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FACEBOOK: A CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS OF THE INFLUENTIAL GLOBAL
POWER OF FACEBOOK AND HOW IT AFFECTS OUR SOCIETY. (*AND
RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW TO FIX IT*)

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Oxford, Mississippi
May 2020

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the global influence of the major social media platform Facebook, in real time. The text reviews Facebook's guidelines and regulations and provides examples of significant social influence. It also analyzes possible solutions, why these solutions provide barriers, and recommendations for current Facebook users.

This information was collected by the individual during months of research. It started with a broader focus on the spread of false information and media literacy. After getting an in-depth understanding, it was decided to focus more specifically on Facebook. All information was collected from scholarly journals, news articles, books, and Facebook. The research was narrowed down to: the ins and outs of Facebook, studying current events that illustrate the global influence, the issue of lack of media literacy, and what recommendations users can take to become a more digitally literate consumer.

Facebook, a platform that has 2.45 billion monthly users, greatly influences society. Because Facebook is a global entity, the content posted on its platform cannot be regulated by one government entity. This contributes to issues such as the overwhelming spread of misinformation, influence in presidential elections, and modern-day genocides. Facebook is a massive network with billions of users and no accountability. Research established that Facebook has lenient guidelines about misinformation and political advertising and that these factors influenced the 2016

presidential election. An entire genocide took place in Myanmar, encouraged through Facebook propaganda for five years before the company became aware of it. The spread of misinformation and lack of regulation influenced many events for which Facebook will never have to take full accountability, or be required to.

The problems are many; the solutions few. While global solutions and regulations are being sought, the thesis offers readers practical solutions and precautions to readers about how to practice media literacy, especially on Facebook.

Dedication

This thesis would not have been possible without the constant support of my family, friends, and professors.

This thesis is wholeheartedly dedicated to my beloved parents, who answered the frantic phone calls and consistently reminded me that I was capable of anything I wanted, and believed it. They have been such a constant source of support and strength during my college career.

To my friends, who sat with me in the library, honors college study rooms, or in our houses as I wrote and rewrote. They provided me with memories that I'll carry in my heart forever.

To Greg Brock, who had more patience with me than anyone in this world ever has. Your class was the inspiration behind this project and I am thankful to have had your advice and expertise for two years.

To my thesis committee, for taking time out of their busy schedules to offer feedback and encouragement.

Last, I dedicate this to SMBHC. The memories within the walls of this building and with the people that occupy it have been some of my favorite. Thank you for the endless opportunities to apply and better myself. Sally was my home for four years and I will miss her and the in-between classes on the third floor couches.

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I. Introduction

Facebook is a social networking site that, in a little less than two decades, has gained a substantial amount of influence. With more than 2.45 billion monthly active users, it is the biggest social network in the world. More than half of these users log in to their accounts daily. In the United States alone, more than 68 percent of Americans own and use a Facebook account (Wagner). Not only do these users go to Facebook to connect with friends, but also more than 67 percent utilize it as a significant news source (Gesenhues).

Facebook is a global network and is responsible for creating its own policies and guidelines. Because it is a social media platform, Facebook does not have any obligation to meet standards of political fairness and accuracy. And being solely self-regulated, Facebook reports to no higher authority. There is no commission or agency capable of regulating the range of raised about Facebook. Philip M. Napoli, professor of Public Policy at Duke University, says that “even if antitrust enforcement moves forward, social welfare regulations are also required (Napoli).” He says any new regulation agency needs to be created, “Such an agency would need to be able to address not only concerns about competition but also these broader social welfare concerns. Essentially, then, we need a robust public interest framework for platform regulation (Napoli).” Facebook is self-regulated simply because there is not an agency created to regulate such platforms to the extent needed.

Without regulation from an outside party, Facebook itself decides the guidelines and regulations about what content is posted on its website. For example, with the rising issue of misinformation, Facebook can decide whether to delete posts that have been proved to be false if the company decides to. Facebook might take precautionary measures to alert its users that the information is not true, but the post can still make a heavy, misconstrued, impact on those who read it.

This thesis is a unique type of platform to discuss the influential power of Facebook accompanied by a lack of accountability and why it is an issue that needs to be brought to the commoner's attention. The majority of information that is used in this thesis is being collected in real-time, as this is a modern issue that is taking place and changing every day.

II. Brief History of Facebook

Facebook, an American-founded, free social networking website, was founded by Mark Zuckerberg and three of his colleagues in 2004. This website was created so that users could network and communicate with people online. Facebook says its mission in the first few sentences of its guidelines, “the goal...has always been to create a place for expression and give its people a voice (“Community Standards”).”

In its first year, Facebook attracted one million users and multiple advertisers. With constant revisions, it has grown to have more than two billion users and a clearly defined system for advertisers to target their audiences.

From the start, Facebook has been influential to its users. In the beginning, the platform was closed for use only between students at local colleges. After the initial launch and growing popularity among the college students, the company decided to expand. In September 2006, the company opened up to anyone over the age of 13 that had a valid email address. Once open to the public, Facebook began to trend rapidly. Its influential power has increased by multitudes and now the company has a significant pull in things such as presidential elections, organization of protests, and many other options that involve bringing people together over issues they are passionate about, good or bad.

Over the years, Facebook has acquired more platforms to help grow its initial audience, including Instagram and WhatsApp. Facebook purchased Instagram for \$1

billion in 2012. Instagram is an application that “allows users to upload photos and videos, which can be edited with filters and organized with tags and location information. Users can browse other users’ content by tags and locations, and view trending content. Users can “like” photos and follow other users to add their content to their feed (“Instagram”).” In 2012, this was Facebook’s biggest app purchase ever; the company had usually focused on smaller acquisitions of \$100 million or less. At the time of purchase, Instagram was the most downloaded application on the iPhone and had 30 million users. Today, it is still one of the most downloaded apps and has grown to more than 1 billion users. Two years after the major purchase of Instagram, Facebook bought WhatsApp for 20 times more.

