

“The Harmful Behaviour of Facebook”: Social Media Destabilizes Democracy and Harm Users’ Mental Health

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Global Research, October 06, 2021
[InfoBrics](#)

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#)

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Controversies involving the role of social networks in the contemporary world are on the rise. Far beyond the blackout on October 4, large technology companies have recently been criticized for acting in a socially destructive way, harming the mental health of their users and fostering the polarization of society. The dissemination of hate speech, fake news, and the omission of the companies’ officials in the face of crimes, offenses and disrespectful discussions that commonly occur on digital platforms have drawn the attention of many experts, activists and legislators to a problem that seems to have reached its limits: the threat that social networks pose to the stability of democracy.

Recently, the denunciations made by a former Facebook employee have strongly impacted public opinion regarding the real functioning of social networks. Frances Haugen, a 37-year-old American engineer who held the position of product manager at Facebook, has stood out for her criticisms about the company’s negative role in the mental health of child users. Beyond mere criticism, Haugen became active in defending the imposition of legal restrictions on Big Tech companies, participating in hearings in the US Senate, where she exposed information about the harmful behavior of Facebook, urging lawmakers to impose limits on companies of the technology sector.

Haugen’s main criticism is that Facebook maintains an internal policy that seeks to grow at any cost, prioritizing profits and the expansion of the platform to any ethical limits. According to her, Facebook purposely provides inappropriate content to children and young people in order to provoke extreme reactions because, in this way, despite the mental damage of users, the chances of virtual interaction increase through views, likes and shares, making the platform grow more and more. The same happens with other social networks belonging to the Facebook Group and chaired by Mark Zuckerberg, such as Whatsapp and Instagram.

These were some of her [words](#):

“The company’s leadership knows how to make Facebook and Instagram safer, but won’t make the necessary changes because they have put their astronomical profits before people (...) Yesterday we saw Facebook taken off the internet. I don’t know why it went down, but I know that for more than five hours, Facebook wasn’t used to deepen divides, destabilize democracies and make young girls and women feel bad about their bodies”.

She [added](#):

Facebook understands that if they want to continue to grow, they have to find new users. They have to make sure that the next generation is just as engaged with Instagram as the current one. And the way they will do that is by making sure that children establish habits before they have good self-regulation (...) It’s just like cigarettes, teenagers don’t have good self-regulation. They say, explicitly, ‘I feel bad when I use Instagram and yet I can’t stop’.”

The Senate reaction was quite favorable to Haugen. With very few exceptions, politicians applauded the former employee and complemented her statement with comments criticizing severely the working dynamics of social media. Amy Klobuchar, a Democratic senator from Minnesota, said:

“When they allowed 99% of violent content to remain unchecked on their platform including the lead-up to the Jan. 6 insurrection, what did they do? Now we know, Mark Zuckerberg was going sailing.”

On the other hand, in response, Mark Zuckerberg made a statement on his media accounts in response, denying all of Haugen’s words and criticizing her stance. Zuckerberg says it is “illogical” to think that his companies push inappropriate content to generate negative reactions. These were his words:

“The argument that we deliberately push content that makes people angry for profit is deeply illogical. We make money from ads, and advertisers consistently tell us they don’t want their ads next to harmful or angry content. And I don’t know any tech company that sets out to build products that make people angry or depressed.”

In fact, the psychological impacts generated by the use of social media has become an increasingly discussed issue in recent years. There is clear evidence that the use of social networks without any kind of regulation – except that one self-imposed by the companies themselves – has caused irreversible damage to the mental health of young people, who constantly expose their thoughts and bodies in texts and photos that are available for the entire world, often resulting in negative repercussions.

Unable to control the reactions of those who consume the exposed content, young users try to seek more and more positive reactions – as this is a way to improve their social acceptance –, which results in more and more exposure. Social networks automatically boost the content that is being commented on, even if in a derogatory or disrespectful way, just so that more users maintain interaction expanding the platform. The same happens with criminal, violent or pornographic content posted on the networks.

Despite the self-imposed rules prohibiting this type of content, in practice, the companies tend to push them to be more and more consumed, generating reactions and expanding the

network. Regardless of whether the reactions are positive or negative, the mere fact that virtual interaction is taking place generates profits for companies, motivating them to increasingly seek to promote all kinds of inappropriate content. It is difficult to measure the effects of this type of constant exposure to inappropriate content and disrespectful reactions in the virtual environment, but certainly many traumas can be developed from this.

The American legislation of the last decades has given a lot of power to social networks, allowing them to work in a system of self-regulation, which in practice means absolute freedom. These networks act as real states whose territory is a cybernetic environment. These “virtual states” are immune to the laws of the physical world and create their own rules – and if in the physical world laws are designed in order to preserve democracy, in these virtual environments they are designed to generate profits.

Now, Washington has a choice to do: either legislation changes completely and imposes severe limits on social networks, or the virtual world will generate more and more damage to the physical world, harming the mental health of young people and destabilizing the entire democratic social structure with unnecessary polarizations and the spread of hatred.

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