

## Time to Breakup Facebook? : RSTV – In Depth

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### Larger Background:

- The journey of Facebook has been a story of unprecedented growth and single-minded domination of the social media space across the globe.
- Today, Facebook has over 2 billion social media users. It also owns WhatsApp, Messenger and Instagram, each used by over 1 billion people.
- This combined might is what is worrying experts, rights groups, governments and industry watchers. In terms of revenues and influence, Facebook Inc founder Mark Zuckerberg commands power that has rarely ever been seen before.
- It has led Facebook co-founder and Zuckerberg's former roommate Chris Hughes to call for a break up of the social media network.
- Hughes joined U.S. lawmakers in urging anti-trust action to break up big tech companies as well as federal privacy regulation.
- The call comes against the backdrop of greater scrutiny of Facebook from regulators around the world over its data sharing practices and hate speech and misinformation on its networks.
- Today's In Depth takes a look at the argument of Hughes, the controversies that have compromised Facebook's reputation in recent times, the case for regulation along-with Facebook's own efforts and often inadequate measures to limit the damage that the company has caused.

### A Brief History:

- In an explosive opinion piece published in the New York Times recently, Chris Hughes, a Facebook co-founder and Mark Zuckerberg's former Harvard roommate, called for the United States Government to break up the social media company. In a lengthy opinion piece, Hughes calls the companies influence staggering as well as dangerous.
- Hughes is the latest in a series of prominent entrepreneurs, as well as tech executives to call for stricter regulation of Facebook and other online platforms.
- Chris Hughes, who left the company in 2007 argues that Facebook has fostered bad impulses among its users, prevented other companies from competing and gained unilateral control over speech worldwide.
- In an editorial published in the New York Times, Hughes is primarily calling on U.S. regulators to split up Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram, warning that the company's head, Mark Zuckerberg, had become far too powerful.
- Hughes pointed to Zuckerberg's staggering influence at the company which controls three major platforms- namely, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp.
- He said that Zuckerberg controls about 60% of voting shares for Facebook's board, giving Zuckerberg immense control over algorithms, privacy settings, and even which messages get delivered.
- In the opinion piece, he called Zuckerberg's power, unprecedented, and un-American. He said that his cofounder's focus on growth let him to sacrifice security and civility for clicks.
- Along with Zuckerberg, Hughes founded Facebook in their dorm room while both were students at Harvard University in 2004.
- It is important to note that with the recent events in the U.S. and the upcoming elections in the U.S., about a private company having such a strong hold on elections.
- Thus, it is not a private rivalry between two friends who started this platform (Facebook) in 2004. However, it is more to do with maturity and the issue has come again because of the upcoming elections in the U.S.

## What has Hughes accused Facebook of?

- Hughes has accused Facebook of acquiring or copying all of its competitors to achieve dominance in the social media field, meaning that investors became reluctant to back any rivals because they know that they can't compete for long.
- Hughes said that even after the breakup, Facebook would be a hugely profitable business, with billions to invest in new technologies, and a more competitive market would only encourage those investments.
- The company has been rocked by a series of scandals recently, including allowing user data to be harvested by research companies and its slow response to Russia using Facebook as a means to spread disinformation during the 2016 U.S. election campaign.
- The company is reportedly expecting to face a fine of 5 Billion US Dollars.
- The total number of users across Facebook's platforms far exceeds the number on any rival platform.
- After buying its main competitors, Instagram, where people can publish photos and WhatsApp, which is a secure messaging service, Facebook has now 2.7 Billion monthly users across its platforms, and made a first quarter profit of 2.43 Billion US Dollars, this year (2019).
- WhatsApp alone has 1.6 Billion monthly users across its platforms and Instagram has 1.3 Billion monthly users across its platforms.
- Other voices who have asked for a breakup of Facebook:
- Hughes is not alone in asking for the breakup of Facebook. Some lawmakers in the U.S. have called for a federal privacy regulation and anti-trust action to breakup big technology companies. Democratic Presidential candidate, Senator Elizabeth Warren in March, 2019, vowed to breakup Facebook, Amazon.com Inc, and Alphabet Inc's Google, if elected U.S. President to promote competition in the technology sector.
- The social media giant Facebook and its founder and CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, has been regularly receiving flak for multiple instances of security breach and unauthorized data access- all of which began in the year 2018.
- Consumers are now losing trust on the platform across markets.

## At the Center of Controversy:

- In March 2018, Facebook found itself at the center of the world's largest data leak scandal. The company was accused of sharing private data of millions of users with Cambridge Analytica, which is a London based elections consultancy for political purposes. All this while, unsuspecting users continued to share their personal information on Facebook.
- On March 17th, 2018, the Guardian and the New York Times, lifted the lid off the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal. It was revealed that Cambridge Analytica had harvested the personal data of millions of Facebook users.
- The data was allegedly used for political campaigns supported by Cambridge Analytica, including the 2016 U.S. Presidential election and the Brexit vote campaign.
- Cambridge Analytica also reportedly used the data for US Senator Ted Cruz's campaign in December 2015.
- The information revealed by none other than ex-Cambridge Analytica employee, Christopher Wylie, showed how the users were hoodwinked in the name of a benign survey. The revelation created a huge public outcry. Facebook later confirmed that it actually had data on up to 87 million users.
- 70.6 million of those users, were from the United States.
- The breach allowed the voter profiling firm to develop techniques to help U.S. President Donald Trump's campaign in 2016. The firm also accessed data on over a million British users, trying to influence the Brexit vote.
- After the expose, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) opened an investigation into the violation of user privacy by Facebook.
- In April, 2018, Mark Zuckerberg faced the joint session of the US Senate, Commerce and Judiciary Committed to respond to some hard questions on the data breach.

