Facebook knows Facebook isn’t the future

Five paragraphs into the monster blog post that Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg published yesterday afternoon, he makes a damning, strangely understated admission: “frankly we don’t currently have a strong reputation for building privacy protective services.”

That one line is the context for the rest of Zuckerberg’s 3,500-word post in which he discusses privacy, messaging, and the future of Facebook. The problem isn’t simply that Facebook has a terrible reputation on privacy. It’s that we’ve come to a point where the company’s leader can take years of growing mistrust and real human damage as a given.

With his latest post, Zuckerberg is trying to redefine Facebook. The Facebook he built over the past 15 years is fundamentally structured around a model of privacy and sharing that we’ve realized is problematic and harmful. People are now demanding privacy and ephemerality, and the Facebook of today, Zuckerberg seems to have concluded, just can’t offer that.

Facebook is unpopular, and ephemeral sharing has won out
To start with the obvious: Facebook is not popular. An Axios Harris poll released yesterday found that the company’s reputation sank substantially over the past year, putting it close to last among the 100 most visible US companies. After years of scandals and a particularly bumpy 2018, Facebook is increasingly synonymous with data breaches, fake news, propaganda, a wanton disregard for privacy, creepy ad-tracking practices, and generally not being a comfortable space to hang out online.

Facebook's overall growth already seemed to be stalling in the US, and a recent report out yesterday said the social network may be losing millions of users. Critically, that's concentrated among younger users from 12 to 34 years old. The ephemeral model pioneered by Snapchat has clearly won out, even if Snapchat itself is struggling. Facebook hasn't entirely failed to embrace these models (it cloned Snapchat's disappearing Stories feature across every property it owns), but they're still the exception rather than the norm.

Writing one blog post, however long, isn't going to suddenly change this. For the most part, Zuckerberg's post is a statement of intent – a signal to users, governments, journalists, and his own employees about where the company plans to focus its efforts. We should stop thinking about Facebook as the Friends list, Likes, and News Feed, he seems to be saying. Instead, we should think of it as a collection of relatively well-liked messaging services: WhatsApp, Instagram, and Messenger.

Zuckerberg describes a new Facebook that deemphasizes the News Feed and its problems

To make that happen, Zuckerberg says Facebook will increasingly refocus around small group messaging, encrypted services, and ephemeral communications. He describes a platform that feels personal, takes your privacy seriously, and isn't in the news for sparking human rights abuses. A platform "where people can be confident what they say to each other stays secure and their messages and content won't stick around forever," Zuckerberg writes. "This is the future I hope we will help bring about."

Zuckerberg describes it almost as though he's building a new Facebook. He refers to this imagined future as a singular "privacy-focused platform," rather than as a series of disparate apps and services. Throughout the note, the current Facebook platform is only ever referred to as a bad example – "many people … have photos from when they were younger that

could be embarrassing" — or when mentioning how this new system will integrate it with better-liked apps.

What goes unstated is that the News Feed — the core of Facebook's success and chaos — seems to be a legacy product in this world. The News Feed has been critical to Facebook: it's where people get updates on friends and where most of the company's advertising revenue comes from. But it's also been responsible for a great deal of Facebook's problems. It's where misinformation spreads, where combative arguments with old acquaintances are sparked, and where publishers big and small compete to game the network. The News Feed is the reason why, even though "only" 1.8 million people followed a Russian propaganda-linked Facebook page, posts by those pages were able to spread to 140 million people.

This more private model has problems of its own

There's no indication that the News Feed, or any other part of Facebook as we know it, is going to disappear. But Zuckerberg is clearly interested in shifting attention away from the News Feed's troubles and toward a more limited model for sharing information. This is roughly what exists on WhatsApp already — a model that, while more private, can still lead to troubling, real-world problems of its own — but it would radically reshape what the company looks like and how it makes money.

We should take this idea with a whole shaker's worth of salt. Zuckerberg has made grand proclamations about the future of Facebook before, and they rarely take shape exactly as he describes them. Five years ago, he was talking about building next-generation computing platforms with virtual reality, something that is still in the works, but with a distinctly smaller vision around it. Privacy features, too, are something Facebook has moved slowly on: its promised "clear history" tool was supposed to arrive in the first half of 2018, but it's now scheduled for sometime later in 2019.

For now, it's evident where Zuckerberg sees things heading. He

sees Facebook as behind the times and playing catch-up. His users have been demanding stricter privacy, more ephemerality, and less invasive services for years. Today’s Facebook doesn’t offer that, and Zuckerberg may finally be ready to try something else.

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