In 2014, Facebook announced its plans to acquire WhatsApp. WhatsApp is a free mobile application that allows users to send unlimited messages to contacts – without use of their network or data fees (Deutsch). Following the \$1 billion purchase of Instagram, “WhatsApp’s founders attached a purchase price of \$16 billion: \$4 billion in cash and \$12 billion remaining in Facebook shares. This price tag is dwarfed by the actual price Facebook paid: \$21.8 billion, or \$55 per user. (Deutsch).” The enormous investment was not necessarily for the app itself, but to initiate user growth. Like Instagram, it succeeded. As of 2020, WhatsApp has 1.5 billion users.

These acquisitions allowed Facebook the ability to reach more people. In a statement by Alison L. Deutsch on Investopedia, “For Facebook, user growth comes first and monetization later (Deutsch).” The major purchases benefitted both the companies and Facebook, allowing for substantial user growth all around. As Facebook’s popularity

grew, thousands of companies, advertisers, and news outlets began to use Facebook as a marketing tool. This has proved to be efficient in connecting consumers to new brands but it also has led to these entities to do whatever it takes, including posting outlandish or misleading headlines, to be recognized on a massive platform.

News outlets use Facebook to publish their news articles so that they can be shared and start a conversation amongst the users. News organizations post their articles on Facebook to direct traffic to their own websites, where they hope to sell ads. The more exposure on Facebook leads to more traffic on their website, which earns the company a profit. Many users are aware that news and other media companies use Facebook to do this. Also aware are scammers. They take advantage of this model and create mock websites that look like reputable news sources. If users are not careful, they could mistake fake sources for a reputable ones. The information posted may be false or misleading, but a clever headline can cause a post on a fake news website to go viral. Because there were no strict guidelines on what could and could not be posted on Facebook, misinformation began to spread. When an enticing headline makes its way to users' screens, they are likely to click on it. Being aware of how the model works, these unauthentic companies create fake news articles that also drive consumers to their website and turn a profit. The spread of misinformation has become a huge problem.

Through the years, Facebook has tried to tweak elements of the Timeline in a way that benefits both its users and its advertisers. "Family and friend" pictures increasingly are posted before a lengthy news article unless it is rendered more important by the

algorithm. Zuckerberg has worked with numerous fact-checking organizations to flag false articles and alert the users. Regardless of whether the article has been proved to be completely false, Facebook keeps it on the Timeline.

Facebook continues to grow in the number of users daily. With this amount of reach, Facebook has an astonishing amount of power and influence when choosing what its readers see daily on their Timeline. The company constantly updates its site to make it modern, fast, and addictive to those who use it.

Facebook is not a government-owned website and has a global audience. It does not have to abide by any rules of any one specific government, even if the content posted by users or organizations directly affects the laws of a certain entity. (Disclaimer: Though it does not have to follow rules of any one specific government, several countries have put restrictions on the use of Facebook and other social content. This will be discussed later.) For example, the United States has to follow the rules of the First Amendment. Even if a troubling statement – for example, a comment that might be classified as hate speech – is posted on Facebook, a user's right to free speech is usually protected by the First Amendment. Facebook does not have to uphold the regulations of the First Amendment, and can choose whether it is removed or not. If it violates Facebook's regulations and guidelines, it will be removed.

Facebook has had a system that has worked for it for many years. It has allowed it to not only to continue to grow, but also to help it avoid problems. However, because

Facebook is a company-made system, with little outside accountability and regulation, it has been responsible for several scandals.

To illustrate, one large-scale scandal that happened recently was the privacy breach in users' Facebook messages (Frier). There is an option to send audio messages via Facebook's unique messaging app, Messenger. It had been revealed that Facebook was paying hundreds of outside contractors to listen to these audio messages and transcribe them, without the user's knowledge. After the company was criticized for the transcribing, it claimed that it would not do so anymore (Frier). Though what the company was responsible for completely violated privacy of its users, Facebook was not held to any accountability other than self-punishment because of social commentary.

The system that Facebook has used may have worked for the success of the company, but the United States Congress and other government agencies are questioning how much longer they can withstand some of the unethical practices of Facebook. Mark Zuckerberg and the United States Congress have met several times. But with the complications of legalities and the promised privacy of the users, an easy solution is proving elusive. As this takes place, the United States is watching a very important moment in modern history. Whatever future solution is decided, can either drastically change how citizens use social media or can be the first time that an amendment is altered in this lifetime. Any kind of decision, of this measure, will affect Facebook and how it will continue to operate.

III. Overview of Facebook’s Current Guidelines Relating to Speech and Misinformation

a. Guidelines

To understand how Facebook works and how it controls the content that is posted on its website, it is important to review its guidelines. This thesis focuses on the Facebook guidelines that regulate what content is posted. Facebook reiterates that the goal of the company is to allow users to have a place to give people a voice. Its guidelines state, “building community and bringing the world closer together depends on people’s ability to share diverse views, experiences, ideas, and information. We want people to be able to talk openly about the issues that matter to them (“Community Standards”).”

Facebook has four main focuses when constructing its guidelines. These are the following: dignity, privacy, safety, and authenticity. There are specific standards and regulations for content that is posted on the website. The topics that will be focused on the most within the regulations are these sections: hate speech, false news, manipulated media, inauthentic behavior, and violent and graphic content.

(Objectionable content is an entire section of the Facebook guidelines. It is broken down into five sections, which cover hate speech, violent and graphic content, adult nudity and sexual activity, sexual solicitation, and material that is cruel and insensitive.) To

elaborate further on what is specified in these somewhat broad guidelines, they will be broken down by section.

