

WHY WE'RE GLAD THAT THE NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY CENTER DELETED ITS FACEBOOK ACCOUNT*



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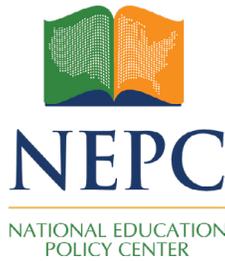
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The revelation that Cambridge Analytica had used the personal data of millions of Facebook users to micro-target American voters has resulted in widespread public outrage. However, no one with even a passing familiarity with advertising-driven, for-profit digital platforms can claim to be surprised. Every day, student data are vulnerable to the [same kind of abuses](#) revealed by the Cambridge Analytica scandal: student personal data are scooped up by digital platforms with little oversight or accountability.

In general, the lack of public oversight of digital platforms has created a *de facto* public policy based on the tacit assumption that virtual space is privately owned and that personal data are corporate property. This situation leaves the public with little or no clear recourse when personal data are used in ways that cause personal and social harm. As a result, in many important respects, the U.S. economy is now a surveillance economy constructed by corporations that relentlessly, invisibly, and very profitably, gather information and create profiles on hundreds of millions of people. In particular, digital platforms in schools [feed children](#) into this surveillance economy.

At the National Education Policy Center (NEPC), where we are researchers, we were discussing deleting our Facebook account when the news broke about the Cambridge Analytica scandal. We have been studying advertising directed at students in schools for three decades, and for the past five years, we have tracked the evolution of digital marketing and the use of digital platforms in schools with growing alarm. In a series of [annual reports](#), we have presented the data we gathered and the conclusions we have drawn. Based on our research

findings, we have repeatedly called for statutory changes and regulations to ensure student privacy, protect data, require transparency, and ensure accountability. Our findings show that despite philanthropic rhetoric, platforms such as Facebook are designed to turn data into money, and require strong public oversight to prevent abuse.

Facebook presents itself in altruistic language about binding people together in a radically transparent world of “friends”: a community open for use by anyone interested in sharing with others. Mark Zuckerberg’s anodyne presentations and relentless repetition of clichés (“[Advancing human potential is about pushing the boundaries on how great a human life can be.](#)”) and techie tropes (“[The internet is so important that for every 10 people who gain internet access, about one person is lifted out of poverty and about one new job is created.](#)”) have helped create a rhetorical fog that obscures the fact that Facebook is a multinational advertising agency. It gathers data on its users, their friends, and all their contacts in order to distill the content they see and shape the ads with which they are targeted into a self-referential social house of mirrors that serves up a bespoke reality crafted out of their hopes, fears, and aspirations.

In his 1928 book, *Propaganda*, Edward Bernays—often described as the father of the modern public relations industry—explained quite clearly that advertising propaganda is ultimately about social control:

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in a democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.

Facebook under Mr. Zuckerberg’s leadership is the apotheosis of Bernays’ vision of advertising as a social control mechanism.

When we discussed with colleagues the idea of deleting NEPC’s Facebook account, some argued that organizations critical of the implications of Facebook’s business model need to keep their accounts open in order to “remain part of the conversation.” There is little doubt, in our minds, that Facebook would like nothing better than having critics and commentators express themselves on Facebook. It both feeds the illusion of Facebook as a “public square” and provides Facebook with still more data with which to help advertisers shape their messaging; therefore, in our view, the conversation we want to have is best taken up outside of Facebook.

Others have suggested that deleting Facebook accounts is a privileged action that many people and companies, because of their circumstances, cannot take.

It’s true. Facebook has gobbled up a large portion of the market for digital advertising and has become the only advertising venue available for countless small businesses. In less developed countries, Facebook may offer the only communication medium available to many people and communities. The question for us isn’t whether or not this is true. For us the question is what is necessary to change this reality because it comes at terrible cost to democratic culture. Facebook has, for example, already been accused of sowing turmoil and corrupting elections in [Myanmar, Sudan, Indonesia, the Philippines and Europe](#), and of putting

its finger on the scales in the [Brexit vote](#)—not to mention its now infamous role in the 2016 U.S. elections.

There is ample evidence that Facebook cannot be relied upon to either police or [control itself](#). Now it is aggressively targeting children as young as six in and outside of schools. In schools, the Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative is devoting billions of dollars in grants and investments to promote adoption by schools of technology-driven “personalized learning,” Although it is [unclear](#) that “personalized learning” platforms and software actually improve learning, it is clear that to function, they require the collection of huge amounts of student data—data whose [security](#) is doubtful and that is in some cases explicitly [shared with unnamed “partners.”](#) Outside of schools, Facebook recently introduced and is marketing its Messenger Kids app for children, despite being [warned](#) by numerous child advocates, educators, and child development experts about the many ways that the Messenger Kids app is likely to impede children’s healthy development.

