

Silicon Valley social media giants are wild beasts devouring freedom and democracy. We MUST tame them

By Max Hastings for the Daily Mail

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Almost 70 years ago, George Orwell wrote a nightmare into our language when, in his novel Nineteen Eighty-Four, he imagined a future in which 'Big Brother' scrutinises an enslaved society with an all-seeing eye.

More recently, civil libertarians have warned ubiquitous CCTV and Government surveillance, born out of the fight against terrorism, have begun to fulfil Orwell's prophesy.

Yet both the fictional fantasies and daily realities pale into insignificance alongside the threat posed by social media.

Scarcely imagined a generation ago, they have become a monstrous, intrusive presence in almost all our lives, especially frightening because of their influence upon children.

Ruthless

Don't take my word for it. Facebook's former technology chief said a few days ago the site is ripping apart the fabric of society — 'eroding human interactions' and leaving users feeling 'vacant and empty'.

The Government's independent ethics watchdog, the Committee on Standards in Public Life, last month warned that social media companies should face fines for failing to remove racist, extremist or child sex abuse content.

That was followed by a testy stand-off between the Commons' Home Affairs Select Committee and executives from Facebook, Twitter and Google, who were lambasted for the appalling content allowed on their sites.

Now, there has been a dramatic intervention from Security Minister Ben Wallace, who warned that internet giants should face punitive tax penalties if they don't help deal with the threat of terrorism.

He said these 'ruthless profiteers' were failing to prevent the radicalisation of young people online, and thus forcing the Government to devote hundreds of millions in resources to tackle the threat.

This is all proof society has awakened to the fact that the way we go online and use our mobiles to communicate and shop has empowered the warlords of the electronic universe.

Headed by Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg and Amazon boss Jeff Bezos, these men and women are armed with the most personal details about each and every one of us such as no Gestapo, KGB or Inquisition in history ever dreamed of possessing. (Germany's competition watchdog has just accused Facebook of a 'limitless' collection of users' data.)

And all this information is being extracted every second of every day — not by red hot irons and thumbscrews, but because we are handing it over through our own actions.



As for the scarily addictive Facebook, five years ago, when it reached a billion users, 55 per cent of them used it daily. Today, numbers have doubled — with two-thirds updating their entries every day

We make constant voluntary sacrifices of privacy in pursuit of convenience and social exchange, seemingly unaware of the consequences.

There are 32 million UK Facebook users, and the company uploads more than 300 million images every day. Many of the young not only expose every detail of their relationships, social and working lives, but

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some also photograph and then broadcast images of themselves having sex.

Maja Pantic, a professor of affective and behavioural computing at Imperial College in London, offers a dire warning: 'As individuals, we must get back the ownership of our own data — we just don't understand how bad this really is.'

Already there is a fightback. Millions of iPhone users, led by the former chief of the consumer watchdog Which?, are seeking a £1 billion settlement after falling victim to Google embedding computer codes in their Apple devices which were designed to reveal to Google the websites users visited.

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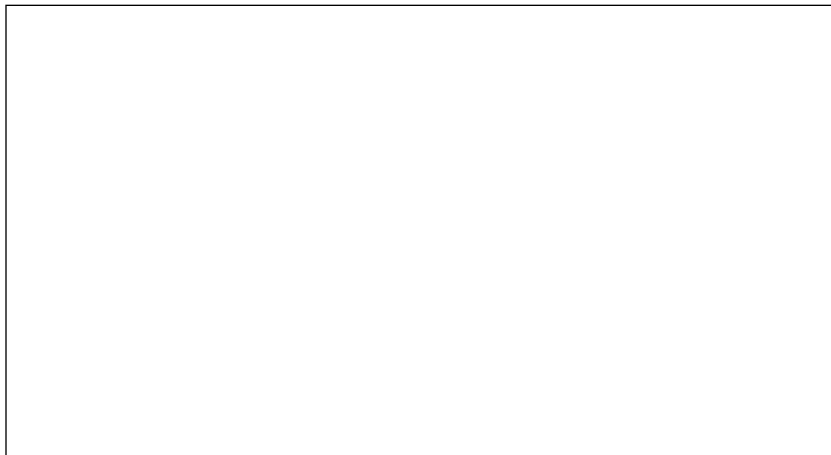


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For their part, while YouTube's bosses profess a willingness to tackle abuses (some of them appalling) and Google at least pretends to think about them, Facebook simply does not care, according to a social media analyst.

