The Facebook Files

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As I was preparing for my drive from Baltimore to New York last week, my daughter-in-law suggested that I pass the time by listening to the WSJ Facebook Files podcast.

It's worth the listen.

1. The Basics. The Facebook Files is an investigative six-part podcast by the Wall Street Journal. Based on Facebook's own documents, it provides an inside view of some thorny issues – about ethics, governance, social responsibility, and transparency – for this social media giant. Research reports, online employee discussions, internal drafts of presentations to senior management, and testimony from former Facebook data scientist Frances Haugen before a Senate subcommittee are among the documents that form the basis of this report. A key takeaway is that Facebook is well aware that it is causing certain social harms, and the contention is that it is not doing enough to address the issues and has no intention of stopping.

2. The Facebook Files, Part 2. [“We Make Body Image Issues Worse”](). The second episode of the series is focused on mental health, and it quickly hones in on the [mental health risks associated with Instagram]() (which is owned by Facebook) for teenage girls. Instagram's own research shows that this photo-sharing app, more so than other social media platforms, can increase body image issues especially for teen girls. A 2019 slide on Facebook's internal message board states, "[We make body image issues worse for one in three teen girls]()." A March 2020 slide states, "Thirty-two percent of teen girls said that when they felt bad about their bodies, [Instagram made them feel worse]()," and "Comparisons on Instagram can change [how young women view and describe themselves]()." Additional slides reveal that Instagram knows that, "Teens blame Instagram for [increases in the rate of anxiety and depression]()" — a reaction that was "unprompted and consistent across all groups." And a disconcerting percentage of teens who reported suicidal thoughts – 13% of British users and 6% of American users – [traced the desire to kill themselves to Instagram]().

3. What's not new? Within the field of eating disorders, we have known for a long time that social comparison, advertising, and social pressures to be thin all contribute significantly to body image issues, particularly for teen girls. Back when it all happened with print versions of [magazines](), for example, we were already able to demonstrate that promoting and glamorizing unhealthy body ideals set unrealistic expectations in young girls and adversely impacted self-image and self-perception – antecedents of eating disorders, and also associated with depression and anxiety.

4. What is new? The rise of social media coincides with advancing understanding of how our brains work and what stimulates the brain to engage in addictive behavior, including, for example, compulsive [gambling](), [eating](), and [sex](). We also have the computing technology today to serve up these images and messages to a degree that is many orders of magnitude greater than just a couple of decades ago. And [algorithms]() to maximize the potency of such imagery and messaging. We have all experienced it with the advertisements that pop up in the margins on our search engines, on YouTube, in texts. With the technology comes algorithms that are designed to "personalize" our experience – a euphemism for selling our identities to anyone who is willing to pay for our attention.

5. What can we do? A lot. I offer three ideas. First, we need to stop vilifying technology. It is not going away. And let's face it, today's technology has enhanced our everyday lives and is lifesaving in profound ways. We are able to connect with loved ones halfway around the world on "free" video chats. In the early days of the pandemic, health care providers shared essential information with each other in real-time, and today's technology was crucial to the rapid development of vaccines. Second, given that it is here to stay, we need to understand that technology is simply potential – like water, fire, money. It can be used for good or evil. We need to do the soulsearching work of deciding how we are going to deploy this technology in our work and in our lives. We need to build cultures within our countries and our companies that move beyond a measure of success defined solely by the anemic measure of dollar return on investment. Culture change is a longview strategy, so third, we need to act now to pass policies and regulations, supported by the right incentives and punishments, that can optimize technology's awesome potential and minimize the damages.

We are in the first chapter of this new era. When the automobile hit the road, many people died in accidents that people survive today. We now require seatbelts and airbags. When the tobacco industry knowingly and intentionally advertised and sold cigarettes to children, public outcry spurred new laws and regulations that effectively reduced smoking among youth. We need to consider the same for social media. It is time to install the seatbelts and airbags; time to regulate advertising. Time to hold ourselves, our communities, and our companies accountable. Only then will we have a chance at optimizing the benefits and reducing the harm for social media.