[**The problem with Facebook**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1674117/the-problem-with-facebook)

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FACEBOOK made history last week. Last Thursday, the company suffered the biggest one-day [loss in stock value](https://www.dawn.com/news/1673194) ever, when its stock plummeted by $232 billion — greater than the GDP of many countries. The news came on the heels of the worst earnings call that the company has ever had. For the first time, the company that has enjoyed the status of a tech behemoth because of its ever-increasing number of users, had to report that it [lost](https://www.dawn.com/news/1673059) half a million active users in the final quarter of 2021. It quantified the damage at about $10bn.

To understand why Facebook is in the predicament that it finds itself, one has to look at how it has been sustaining its narrative of constantly growing numbers of users. Even though most of the company’s advertising revenue comes from the developed world, the company’s leaders have long prioritised expanding globally. This means that the company has developed country-by-country strategies to bring in new users and these new users have allowed it to claim that it has never ‘lost’ a cumulative number of users. Some critics have criticised Facebook’s reporting numbers, drawing attention to the fact that the company also makes it hard to determine how many of these users are real and not fake accounts.

According to *Washington Post* columnist Megan McCardle, the loss was also brought on by the social media platform’s tussle with Apple. In recent days, Apple has changed its privacy rules on the IOS programme on its iPhones, such that Facebook is not able to track users data in the same way that it could. This gathering of data is crucial to Facebook’s earnings, because its particular selling line to advertisers is that it has very particular data on users which allows advertising to be tailored in a very particular way. As McCardle describes it, the fact that Facebook operates on Apple phones means that it has built a house on someone else’s land. Apple, which owns that land, now wants Facebook off its property. Facebook, it seems, has not yet found a solution to this conundrum.

**Read:** [*Apple busts Facebook for distributing data-sucking app*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1460992)

There are many people who will be cheering at Facebook’s loss and hoping that it is the harbinger of its declining power, even if it still boasts almost 2bn users a day. In its rise to the top, it is alleged to have played many dirty games and hung many others out to dry. Even its genesis story, of a young Mark Zuckerberg coming up with the idea during his time at Harvard, is tainted by allegations that he actually stole the code for the initial programme from a friend. Those were the early days and early sins could be forgiven.

Thanks to Facebook’s reluctance to rein in misinformation, there are many who don’t want to share their data on the platform.

More unforgivable are Facebook’s more recent and ongoing sins. Central among these is the platform’s refusal to put a stop to the spread of misinformation. In an effort to increase engagement by users, Facebook has deployed algorithms that facilitate sites that spread misinformation and lies (despite knowing the social harm this could do). Investigations have found that the spread of hate speech and misinformation from its platform played a huge role in the 2016 US elections. Misinformation sites created by (among others) Russian operatives maligning former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton led to the wide proliferation of conspiracy theories about her and the Democrats.

Nor was this push limited to the 2016 elections. A recent podcast about one of the women who was radicalised and became part of the white nationalist mob that attacked the US Capitol on Jan 6 last year, revealed that she got sucked into the conspiracy universe of QAnon (whose adherents think President Donald Trump is the hero who has arrived to fight a vast cabal of Democratic paedophiles) through social media. It can safely be said that this woman, who ended up dying of a drug overdose on Jan 6, is not the only white nationalist that was led on the path of extremism in this way. Even now the top 10 posts on Facebook are usually dominated by alt-right views and pundits like Ben Shapiro. In addition to right-wing views, they also spread propaganda against the Covid-19 vaccine.

Facebook’s refusal to counter hate on its platform is not limited to the United States. A plethora of Facebook pages in Urdu and English have been instrumental in spreading religious and sectarian hatred. Even if hundreds of people report the website, the site is rarely taken down. It is almost as if the leaders of the company created a platform and decided to sit back and watch the show of hatred and misinformation proliferate on a scale larger than ever before.

**Read:** [*Facebook 'operating in the shadows', says whistleblower as US lawmakers demand probes*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1650296)

Now the mighty have fallen. There is a lesson here for everyone. It doesn’t matter how ubiquitous your platform or product may be and how dependent users may be on using it — there will always be alternatives. Thanks to Facebook’s reluctance to rein in the dissemination of lies and misinformation, there are many who have become hesitant to share their data on the platform. The social media platform has still to allay these concerns, which means that people are not logging on to the site with the same frequency. Even when they are logging in, they do not want to put up pictures of their children, their family occasions or anything else. The incentive to log in has lessened.

Big Tech is a ruthless world, and for all the pretence that tech entrepreneurs put up of being casual and less interested in profit margins, money still talks. Facebook, likely aghast at what a small change in Apple’s privacy laws can do to its business, is allegedly pivoting to a hardware company. A better pivot would have been to simply reorganise its priorities so that it actually starts to care about the welfare of its users.

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