



Book Review:

Read, R. (2013). *Delete Me: An Argument Against Facebook*. Publisher: Author.

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Delete Me is an interesting collection of research, observation and argument where Ronald Read attempts to pull back the curtain to reveal who really runs Facebook and what purpose the current and undisputed king of social media serves. Facebook was influenced by earlier social media efforts like Friendster and MySpace. But as Read asserts, Facebook has 1.3 billion users because the services it provides are addictive and easy to acquire and consume and it is critical for Facebook to maintain this huge user base because it is instrumental in attracting more users and it is the increasing information available on this increasing user base that Facebook sells to advertisers and intelligence gathers. Access to Facebook is available at no monetary cost and the interface offers a very shallow learning curve. Facebook has applications that allow access on just about every type of popular communications device imaginable, including smartphones, tablets and personal computers. Facebook offers a variety of communication services that allow its users to communicate with friends and family that might otherwise be difficult through another medium. Facebook was also instrumental in providing a means of open communications in countries where this is heavily sanctioned or banned outright as in Egypt during the Arab Spring uprisings.

Facebook did not get to be worth over \$200 billion by giving anything away and as Read points out Facebook collects an enormous amount of data when a new user account is requested and during the course of using the Facebook website and any related applications. Users perform a kind of sousveillance as they are encouraged by the software to constantly provide additional information about themselves. Facebook also encourages obsession with their website with the goal of gathering information about their user base. As Facebook profits from advertising dollars it sells its massive access to information about its massive user pool to allow advertisers pinpoint accuracy in targeting their advertisements to different

demographics. Membership size is critical to maintaining Facebook and a primary method of keeping users is through addiction by using gamification methods. Gamification is the use of game thinking and game mechanics in non-game contexts to engage users in solving problems and increase users' self-contributions, (Wikipedia, 2015). Instead of just providing information and communication services Facebook encourages use through a rewards systems built around not just through actual games that are hosted through the website but also competition through popularity using things like page view counts, rating systems, number of “Likes”, etc. which allow users to judge each other’s Facebook pages. The result is a competition for more favorable ratings not unlike the mechanisms employed in arcade games that drive users to make more information about themselves available to Facebook.

Facebook also makes great use of peer pressure to not only garner new users in the face of competition whenever there is any but to keep users coming back to the website. Users also need to be concerned about the content of their Facebook account and even of the Facebook friends it attracts as employers have turned to mining Facebook data as part of a job applicant's background check. While some applicants may have been passed over for a Facebook post or even who they have “friended” on the service other employees have lost a job because of viewers that they posted on the service that their employers disagreed with. Facebook's first targeted audience was college students. When a school or other institution succeeds in banning Facebook perhaps because of a competing service or concerns about social media. Facebook often adopts a surround and conquer strategy. Facebook will become accepted by other institutions local to the holdout including their competition. Then students often abandon the holdouts competing services or put pressure on administration to allow Facebook because their friends from outside the university use Facebook. This strategy along with the purchase of startups scales up to the national level with few exceptions. One of these was the Peoples Republic of China where the strong central government successfully banned Facebook over concerns about control over communication and to prevent competition with a government sponsored alternative. In consideration of the growing use of social media and the size of Facebook corporations have become more concerned with developing and maintaining an online image to remain competitive. Facebook provides datasets that are easy to mine for public opinion information about a company, its products or those of a competitor. The size of its membership also means that many corporations cannot afford to avoid Facebook advertisements further funding Facebook.

Like the design of any modern casino to keep users staying longer Facebook makes it hard find the exit and gives visitors plenty of reasons to stay on the way out. Read mentions that Facebook allows frustrated users time to cool off by making it easy to deactivate their account but much harder to delete it. Deactivation tempts the Facebook user into coming back to see what has changed. Read states, that even if a user were to traverse the labyrinth of menus that actually lead to the deletion of an account that Facebook will reactivate the account if the user logs in again with 14 days after reactivation. Actually the current Facebook policy mentions that it could take up to 90 days to process the account deletion request and that details shared with other Facebook users would remain, (Facebook, 2014). Data would continue to be gathered by the use of applications tied to Facebook and even if those were deleted some data collected by these would remain in the service. Facebook's success formula includes more than just applied social engineering. Read points out the Facebook has a knack for market timing, and is more of a product of crass business and financial practices. Facebook has had some controversial financial dealings. An example provided by Read was that during the lead-up to becoming public Facebook with help from Goldman Sachs listed each investor as "Goldman Sachs" obscuring the number of investors the company. This advantage for Facebook was overlooked by the SEC as normally Fortune 500 companies have to go public when they reach 500 investors.

Facebook has also benefitted greatly from shrewd human resources decisions. Facebook has very competitive hiring practices and claims to only hire the best of the best. Read points out that employees often look upon Facebook as only a temporary job as promotions from within are rare as management is often hired from outside of the company. Still, Facebook employee morale is often high as the pay is good and there are many perks. Facebook has made even more shrewd choices about hiring company management. Decisions are not just made regarding competence but connections are important as well. Facebook management is chosen for its connections to the intelligence community and to other large players in Silicon Valley. These choices give Facebook inside information and connections they might not have had were hiring decisions based on merit alone. Read suggested that while Zuckerberg is arguably the father of Facebook that he may not be wholly responsible for developing Facebook into the massive data collection and profit making machine that it has become. Key players in Facebooks survival in the beginning and its current growth have connections that span the financial industry and government fostering the use of Facebook as

an important destination for intelligence gathering and lining up Facebook for profitable access fees. Read points out the Facebook has become part of a network of social media websites that are integral to the Internet of Things (IoT). According to Read the IoT can be seen as a paradigm shift in the way technology collects and stores information. IoT benefits from giant Facebook dataset as a source of data for learning about our habits and behavior and the social media service will be used as part of the mechanism of data sharing between devices. This profiling will offer unprecedented opportunity for government and private sector surveillance.

The title Delete Me is Ronald Reads declaration of war on the abuses of Facebook. It is us or them when it comes to the social media giant. Read states that regulatory agencies have failed to reign in the social media giant and legislators or too slow and uninformed to act so that the only response to Facebook's use of user data is mass exodus. Read makes a compelling argument for Facebook users to demand the right to their own data back from Facebook. Perhaps Read's argument would have been made even stronger if he were to present a counter argument to help the reader evaluate his thesis. Delete Me is a good start for those interested not just history and the workings of Facebook but would also serve students of social engineering and those interested in the commercialization of surveillance.

References,

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