Hate speech is a topic that many Americans are familiar with discussing in regards to the First Amendment. It then becomes a choice in an internal ethical decision to prevent users from publishing such speech. Facebook has a specific definition for hate speech, which is defined as, “a direct attack on people based on what we call protected characteristics – race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, caste, sex, gender/gender identity, and serious disease or disability (“Community Standards”).” These guidelines seem specific, but it is also explained that a multitude of things can keep speech that meets the requirements stated above from being taken down. Facebook classifies this into levels of severity. Hate speech that can be classified as self-referencing, empowering or comical will not be removed by administrators.

These guidelines may have helped control the amount of hate speech on Facebook, but some significant mishaps have occurred. In July 2018, a local Texas newspaper had been publishing excerpts from the Declaration of Independence daily leading up to July Fourth. There had not been any issues flagged by Facebook for the first nine posts, but “the 10th post, which included paragraphs 27 through 31 of the Declaration of Independence, was deleted by Facebook (Grayer).” The newspaper received an alert claiming that the material went against Facebook’s guidelines. The

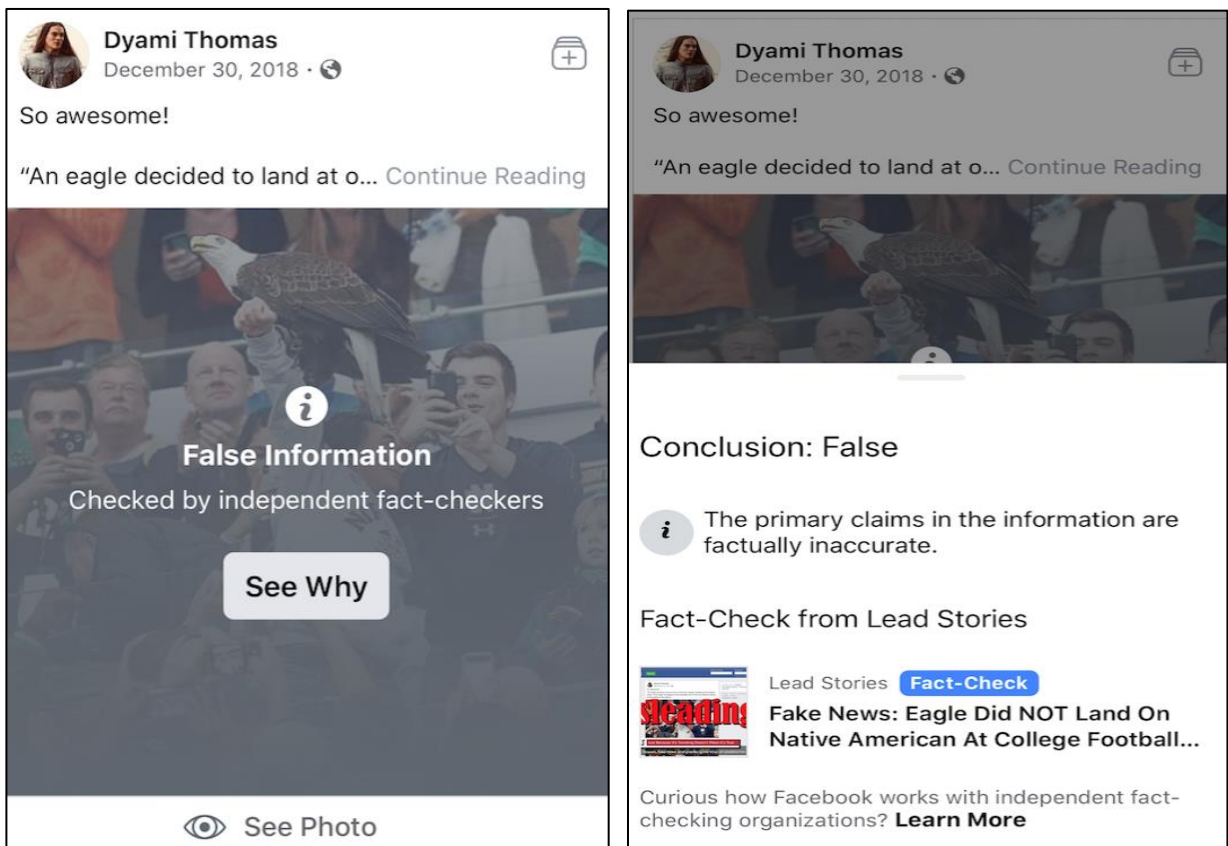
removal of the post was an obvious mistake being an automatic action that was triggered by the phrase, “Indian Savages” (Grayer). Once the report was processed and reviewed by a moderator, the post was restored and Facebook issued an apology. This example alone proves that Facebook and its automatic hate speech filter is not always accurate and can unnecessarily take down unharmed posts while missing other posts that should be addressed.

Facebook has created a specific definition of hate speech and in most cases if the statement is proved to be harmful, it is taken down. False news shared on the domain is not treated the same way. Facebook acknowledges that spread of misinformation is a serious issue in its guidelines, “reducing the spread of false news on Facebook is a responsibility that we take seriously (“Community Standards”).”

The company says it believes it is a severe issue, but does not take down content that is considered to be false news. It is not completely ignored; Facebook reduces the distribution by pushing the article further down into the newsfeed. In addition to bogging down the articles, Facebook reached out to a few fact-checking websites in 2016 to help control the distribution of false news. Since then, “Facebook has expanded these third-party fact-checking partnerships: it now has more than 50 partners globally, fact-checking in 42 languages (Owen).” When an article is flagged by a fact-checking source to be false, a notice appears on the post.