Facebook isn’t the only actor whose work in the digital space has destructive consequences. We have, for example, [pointed to the dangers](#) posed by Google’s opaque algorithms in general and Google’s G-Suite for Education in particular. Infiltrating schools and exploiting classrooms can mean lots of money. There is a [long list](#) of private investors betting on digital technology in schools paying big dividends. Our research tells us that, rhetoric notwithstanding, investor interest should not be confused with a desire to improve schools, promote children’s welfare, or provide social benefits.

What’s wrong with Facebook, Google, and other unregulated digital platforms shaping children’s school experiences? The dystopic teen novel, *Feed*, gives a pretty clear picture of what “School™” would be like after it is bought and run by media corporations: all the students receive free computers, and students’ classwork consists of learning how to use technology, get a job, find bargains, and decorate their bedrooms. Their feed is full of ads, reassuring spin from the President, and chatter from their friends. They are encouraged to shop and chat endlessly, with all their activities surveilled by the corporations who collect their data to predict future purchases. Anyone not connected risks becoming a social and economic outcast.

Our research suggests that the dystopia described in *Feed* is all too real a possibility. One of the teenagers we interviewed, Maddie (not her real name), told us how her homework assignments, done mostly using the Google platform G-Suite for Education, become a portal that pulls her to the Internet and to constant tracking of her interests, friends, and activities. She reports being online for hours when working on an essay or a project for school: “I’ll surf . . . open a new tab and go to Twitter, or Facebook, or BuzzFeed. Also Yahoo and Netflix. It’s all so accessible. I’m watching *30 Rock*. Each episode is 20 minutes, which is a good break. I get my texts on my computer, so I see them.” A middle schooler, Anna (not her real name), reported similarly: “I always have the option to open a new tab...The other day we were working on something and my friend said something about puffins. So I opened up a new tab and looked up baby puffins. And 20 minutes later we were still looking at baby puffins. They were so cute!”

Maddie told us about being followed around the Internet by shoe ads after she looked at

shoes during one of her study breaks. No doubt Anna will be followed by baby puffins. But what does this have to do with Facebook? Because Maddie has a Facebook account, Facebook collects data about her not only from the data that she has willingly supplied to it; but also, whenever she goes to a page with a “like” button, it stores and sells that data. The Cambridge Analytica scandal has taught us that it also collects, stores, and shares data about her friends. Maddie may have joined Facebook independently of school, but school activities prevent students like her from leaving. Many school groups use Facebook to organize, and students need to be part of those groups. Unable to opt out even if they wanted to, students constantly provide Facebook with information that is then used to manipulate them, usually without their realizing it.

Schools are important civic institutions, essential to democratic culture; and a healthy democratic culture requires a dynamic public sphere. The public sphere is not simply a political framework. It is supported by shared customs and practices, norms and values. It requires constant attention to ensure that powerful interests don’t constrain, marginalize, or silence contrary or challenging expressions. Facebook degrades the public sphere. Facebook creates a fake public square in which users are “siloes” and tethered to a flow of information that is then used by advertisers to influence and manipulate them. Facebook has created an ecosystem in which its users direct their communication to those who think the same things and do the same things as they do; it offers only the illusion of engagement with the real world. Whether its advertisers are pitching clothes, deodorant, or political candidates, Facebook will organize its information about users to help its clients learn the best way to target them and influence their decisions. This is not a “mistake.” This is what Facebook was designed to do. Facebook’s users will never see nor control the privacy settings that matter, so long as Facebook’s business model is in place and there is no effective public oversight.

With respect to the digital internet platforms, it is often said that if you’re not paying for a product you *are* the product. We’re especially concerned when the product is children. The implications of all of this are broader than opportunistic political manipulation. As we have learned to our cost, Facebook’s “engagement” algorithms nudge users to become ever more extreme in their views and behaviors. This manipulation is especially problematic and potent for children, whose worldviews are still developing. Children in and outside of school are now routinely subjected to all the marketing firepower that money can buy. They are without recourse as their personal data are gathered and sold on. Using these data, advertisers attempt to shape their attitudes about how they should think about their families, friendships, romantic relationships, environment, society, and themselves. Facebook’s business model was developed to help marketers take full advantage of its feed to manipulate its users in these ways. This is bad for us all; when applied to children, it is intolerable. Mr. Zuckerberg has been moving fast. The question before us now is: How much longer are we going to let him and others like him continue to break things?

Note: On March 27, the National Education Policy Center (NEPC) deleted its Facebook account and removed Facebook from the NEPC website. NEPC’s final Facebook post was a press release announcing our action.