

OPINION

Murray: In defense of Facebook

By E. Christopher Murray | November 2, 2021



By AllaSerebrina



Criticism of Facebook has escalated with the recent congressional testimony of a former executive asserting that Facebook puts profits over the public wellbeing. Facebook is being blamed for everything from the toxic political environment, the spread of disinformation about the COVID-19 vaccine and teenage bullying. Conservatives are angry at Facebook for banning Donald Trump, and liberals blame Facebook for facilitating the spread of the “big lie” about the 2020 election. Demands are now being made for the government to regulate Facebook. This is unwarranted and dangerous.

Facebook provides a service to individuals that allows them to share posts with their friends. Facebook does not charge for this service, but instead makes money by advertisements that are directed to its users. Critics contend that Facebook uses personal information supplied by its users, and algorithms that it developed, to help advertisers target ads to people who may be “susceptible” to them. According to critics, this preys on vulnerable individuals in an unfair manner.

Facebook is not a charity or a public service, it’s a business, and it would not be able to provide its services for free to those who have Facebook pages if it didn’t make money in some manner. Facebook is simply using its proprietary intellectual prop-

erty to target advertisements, just like traditional advertisers using data about who reads what type of magazine or watches a particular television program to decide where to place ads. As for any claim that Facebook is infringing on its users’ privacy, there could be no expectation of privacy when posting photos or comments to numerous friends. The content posted on Facebook is clearly going to be known by Facebook as well as those who see it. Facebook using that information to make a profit is Facebook’s very business model. If an individual doesn’t want Facebook to use their information, don’t publish it on Facebook.

Critics also complain that Facebook does not do enough to screen out harmful content, or to

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verify the truth of statements made on its platform. As Congress properly determined in adopting Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act that protects social media platforms from libel claims, it is simply unreasonable to expect a social platform to police all of its account holders. In addition, anyone who posts defamatory statements can still be liable under common law.

Critics also assert that Facebook is so large and ubiquitous that it has an unfair advantage over competitors. Facebook is subject to the existing anti-trust laws, and if Facebook engages in predatory practices that violate those laws it can be held responsible. In addition, there are plenty of competitors of Facebook, such as TikTok, Twitter and Pinterest. Facebook is subject to competitive pressures as any other company.

Businesses that are successful often draw criticism for their practices. Facebook used its ingenuity to develop a product, which is much sought after. I was late in establishing a Facebook account, but I truly enjoy reconnecting with old friends from high school, college and law school. Without Facebook, I would not know anything about their lives, such as where they live, who they married, and how their kids are doing.

Facebook is not a public utility, nor does it market an inherently dangerous product like cigarettes or alcohol. All of society's ills are not the fault of Facebook, although our country's current caustic political environment is often displayed in some Facebook posts, along with pictures of kids going off to college and dogs. Any expansion of government regulations over Facebook should be looked upon skeptically, and unless Facebook breaks the law it should be left alone.

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