

Facebook: why shouldn't you trust them?

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Facebook at LSE

If Facebook was a country – so the false analogy goes – it would be the world's third largest with 500+ million 'inhabitants'. But what's it like to live there?

I know that Facebook isn't a country, but I wonder if people who use it are starting to think of it in those terms. Let me explain.

We had the pleasure of hosting Facebook's [Sheryl Sandberg](#) for a [POLIS lecture](#) to celebrate our fifth anniversary. [\[Video podcast now online\]](#) If Facebook is a country, she is the Prime Minister. 400 people including many top figures from the media industry packed in to hear her deliver a funny, sometimes moving and very persuasive speech about how Facebook is a great business and also a force for some good in the world.

Yet as one rather world-weary [PR person correctly pointed out](#), some of the audience reaction was ambivalent. Gordon Hector makes his money out of implying that the Internet is fraught with danger and that you need to pay his firm to protect your reputation, but, allowing for that, he makes some interesting points about how companies like Facebook are now subject to increasing scepticism:

"She claimed 'on Facebook, people become truly human' – which was entertainingly hubristic – and one questioner asked 'do I own my photos, or does Facebook?'. Her answer was that 'we store it for you.' At which, of course, we had a good little chuckle. These are telling reactions. This is what we Brits do. We joke at the over-enthusiastic. We see irony in every word. The bigger threat to credibility in this country for any brand, company, or individual isn't being feared or hated – it's being ridiculed. Our instinct is to sneer, in a sort-of good-natured way, at anything that sounds daft."



Sheryl Sandberg at LSE

Of course, Sandberg is perfectly aware that people's scepticism (or skepticism as she might spell it) could become a problem. That's why she spent 45 minutes responding to a stream of questions. She dealt with most of it in a straight and direct way. The trouble is that Facebook is now like the Government. It is an essential part of our lives. We want it to make everything perfect, but we don't want to accept responsibility ourselves. So we all want a great health service and terrific schools AND low taxes.

Likewise on Facebook we want to be able to share information freely and easily but we want privacy. We want to have great applications and functionality, but we'd prefer to have no adverts to pay for them.

This is not to say that Facebook hasn't got things wrong. They would like to float at some point. They are fiercely competitive with other companies like Google. In a sense, they make their money by trading your online social life for profit. That's Internet Capitalism my friend, and in general, it can be a marvellous thing. But sometimes they have

– and will again – overstep the mark. This is partly why they are trying so hard to bridge the cynicism gap. They want to understand your fears and to clarify their policies. As Sandberg said, ‘the communication challenge is real’.

Because here’s the strange thing. Facebook is more than a country. It is also your family. It is your public platform but it is also your private space. I can’t think of other products that have the same inside/outside role. A social network on the scale of Facebook has universal reach. But it is also your personalised product, your identity and your very own communications sphere. We are all a mess of contradictions and that is what makes us human. Facebook is finding out how difficult it is to live with these paradoxes.

Of course, there is no solution. This is a negotiation between companies like Facebook and consumers that will continue and that will evolve as the social media market grows. It will become more complex as the technology advances. But let’s not forget the social bit of social media. As [POLIS research has shown](#), changing social trends are driving this relationship, too. Increased scepticism in society, for example, is produced by improving education, increasing individualism, and a loss of political deference. It is not something ‘natural’ about being British and it certainly isn’t just about Facebook.

If scepticism means being more thoughtful about the decisions you make and the actions you take, then I think it’s a good thing. As a journalist I like to ask questions first and then trust afterwards. This applies to Facebook as well. On the other hand, I hope we don’t all default to a kind of lazy and rather fearful flip cynicism.

I am not a heavy user of Facebook nor a particular advocate. But independently of Sandberg’s visit I have recently seen a whole load of socially useful applications of the network that have impressed me. Sandberg made it clear that Facebook isn’t going to save the world or start revolutions. That’s not in their business plan. But those of us who live in the country of Facebook and who have taken it into our lives can use it for something more than making Mark Zuckerberg an even richer man.

I think that in that sense, we can trust Facebook. Not just because I think people like Sheryl Sandberg are honest, but because the logic of their business is that the user – not the tech media or even the politicians – will decide how it works.

The [audio podcast is here](#)

[A good blog about this lecture from someone who was convinced [here](#)]

[You can read what Wired UK made of it [here](#)]

[Watch the video podcast of the event [here](#)]

[Get links to other blogs about the Sandberg lecture and the audio podcast itself [here](#)]

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