- Mark Zuckerberg blamed Aleksandr Kogan who sold data to Cambridge Analytica, for violating Facebook's terms of service.
- On May 2nd, 2018, Cambridge Analytica announced that they were closing.
- In December 2018, Facebook reported a breach in its system due to a bug that it said may have exposed pictures of nearly 6.8 million users across the world for over 12 days between September 13th and September 25th, via 3rd party applications.
- Facebook said that the issue was fixed, however, the bug potentially gave developers access to other people's photos such as those shared on marketplace or Facebook stories. Further, it also gave access to photos that people uploaded to Facebook, but did not post.
- In 2019, Facebook's data misuse hit headlines again in May. Reports said that the company harvested email contacts of over 1.5 million users without their knowledge or consent, when they opened their accounts. The privacy breach came to light when a security researcher had questioned as to why Facebook was asking for email passwords, when new users signed up with the platform.

### **Facebook's Role in Disseminating Fake News:**

- Facebook has been continuously under the scanner for its alleged role in disseminating fake news, and also unknowingly generating the terror content.
- As a vast social media Networking—a lot is at risk from internal security to international upheavals.
- The role of fake news in influencing voter behaviour has come up for debate.
- As a matter of fact, older Facebook users share more Fake News than younger ones, regardless of education, sex, race, income, or how many links they shared.
- Facebook is the biggest epidemic of the information age. Fake news affects the basic fragment of democracy which is informed choice.
- Experts opine that what we in India need at the moment is something similar to what Singapore has done, wherein they created a law around this issue. Facebook has also been accused of auto-generating extremist content, including a Jihadist video and a business page for Al-Qaeda. Similar content for self-identified Nazi's and White Supremacist groups were also found online.
- The Centre monitored the pages of around 3000 people, who liked or connected to the organizations listed as a terrorist group by the U.S. Government. The study found that the groups such as the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda were openly active on the Facebook network.
- In addition, the study found that Facebook's own tools were automatically creating fresh content, for the proscribed groups by creating celebrations, memories and videos when pages get enough views or likes, or had been active for a certain number of months. The local business page for Al-Qaeda, generated by Facebook's tools, had 7,410 "likes", and gave the group valuable data that it could use while recruiting people or seeking out supporters.
- Facebook has faced increased scrutiny for its role in online terror, since a gunman live-streamed the a part of the New Zealand mosque shooting on the social media platform. Several countries have taken steps to regulate online content since the attack. In early April, 2019, Australia passed a legislation, setting out fines and punishment for the social media sites for hate content. The U.K. has proposed making social media executives, personally responsible for harmful content shared on their platforms.

### **Facebook's Multilayered Problems:**

Facebook's multilayered problems can be broadly divided between:

1. Size
2. Business Model
3. Technical Limitations
4. Years of Unchecked Growth

- Miscreants have created celebratory videos using Facebook's platform to generate extremist content for the ISIS and Al-Qaeda. The company says that it is working on solutions, however, the problems are getting bigger. Mass shootings are being live-streamed and online mobs are spreading rumours, leading to deadly violence with greater impunity than ever before. Whenever a new problem crops up, critics say that Facebook apologizes and promises to make changes. This is done until a new, bigger and more shocking incident happens. Critics also say that Facebook did not anticipate how malicious elements readily misuse its platform. More recently, the company has emphasized just how much it is improving in its use of artificial intelligence to detect problems, and in terms of focussing money and effort in fixing them.
- In a statement, Facebook said that, "After making heavy investments, we are detecting and removing terrorism content at a far higher success rate than even two years ago. We don't claim to find everything, and we remain vigilant in our efforts against terrorist groups around the world."

### Concluding Remarks:

- Experts believe that the problem of the company could be owing to its DNA.
- Facebook did not see it coming that its platform could also be used for generating extremist content, or even transmitting fake news, or for that matter, even in the misuse of its user data. Facebook has been at the center of data leaks, privacy scandals, election meddling and more.
- All of which has made the Facebook CEO, Mark Zuckerberg requesting the Government to clarify as to what counts as harmful content online so that the company can take it down. However, analysts feel that this is superficial at best, compared to the scale and scope of the problems Facebook is confronting.
- Experts opine that the problems of the company could be owing to its DNA. While the business model relies on as many people as possible using Facebook as much as possible, it is making users leave behind personal information and details that can and are being targeted by advertisers. Facebook and its users seem to be caught in a complicated bargain and a vicious cycle.