An article, published in December 2018 by a Facebook user, quickly went viral after claiming that an American eagle landed on a Native American at a college football

game. It was published with a lengthy caption of a made-up, feel-good story. The fact-checkers hired by Facebook flagged the content as factually inaccurate. Even though it has been proven to be completely false, it is still circulating to date on the website. The only difference is now Facebook users receive a warning that it has been flagged as false. Users can still share it onto their feed. The use of fact-checkers makes it easier for



users to decipher what sources are trustworthy, but leaves them with the decision whether to share the misinformation or not, regardless of the accuracy.

This method relies on the hope that users will understand how fact-checking websites work and that users already have media literacy skills. Not only is it a bold assumption from Facebook but also it continues to shift the blame of whatever the

outcome is from the company to the users. This feeds back into the argument of when and how Facebook should be held accountable for these types of situations.

Another form of false information, manipulated media, is an issue regulated by minimum guidelines. Media manipulation is when content is taken and edited to misconstrue the original context of the message. Facebook will not take down edited videos unless they have been altered by Artificial Intelligence, or are a “deepfake.”

A deepfake is a form of Artificial Intelligence and in most cases is used to change the context of a video entirely. Margaret Rouse, “What Is” blog writer, defines deepfake as, “an AI-based technology used to produce or alter video content so that it presents something that didn’t, in fact, occur (Rouse).” Facebook will remove these types of videos because it goes against their belief that all material should be authentic. The only exception in regard to the removal of deepfakes is if they are clearly classified as satire. This policy also states that Facebook does not delete videos that were simply edited to omit certain words. Though these types of edited videos could misconstrue the original meaning, Facebook will not remove them. Unlike false news articles that are now flagged when potentially containing misinformation, there is not yet a system in place to notify users that videos have been edited to leave out or rearrange certain words.

In May 2019, an edited video of Nancy Pelosi went viral on Facebook, “Pelosi spoke at an event hosted by the liberal group the Center for American Progress. Soon after, an altered video of her speech that has been slowed by about 75 percent to

introduce ‘significant distortion’ popped up online – and it took off (Stewart).” The video was edited to make Pelosi look as if she was heavily intoxicated at a public event. The video is still widely available online because Facebook refuses to take it down.

At first, Facebook argued that the video had gone through the fact-checking process and even though the information was not true, it did not have to remove it. When Facebook made the announcement that it would start taking down deepfake videos that are AI-manipulated, people started to question if Pelosi’s video would finally be taken down. It was not. Facebook argues that the edited video of Pelosi still does not meet the standards of the new deep fake policy, which says that, “only videos generated by Artificial Intelligence to depict people saying fictional things will be taken down. Edited or clipped videos will continue to be subject to our fact-checking program. In the case of the Pelosi video, once it was rated false, we reduced its distribution (Ghaffary).” With this very specific policy in place, the Pelosi video, though edited to misconstrue the video’s original meaning, will stay on Facebook because it does not meet Facebook’s specifications of a deepfake.

b. Content moderators, Their Job and Responsibilities

Those in charge of monitoring what is allowed to be published on Facebook is classified as a content moderator. As of May 2019, there were 15,000 content reviewers hired by Facebook through third party companies. This job may seem like simple busy

work to those on the outside, but it takes a significant emotional toll on those performing it. Details will be given through a past employee's personal experience to further explain how this job works and how it affects those who do it.

For privacy reasons, the writers at Verge kept the interviewed employee's identity a secret and referred to her using a pseudonym, Chloe. Chloe represents thousands of employees in this field, specifically those who were hired through the third-party company Cognizant. As soon as they were hired, they were required to sign a nondisclosure agreement stating no information about work for Facebook should be discussed. The company claims that the nondisclosure statements are for the protection of the employees', in case a Facebook user is angry about a moderator's decision. Not only are the Cognizant employees not allowed to discuss the work they do and who they do it for, but also they are restricted of revealing details of emotional toll they can reveal to friends and family members (Newton).

The job starts off with rigorous training that is overseen by an experienced moderator. Chloe spent three and a half weeks in training. In this training cycle, she read through an enormous amount of disturbing posts, including, "hate speech, violent attacks, and graphic pornography (Newton)." After the trainees learn what is acceptable by the company, Chloe and fellow trainees have to perform a test in front of each other in a large room.

An image, which they have never seen before, appears on the large screen and the trainee has to decide instantly if the post can stay up on the site or not (Newton). This kind of work seemed to affect every employee who was interviewed, “collectively, the employees described a workplace that is perpetually teetering on the brink of chaos... workers cope by telling dark jokes about committing suicide, then smoke weed during breaks to numb their emotions (Newton).”

The employees interviewed raised issues that were directly related to Facebook and its content, even if their job was outsourced through another company. Moderators are typically young adults, looking for a side job to make money. “Moderators in Phoenix will make just \$28,800 a year -- while the average Facebook employee has a total compensation of \$240,000 (Newton).” These moderators are the ones who are tasked with finding content that is against Facebook guidelines and making sure it is taken down. It can be assumed that content moderation is a significant role because Facebook has hired 15,000 content moderators around the world. It keeps Facebook within its guidelines and keeps users happy.

Material that is removed because it goes against the guidelines can be traumatic to the content moderators who view it. These employees have to view the content, make the decision to take it down, all while keeping their work life a secret from everyone around them. This is a massive responsibility to carry while also getting paid so little. Facebook employees are compensated much more, but rely on moderators who are paid less to keep their website within their guidelines and out of trouble.

These content moderators are an example of how Facebook's operations are not entirely ethical, but the company is not directly affected nor are they held accountable for it. There are 15,000 people employed to be content moderators globally, an outstanding number of employees forced to keep information to themselves because of the looming threat of losing their job. These moderators directly contribute to the success of Facebook but are treated as disposable and without a competitive compensation.

These moderators are how Facebook keeps its company within its guidelines and protects users from inappropriate content. The stipulations, however, that come with such a low-paying, emotional job are concerning. These third party companies are hired, but not monitored, by Facebook to do a job that it relies on.