The company's origins explain a lot. Peter Thiel, one of its inventors, formed an early fascination for a 20th-century French philosopher and anthropologist called Rene Girard who identified a phenomenon known as 'mimetic desire'. His reasoning was that, once human beings have met their basic needs for food and shelter, they are very vulnerable to a yearning to find out what other people are doing, then do it themselves.



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Thus, at the heart of Facebook's stupendous success is how it exploits the human weakness of 'me-tooism' (our wish to copy the behaviour of others) on a global scale. Its system empowers individuals to connect with others who think like themselves, in a way that no other medium in history has made possible.

In a political sphere, this is why some believe Facebook played a key role in Donald Trump's election a year ago.

Whereas mainstream media, led by the Washington Post and New York Times and all the big TV networks except Trump's unofficial mouthpiece Fox News, were telling people Trump was an irresponsible lunatic, Facebook connected its users to millions of other voters who thought that here at last was a 'real American' who shared their abhorrence of homosexuals, Muslims, Latinos, blacks, East Coast smartieboots and atheists.

Meddling

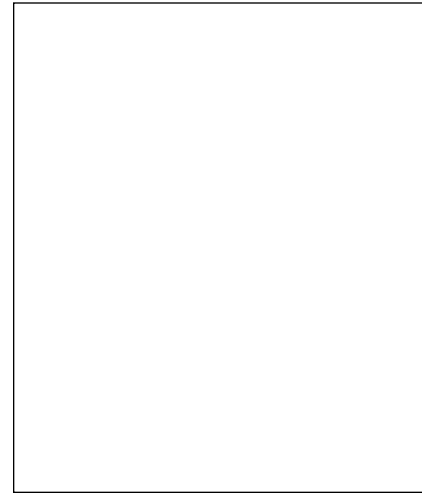
Social media enables voters to feel that instead of being isolated freaks, they are part of a brotherhood and sisterhood, embracing each other to triumphant political effect.

Although I am not among those who believe Russian meddling was decisive in getting Trump into the White House, their efforts to manipulate the result are not in doubt, including buying £80,000 of Facebook advertising that reached ten million Americans. They created pages which — for instance — broadcast fake news about Muslim men claiming welfare for several wives.

Anyone who sees something in the Daily Mail, The Times, on the BBC, Sky News or Russia Today, for example, can make an immediate judgment about its reliability. With social media, this is impossible. And one of its most pernicious vices is that it encourages people to believe what they wish to believe — often nonsense.

In both the political and consumer spheres, Facebook is constantly refining its reach by targeting users with the precision of a telescopic sight through its knowledge of their age, race, sex, shopping habits and preferences. Its partnership with Experian, a consumer credit reporting agency, has dramatically increased its information on people's credit ratings and purchases, reaching back over decades.

Facebook trumpets its benevolence in enabling mankind to connect, to 'build communities', as if Mark Zuckerberg was a modern-day Mother Teresa, Walt Disney and William Caxton all rolled into one.




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Dangerous

It is true social media is making as dramatic an impact on mankind as did the medieval pioneer of the printing press. But we should be in no doubt that Zuckerberg's prime interest is to make money from us. He displays as much interest in or concern about the pernicious consequences of his actions as does a cruise missile or tidal wave.



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Facebook is valued at around £400 billion, making it the fourth most valuable company on the planet. Zuckerberg's personal wealth is around £60 billion. What makes him and his fellow-social media giants uniquely dangerous, however, is not their money, but their unprecedented, intimate personal knowledge of billions of people.

No human can be entrusted with such data, which we should properly view as a weapon of mass destruction.

There must be regulation of social media, and every government in the world ought to address itself on how best this can be implemented, without, of course, imposing improper restrictions on free speech.

It must be the beginning of wisdom that we understand how wildly excessive and deeply dangerous are the powers of the social media giants, headed by Facebook. They cannot be uninvented, but they must be tamed. Should we fail to do this, these wild beasts will devour our democracies and our individual freedoms.

Read more: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5227455/Social-media-giants-wild-beasts-devouring-freedom.html#ixzz532VtTyRE>

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