

# Conquering the world, friend by friend

Despite its sympathetic stance, this account of Facebook's dominance raises troubling questions

*The Facebook Effect* by David Kirkpatrick, Simon & Schuster, \$26

Reviewed by Jim Giles



HERE'S one of the scariest passages from *The Facebook Effect*: "In five years there won't be a distinction between being on and off Facebook,"

says a former Facebook employee who claims still to be "deeply involved" with the company. "It will be something that goes with you wherever you are communicating with people."

Facebook's plans for world domination are born of its mission to help people connect and share. It seems to be working. Its 400-million-plus users have an average of 130 friends each. Many websites, including *New Scientist's*, encourage readers to share content on Facebook. Users play games that exist only in Facebook. They send messages within the site rather than using email. Facebook is creating an infrastructure so useful that its customers rarely need to go elsewhere. More than half of its users log in every day.

Should we welcome Facebook's relentless expansion? Mark Zuckerberg, the precocious and intense 26-year-old who built the site during his first year at Harvard University, insists it exists to help people connect and share. It's easy to feel cynical about such pronouncements: Zuckerberg's share of Facebook is worth \$4 billion. But journalist David Kirkpatrick gained exceptional access to Facebook's founder and reports that Zuckerberg consistently puts these goals



JAMES SARDARRIAGA/REUTERS

above short-term profit.

Kirkpatrick's account is convincing and engrossing. What is frustrating, however, is his decision to place Zuckerberg's pureness of ambition at the heart of the story, as if we should take the founder's sincerity as evidence that Facebook is a force for good, rather than question the impact the site has on our lives.

Zuckerberg, for example, is excited that political activists can utilise Facebook to rally support. Kirkpatrick cites a 2009 study showing that membership of political groups on the site encourages political participation in the real world, but he fails to mention that the same study

Thousands demonstrated in Colombia after organising on Facebook

also found that Facebook had no effect on people's political knowledge. Facebook might foster political engagement, but by exposing people only to their friends' ideas it could equally well encourage groupthink.

A more troubling question is whether a private company should be allowed to handle so much of the world's communications. Of course, we already trust private postal firms and telephone companies. But Facebook users are regularly confronted with unwanted changes to the site that many feel expose too much

of their personal information. Facebook describes these updates as steps in its mission for openness, but one can't help noticing that each change is attractive to advertisers, who can use the information to better target their messages.

Facebook also retains control over the content on its site. Pages relating to criticism of pro-Beijing

**"We are wise to question whether a private company should control the world's communications"**

political parties in Hong Kong were allegedly removed without reason this February. Around the same time, the Argentinian author of a satirical book about Facebook is reported to have had his profile removed, as did two others involved in the publication. According to critics, in all these cases Facebook reinstated the pages only after media protests, though the company says that the accounts were disabled in error.

If Kirkpatrick's account of the firm's ethos is accurate, it seems unlikely that the removal of the pages was part of a larger plan to censor criticism or bow to Beijing's will, but in a sense that does not matter. One day Zuckerberg will leave Facebook, and the company's moral compass may shift. Facebook may by then be even more central to our communications. Before that day comes, it would be worth asking whether we want to place a commercial organisation at the heart of our social interactions. ■

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