The issues with mental health, inadequate breaks, and low pay explained by current employees are mostly ignored by Facebook. Not only is it something that directly effects the company, but a company as large as Facebook should take responsibility in investigating worker conditions. Facebook outsources these jobs through other companies, so if a traumatic event were to happen to one of the moderators, Facebook would not be the entity held accountable. This is an example of how Facebook can directly effect a group of people, but have no actual responsibility of what occurs.

IV. Examples of Influence with Lack of Accountability

a. 2016 and 2020 Presidential campaigns

Facebook has played a key role in political campaigns since its founding. Social media has continued to be an outlet that candidates running for election have used to gain support and following. With the advancement of technology, how political advertisements are distributed has also advanced. Online ads do not have to meet regulations required of political ads on television, which have to include a disclaimer about who paid for the ad and that information has to be disclosed to the Federal Election Commission. With online ads, anything goes. The most recent presidential election, in 2016, was seriously influenced by Facebook.

The 2016 presidential election campaign was unlike any in history. The two main opponents, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, both used social media outlets in an attempt to gain a following and support from voters. Facebook was a social media platform that both candidates used heavily. The presidential candidates and their campaign teams were not the only ones buying political ads. After the election of Donald Trump, it came to light that Russia had played a significant part in the political ads on Facebook.

Russia's Internet Research Agency was responsible for spending \$200,000 on advertising. Its workers posed as American users and wrote original posts, which among other things, helped organize political rallies (Parks). On Facebook, these ads may have

reached as many as 126 million people. This could have had a significant effect on undecided voters. In September of 2016, the Russian IRA had a monthly budget of more than \$1.25 million, which it used to hire hundreds of employees and to establish a graphics department, a data analysis department, a search-engine optimization department, an IT department and a finance department (Parks). The Russians had not only a hefty budget but also large staff that worked to publish pro-Trump ads on Facebook. Along with Russian trolls creating content to push Republican propaganda, a massive data breach allowed for another group, Cambridge Analytica, to use private information to create specifically targeted ads to voters.

Data was accessed through Cambridge Analytica, a British political consulting firm. Cambridge Analytica would collect data on voters, “using sources such as demographics, consumer behavior, internet activity, and other public and private sources (“Cambridge Analytica”). The company did not always get their information legally, “in 2014 contractors and employees of Cambridge Analytica, eager to sell psychological profiles of American voters to political campaigns, acquired the private Facebook data of tens of millions of users – the largest known leak in Facebook history (Confessore).” An estimated number of 87 million people that were affected by the data breach, most of them being United States citizens (Confessore). The company, which worked for Donald Trump at the time, used the stolen data to target voters in Trump’s 2016 campaign.

The Trump campaign hired Cambridge Analytica to run data operations and help the campaign identify which voters to target with ads, based off both legal and stolen data (Sherr). The Trump campaign has stated that Facebook was a key part to its victory (Bump). A majority of the information used to create targeted ads came from Facebook users taking quizzes. When a Facebook user would take a seemingly easy quiz, Cambridge Analytica would then have access to both the user's information and to a loophole in the system that also allowed access to quiz taker's friends' data. The incident was a massive breach of Facebook users' privacy.

After it was made public that Cambridge Analytica had taken this information, Mark Zuckerberg had to respond to many officials and explain Facebook and Cambridge Analytica's relationship. Facebook said that Cambridge Analytica, "certified three years ago that it had deleted the information (Sherr)." Shortly after the scandal made news and Zuckerberg was forced to inform the public of his plans, Zuckerberg made his first mention of Facebook needing some sort of regulation, but was not sure what that would look like (Sherr). Four years later, no regulation has been put into place as the United States prepares for another presidential election in 2020.

Facebook has not made many changes since the 2016 election regarding its political policies. In the middle of February 2020, Facebook announced that it will allow branded content from political candidates to be posted on its platform (Scola). Branded content is defined as, "a practice in which a campaign pays so-called influencers to place

supportive posts on their accounts. Under the new rules, the content will have to be clearly marked as sponsored (Scola).” This change in policy was prompted by Mike Bloomberg, presidential candidate at the time, and his use of social media memes.

Bloomberg was paying influential Instagram accounts to post his memes, a method that had not yet been tried before. Facebook stated that it believes there is a place for branded political content on its platforms, but it will not treat it the same as political ads. The posts will be allowed, but will not be included in the, “library of political ads that the company launched after the 2016 presidential election, unless the posts are converted in to paid advertisements using the site’s boosting tools (Scola).” The implementation of this very recent rule is the only addition Facebook has made to its political advertising policies.

In 2020, Kevin Roose, writer for The New York Times states, “politicians will still be exempt from Facebook’s fact-checking program and will still be allowed to break many of the rules that apply to other users (Roose).” After the backlash of Facebook’s involvement in the 2016 election, many thought that Zuckerberg would hesitate to be as involved in the 2020 election. Instead, “Mr. Zuckerberg has embraced Facebook’s central role in elections – not only by giving a political pass on truth, but by preserving the elements of its advertising platforms that proved to be a decisive force in 2016 (Roose).” Zuckerberg and his social media platform will continue to be involved in

political campaigns of the 2020 presidential campaign, with very few, minor changes to the political policies since 2016.

b. Myanmar Genocide

In April 2018, Mark Zuckerberg came across an urgent and dangerous situation taking place in the depths of his social network. There were violent groups that had come together on Facebook in Myanmar, a country in Southeast Asia, and were calling for harm against the Rohingya and other Myanmar Muslims. These Facebook groups and pages that were started slid under Facebook's radar and allowed for this violence to occur for years.

