

**OPINION**

**FACEBOOK HAS LOST ALL  
CREDIBILITY FOR THE REST OF  
TIME**

# Between fake news and data harvesting, Facebook has no way to win

By [Leonid Bershidsky](#)

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## FACEBOOK

Mark Zuckerberg is stuck in a catch-22. Any fix for Facebook's previous big problem — fake news — would make the current big problem with data harvesting worse.

As a media company and one of Americans' top sources of information, Facebook's de facto anonymity and general lack of responsibility for user-generated content make it easy for propagandists to exploit. Making matters worse, it isn't willing to impose tighter identification rules for fear of losing too many users, and it doesn't want to be held responsible in any way for content, preferring to present itself as a neutral platform.

So Zuckerberg **has been trying to fix the problem** by showing people more material from friends and family and by prioritizing "trusted publishers" and local news sources over purveyors of fake news.

But **the Cambridge Analytica scandal** shows people may not be OK with Facebook's data gathering, improved or not.

The scandal follows the revelation (to most Facebook users who read about it) that, until 2015, application developers on the social network's platform were able to get information about a user's Facebook friends after asking permission in the most

Zuckerberg's apology was not enough for Wall Street

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perfunctory way. The 2012 Obama campaign used this functionality. So — though in a more underhanded way — did Cambridge Analytica.

Many people are angry at Facebook **for not acting more resolutely to prevent the abuse**, but if that were the whole problem, it would have been enough for Zuckerberg to apologize and point out that the offending functionality hasn't been available for several years.

**The #deletefacebook campaign** is, however, powered by a bigger problem than that. People are worried about the data Facebook is accumulating about them and about how these data are used. Facebook itself works with political campaigns to help them target messages; it did so for the Trump campaign, too, perhaps helping it more than CA did.

The anger over this incident is akin to the more benign outbreak of anti-Facebook fervor in 2014 after revelations Facebook had been running secret psychological experiments on users, attempting to alter their mood by tweaking their newsfeeds. People may give up personal data easily for the sake of convenience, but they hate being turned into guinea pigs.

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Is there a Zuckerberg response that would reassure users that this is not going to happen to them? In theory, sure. Zuckerberg could say his platform would reject all political advertising, take measures against all data scraping and provide no data to political actors. That, however, would be a slippery slope; nobody wants to be a guinea pig for big corporations, either.

Smaller sacrifices, however, may be useless against the critical mass of popular disapproval. What do people want from Zuckerberg, anyway? Do they want an environment that produces lots of quality data or do they want Facebook to stop collecting data? Both? But then, how would Facebook make money?

Or perhaps neither? Would the world be a worse place without Facebook? People can always have an uncivil conversation with bots about divisive politics on Twitter. They can stay in touch with friends, family, neighbors and co-workers on any of the numerous messenger apps. Young people are giving up on it, and Germany's new digital minister Dorothee Baer recently teased it for turning into "a senior citizens' network." But what's keeping the older generations on it except inertia?

German officials  
want answers on  
Facebook data  
mining

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Zuckerberg probably won't make any radical moves. But what if he did? What if the Facebook CEO makes an announcement?

"We've come so far from that dorm room at Harvard," he'd say. "Perhaps too far. I'm sad to announce that today, we're closing the main Facebook app and Web site: It's clear that it's been abused by anyone and everyone, including ourselves, and you folks no longer want it. We'll still help connect the world through Instagram, Messenger and WhatsApp. We promise they won't turn into another Facebook."

Would there be many people — except perhaps the remaining Facebook shareholders — who wouldn't heave a sigh of relief? I know I would.