the country's police to contact Interpol to have Zuckerberg and the three others arrested for blasphemy. On May 19, 2010, Facebook's website was temporarily blocked in Pakistan until Facebook removed the contest from its website at the end of May. Sidiqqe also asked its United Nations representative to raise the issue with the U.N. General Assembly. After all, if Facebook is now considered to be a “utility,” it ought to be regulated like other utilities. But in reality, Facebook is a private company serving private needs.

Of course, Facebook has made Zuckerberg a billionaire, but the money hasn't gone to his head. He is really too young to know what to do with his wealth. And you can be sure that there are a lot of people out there who would like to separate him from some of those shekels.

In fact, that is beginning to happen. According to *Time*, “In July, Zuckerberg went to a conference in Sun Valley, Idaho, where he was seated at dinner with Cory Booker, the mayor of Newark, N. J. It must have been an interesting dinner, because in September, Zuckerberg announced that he would put up \$100 million of his personal Facebook equity to help the Newark school system.

In a statement released by Mayor Booker, Governor Chris Christie of New Jersey, and Mark Zuckerberg, it was announced that a foundation had been established by Zuckerberg — Startup: Education — to “improve Student Success and Champion Great Teachers, Starting with Newark, New Jersey.” The statement also described the problem in Newark's schools:

The Newark Public School District with a student population of more than 40,000, is the largest school system in New Jersey. In 2008-2009, only 40 percent of students could read and write at grade level by the end of third grade, and only 54 percent of high school students graduated and just 38 percent enrolled in college.

But if Mayor Booker really wants to reform education in Newark, he's going to have to get rid of the progressive curriculum that is being used to dumb down Americans and replace it with an academic program based on methods known to develop high literacy.

So it will be interesting to see how Mayor Booker uses that \$100 million. We don't doubt his honest desire to improve his city's schools, but the last thing the schools of Newark need is more money when the money they already have is being so poorly spent. More money will simply buy more educational malpractice, which has become increasingly expensive. What is really needed is a good intensive phonics reading program, instruction in cursive writing, and traditional arithmetic. You don't need \$100 million to buy that!

Apparently, Zuckerberg has a great interest in education. His girlfriend, Pricilla Chan, whom he met at Harvard, taught first grade after graduation. I wonder where she taught and how long she lasted. And I wonder who taught her how to teach reading to first graders.

Time quotes Zuckerberg: “It just strikes me as this huge issue that teaching isn't respected or compensated in our society for the economic value that it's actually probably producing for society.”

Like dumbing down the nation and corrupting American youth with sex ed, drug ed, death ed, and



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multicultural ed.

One cannot blame Zuckerberg for his ignorance about the real state of our public schools. He's surrounded by computer whiz-kids who have spent most of their lives gazing at computer screens and learning how to program games for a largely illiterate population.

Besides, why worry only about what goes on in American schools, when Facebook now covers the globe? In Iceland, 86 percent of the population is on Facebook. In India, 16 million. In Russia, 3 million. In Colombia, 11 million. And it continues to grow. Why? Because people like it, and Zuckerberg has made it possible for them to enjoy the computer as a magical tool of communication and friendship. It has also become a meeting place for groups involved in all sorts of causes.

One of the problems Facebook has had to deal with is the issue of privacy. Some people believe that everything they post on Facebook should be restricted to just personal friends. But since most of the information posted on Facebook is not private, it has become tremendously valuable to advertisers anxious to target specific groups with their products and services. And since posting on Facebook is free, the only way Facebook can make money is by attracting advertisers. However, some private information has somehow been made public. Facebook says it's because of some technical glitch.

But one wonders why anyone would post anything on Facebook they didn't want the world to know. For example, there is the story of one young Los Angeles marketer who posted over 500 photographs of herself on Facebook and was annoyed when some of the information she posted became public. I suppose she expected Facebook to become her own private photo album accessible only to friends and relatives. In this day and age of the Internet, privacy is a thing of the past.

Recently, I discovered that my niece and her husband are making very good use of Facebook as a site to display a whole bunch of colorful family photographs with their newborn son. Now they don't have to email the photos or send them through snail mail. All I and their friends have to do is get to their site on Facebook. Indeed, Facebook now hosts over 15 billion photos. And, of course, even I joined Facebook and have received birthday greetings from friends. Had my date of birth been kept private, I would probably have received no birthday greetings.

The Facebook phenomenon is one of the technological wonders of the computer age, which seems to have no boundaries to its development. YouTube was started by two computer geeks who wanted an easy way to exchange videos on the Internet so that their friends could see them. Now the whole world is on YouTube and it has become the world's new media of record.

Facebook started as a website for students. And now the universe is climbing on board. Why? Because it's easy, it's free, and can be economically useful and a lot of fun. In fact, Facebook can be a liberating force where anyone can state their case and get a hearing. Which is why governments may want to crack down on it. In any case, the future looks bright for Facebook and Zuckerberg. And, as *Time* comments, "he's just getting started."

But now an amazing new phenomenon has arisen involving the social networks. They are being used to help organize revolution in authoritarian countries. They have become dynamic vehicles of communication, expanding the concept of freedom across the globe. But we have yet to see how all of this will develop. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were created for a free people. But the world is now using them, hopefully to advance the benign ideals of the West.



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