The propaganda began when Myanmarans began to create fake news pages that appeared to be dedicated to Burmese pop stars and other celebrities. The pages attracted a lot of following, quickly, then transformed into "distribution channels for lurid photos, false news, and inflammatory posts, often aimed at Myanmar's Muslims (Stevenson)." The campaign that took place in Myanmar was compared to those of Russia.

The Facebook posts were created not by ordinary Myanmar citizens, but those with power, which included Myanmar military personnel. Troll accounts run by the military helped spread the content, shut down critics and fueled arguments (Stevenson). The New York Times reported on the incident, "Members of the Myanmar military were the prime operatives behind a systematic campaign on Facebook that stretched back half a decade and that targeted the country's mostly Muslim Rohingya minority group

(Stevenson).” There were thousands of degrading posts that were used to call Myanmar citizens to action, including one that read, “We must fight them the way Hitler did the Jews, damn kalars (Stecklow)!”

This anti-Rohingya propaganda was spread through Facebook pages and groups in forms of advertisements, articles and vulgar images. There were more than 1000 violent examples of not only hate speech, but also videos that recorded direct attacks discovered within these Facebook groups. This was not an event that took off overnight or that was resolved quickly. Some of these posts dated back six years ago (Stecklow).

Several institutions, including UC Berkeley School of Law, were involved in gathering and analyzing this data. “The use of Facebook to spread hate speech against the Rohingya in the Buddhist-majority country has been widely reported by the U.N. and others (Stecklow),” writes Reuters Investigates. This issue was so large that it had to be reported through the United Nations on a global scale by several sources to get the attention of Facebook.

Reuters Investigates explains why the company failed to stop an organization of a massacre for so long. Facebook, a company that annually brings in \$16 billion in revenue, has allocated very little money toward detecting hate speech in Myanmar. There were 21,765,000 Facebook users in Myanmar as of February 2019, which is almost 40% of the entire population (“Facebook Users in Myanmar”).” With little resources dedicated to this group of people, hate speech and violent posts went

undetected, “In early 2015, there were only two people at Facebook who could speak Burmese reviewing problematic posts. Before that, most of the people reviewing Burmese content spoke English (Stecklow).” Facebook’s moderation system relies a lot on users reporting things as inappropriate, especially when written in languages like Burmese, because the system struggles to interpret more complicated languages.

Since 2015, a secretive operation called “Project Honey Badger” has been established abroad and has 60 people employed to review explicit content published by Myanmarans on Facebook (Stecklow). The secret operation is similar to the responsibilities of the aforementioned content moderators. Those who monitor the content through Project Honey Badger are not allowed to disclose that the outsourced client is Facebook or what their specific duties are. These revisions were created by Facebook considerably after the fact, originally ignoring several warnings about Myanmar from researchers and activists.

David Madden, a tech entrepreneur employed in Myanmar, states, “They [referring to Facebook officials employed at the company’s headquarters] were warned so many times (Stecklow).” Madden explains that in 2015, he gave a speech at Facebook Headquarters in California claiming that the platform was being used and exploited for hatred. To elaborate, Madden tells Reuters that there were more than a dozen Facebook employees in attendance, both in person and via video, “It couldn’t have been presented to them more clearly, and they didn’t take the necessary steps (Stecklow).”

One Facebook employee, Mia Garlick, attended this speech and later spoke on the issue.

Mia Garlick currently serves as Facebook's director of Asia Pacific policy, which includes countries like China, Australia, and Myanmar. Reuters Investigates asked Garlick directly about the situation with Myanmar. She admitted that it was the company's fault. "We were too slow to respond to concerns raised by civil society, academics, and other groups in Myanmar. We don't want Facebook to be used to spread hatred and incite violence," she said. "This is true around the world but it is especially true in Myanmar where our services can be used to amplify hate or exacerbate harm against the Rohingya (Stecklow)."

Facebook admits to fault, but still lacks urgency. By the time Facebook acknowledged the tragedy, more than 700,000 Rohingya had fled the country by August 2018 (Mozur). The United Nations referred to it as a textbook example of "ethnic cleansing" (Mozur).

Since this event, Facebook has added a section in the community guidelines that directly acknowledges coordination of harmful events or public crime. It states, "we prohibit people from facilitating, organizing, promoting, or admitting to certain criminal or harmful activities targeted at people, businesses, property or animals ("Community Standards")."

Without proper regulation and accountability, it takes tragic and large scale events to draw Facebook's attention to an issue. There is no one solution that would prevent outside presidential campaign influences, data breaches, and ethnic cleansings. If Facebook wants more regulation to combat these issues, it will have to find and implement different solutions to do so.

V. Solution Barriers

a. Problems Surrounding Government Regulation of Social Media

Facebook operates in countries all over the world, so there is currently not one single body of government that it could be regulated by. Individual countries have put their own rules about social media in place, many vastly differing from the other.

Taking a look at how other big countries regulate their social media provides a better understanding of the individual governance that is taking place around the world. Countries like Australia, Germany and China have set rules to deal with social media regulation, though each unique.

In Australia, the Sharing of Abhorrent Violent Material Act was passed in 2019. This policy states that it, “introduces criminal penalties for social media companies, possible jail sentences for tech executives for up to three years and financial penalties worth up to 10% of a company’s global turnover (Team).” This act was put into place after Facebook allowed the New Zealand shootings to be live streamed on their platform and prohibits violent content. Australia punishes the tech executives instead of punishing the users, unlike Germany.

Germany passed its NetzDG law in 2018. This law applies to both companies with more than two million users in country and the users themselves. Companies were held accountable, “they were forced to set up procedures to review complaints about content they were hosting, remove anything that was clearly illegal within 24 hours, and

publish updates every six months about how they were doing (Team).” Along with strict regulations for companies, individuals that failed to comply could also be fined. Under this law, Facebook was the first to receive a fine from Germany’s government. The company had to pay \$1.1 million in July 2019 for under-reporting illegal activity on its platform (Team). The threat of steep fines keeps companies and individuals accountable, but allows the freedom of making their own decisions. China is less trusting of internet giants and has much stricter social media policies.

In China, if the government believes that social media platform is problematic, they simply block its citizens from using it entirely. For example, “sites such as Twitter, Google, and WhatsApp are blocked in China. Their services are provided instead by Chinese providers such as Weibo, Baidu, and WeChat (Team).” There is an entire sector of their government dedicated to monitoring social media known as The Cyberspace Administration of China. They are responsible for closing 733 websites, “cleaning up” 9,382 mobile apps, and are over hundreds of thousands of cyber-police who screen messages for nationally censored keywords (Team). Instead of fining the companies, the Chinese Government simply bans use of them from their country.

The aforementioned examples provide insight into what regulations other countries are implementing for social media usage. Because there is not one overall government to do so, the countries have had to individually take responsibility in regulating these major platforms, including Facebook. In an ideal situation, there would be a global

standard set for both users and companies. A group of people to allow self-regulation by the two mentioned above, but that also offers a role in accountability and correction. Mark Zuckerberg mentioned the creation of this type of governing body to the United States Congress in March of 2019 (Zuckerberg).

Mark Zuckerberg recently asked for help from governments worldwide to play a more active role in regulation of content on the internet. "I believe we need a more active role for governments and regulators (Zuckerberg)," Zuckerberg said. He addressed what he believes are the most important areas to focus on, "from what I've learned, I believe we need new regulation in four areas: harmful content, election integrity, privacy, and data portability (Zuckerberg)." The creator of the internet giant began to admit that Facebook could no longer control what it needed to by itself. Zuckerberg explained that Facebook wants to create an independent body composed of different government officials in order to accurately regulate and create a broader standard for use of the internet.

Zuckerberg thoroughly explained what he thinks this entity should look like. This group would be created in an attempt to balance both an effort to expand free speech and the necessity to keep people safe globally (Newton). Zuckerberg broadly explained the importance of the hypothetical body, "First it will prevent the concentration of too much decision-making within our teams. Second, it will create accountability and oversight. Third, it will provide assurance that these decisions are made in the best

interests of our community and not for commercial reasons (Newton).” This board would need to be independent but supportive of Facebook’s principles. They would not review minute disputes, but instead would be asked to handle high-profile and important cases (Newton). Every decision that would be made would be public, which would allow Facebook policies to be supported by a type of case law over time. This discussion about an implementation of a global governing board offers the start of a long awaited solution for social media regulation. In theory, it sounds like it could work. In reality, there would be several obstacles to overcome beforehand. The idea of one of the internet giants making the stipulations that all of the others have to fall under seems bias and it would be extremely difficult to receive a global consensus.

Facebook is eager to design and implement this idea. If the company can get ahead of the inevitable regulation that is soon to come, it can create a board for everyone, while making sure that it aligns with the company’s ideals and runs the way Facebook wants it to. If Zuckerberg plays a heavy role in creating this governing body, he is will be able to control the amount and type of regulation that he wants for his company. This could be a conflict of interest, especially if other social media platforms that are to be regulated by this body think differently than Zuckerberg.

As previously noted, several countries have installed their own rules for social media regulation. Many of these laws and standards in place differ greatly from each other. With every country having vast differences in beliefs about social media usage, it would

be incredibly difficult to create a global standard that all governments agreed on. In order for such a body to be created, hundreds of government officials would have to agree on the same principles to create a standard. This massive correlation could take years before a list of rules are agreed upon and put in place on a global scale.

b. Restrictions of the First Amendment

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution reads, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble...(US Constitution).” This amendment applies and provides protection only from the state or federal government. Facebook, a publicly traded company, does not have to allow free speech to users on its platform because it is publicly-owned and not a governmental agency. Along with the First Amendment, the Communications Decency Act provides immunity to providers of interactive computer services, including social media, both for certain decisions to host content and restrict access created by others (United States, Congress, Brannon). “In part because of this broad immunity, social media platforms and other online content hosts have largely operated without outside regulation, resulting in a mostly self-policing industry,” states Valerie C. Brannon, Legislative Attorney (United States, Congress, Brannon). The immunity discussed states that no provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another

content provider (“What is Section 230”). These laws complicate the ability to regulate Facebook and its actions.

Facebook makes a lot of its own rules regarding content. If Congress were to step in and try to regulate a social media platform, there would be a need for state action, which would directly implicate the First Amendment. Not only can Congress not take action toward a social media platform like Facebook, in regards to content posted, but also the company receives immunity for any content that it hosts through the Communications Decency Act. With these two laws in place, there is very little that the United States Government is capable of doing to regulate social media platforms.

In most cases, if someone were to sue a company like Facebook, the case would be dismissed. In past cases that attempted to hold providers liable for regulating users’ content, the courts have ruled that the First Amendment does not apply to the actions of these companies or that the CDA bars the lawsuit (United States, Congress). There are few laws that expressly govern social media site’s decisions about how to present users’ content, “consequently, users’ ability to post speech on social media platforms is governed primarily by the private moderation policies created by these companies (United States, Congress).” This is another illustration of a solution barrier. With no way to govern Facebook’s decisions of what content to host, there is currently not a national or global wide method to hold Facebook accountable.

The First Amendment is an obvious element to the inability to regulate social media in any form. Though simple, it plays a major part of analyzing solutions to hold

internet giants, in this case, Facebook, accountable. The United States has made incredible strides in technology since the writing of the Constitution; at what point does the government decide that an amendment is outdated and should be reconsidered? Social media and internet use is an asset to modern everyday life for most and has incredible influence over decisions made daily. If there is no change to the laws put in place hundreds of years ago, government regulated social media will never happen.

c. Lack of Social Media Literacy by Age Group

There is not a one-time easy fix for these issues. Facebook's lack of accountability is something that needs to be addressed by the public, questioned by governments, and exposed to those who use social media. With the argument of government regulation and the right to free speech, it will take years to find a unified solution for these issues. Facebook might be a powerhouse, but there are other ways to bring awareness of media literacy tools to users. The benefits of media literacy provided to all ages is profound. Media literacy expert Renee Hobbs explains, "when people have digital and media literacy competencies, they recognize personal, corporate, and political agendas and are empowered to speak out... people use their powerful voices and their rights under the law to improve the world around them (Boss)."

Facebook is used by people of all ages from all around the globe. Users are anywhere from the age of 13 to older than 65 (Sprout Social). This makes it very difficult

to target and educate all audiences in the same manner. To discuss the best approaches for the different audiences, they will be broken down into segments by age group.

STUDENTS: GEN Z (Aged 5 to 25)

A study by Stanford Graduate School of Education in 2017 evaluated middle schoolers, high schoolers, and college student's media literacy. After this study, Professor Kevin John suggested that these students struggled with identifying the difference between fake news and real news. One of the biggest findings that contribute to the spread of misinformation on Facebook is this: "Many high school students couldn't tell the difference between a real news article and a real-looking fake news article on social media. More than 30 percent of high school students tested thought a post claiming to be Fox News was more reliable than one actually from Fox News (Spilsbury)." With high schoolers and college students becoming adults and having to make important decisions, like presidential elections, it is alarming that many cannot identify what is authentic.

The advantage to targeting and teaching media literacy to this age group is the fact they are still in school. This gives higher education professionals and teachers the upper hand on establishing this curriculum. They have the ability to teach media literacy and critical thinking to the audience that is growing up with the internet, at an early age. Teachers who are not experienced in teaching the topic or who are not sure on how to address it can find a plethora of free sources and lesson plans online. A website was

published after the Stanford study, “Stanford History Education Group published a website with tools teachers can use to teach young students about media literacy and civic reasoning (Spilsbury).”

As an example, Professor John teaches a class called Media Effects. He recognizes the problem with illiterate media usage and “tries to instill his students a sense of critical thinking when they look at any sort of media (Spilsbury).” With students, there is still enough time to implant these ideas and skills within them, so that they can be educated and also educate both their elders and those who come after them. With the age gap of Facebook ranging from 13 to 65+, these would be skills that lasted a lifetime on the internet.

MIDDLE AGED USERS: Generation X and Millennials (Aged 26 to 54)

As of August 2019, both male and female users aged 25 to 34 years old made up the biggest group of Facebook users in the United States, accounting for 13.8 percent of the entire social network’s user base each (Clement). A recent study highlighted the generational digital skills gap, showing that 64% of millennials are digitally savvy, but only 46% of Gen X are (Dunk). Though this age group did not grow up with the internet, it was first introduced to them when most were teens.

GenX is at somewhat of a disadvantage. They began using the internet in their teen years and at one point were the most digitally savvy generation. Programs that are designed to teach media literacy are catered to students or senior citizens. This middle-

aged group is often forgotten about, but still have a need to be taught digital literacy, “most programs teaching digital literacy to combat fake news are aimed at students and their teachers. Higher level programming for people well past their school years is much harder to find (Nash).” There are very few programs designed to teach media literacy to middle-aged people. Lack of digital and media literacy has been recognized as an issue, as some internet users in this age group are more susceptible to get scammed or have trouble identifying and believing false information. There are very few programs designed for middle age internet users, but Renee Hobbs, media literacy expert, gives suggestions on how to fill this gap.

Hobbs explains that mere access to digital tools will not make a significant enough difference. These lessons need to be taught and applied in different types of learning environments. Hobbs calls for a nationwide education movement for digital and media literacy. Open to all ages, Hobbs describes it as, “a mix of formal and informal learning opportunities in settings including homes, schools, libraries, museums, colleges, and nonprofit organizations (Boss).”

Creating a nationwide movement and increasing awareness of the lack of media literacy programs for adults will take time to develop. Until then, Gen X and older millennials are left with the responsibility of teaching themselves media literacy.

SENIOR CITIZENS: Baby Boomers (Aged 55 to 75)

Senior citizens might not be as relevant on all social media websites, but they dominate a large section of Facebook. They occupy a large section of Facebook, but studies show just because they are active, does not mean they are equipped with the correct internet skills. A recent study showed that only 23% of baby boomers are digitally savvy (Dunk). It can be assumed that the reason for such lack of skills needed to properly use the internet is simply because this generation grew up without it. This generation was in their 30s and 40s when the internet was invented.

Growing up without the internet poses the same issue younger users have: the inability to identify what content is accurate when scrolling down their news feed. One element of media literacy is having knowledge of breaking down a piece of news and deciphering the trustworthiness of it. Clickbait headlines, especially about modern issues and technology, can allude an elder to a construed understanding quickly. Deena Newaz, media literacy blog writer, agrees that seniors are an important audience to focus on. He writes, "While we work to include media literacy in the classroom to ensure students are conscious and creative consumers of information, we must also rethink our approach to media literacy for senior citizens (Newaz)." There is a collective agreement that among the digital community, seniors are important when it comes to this issue as well. The problem needs to be addressed in a different way than the two previous groups.

Media consumption is not foreign to the older demographic, but its means have changed significantly in their lifetimes. The older generations read the paper and listened to the radio to learn current events. There was not an abundant amount of news that is supplied to consumers now. Part of teaching elderly digital users how to be media literate is for them to unlearn their ways of the past. In the 1950s, there were few news outlets and most took pride in telling truthful and accurate news. 70 years later, there are hundreds of news outlets, some accurate and some that are not, that bog any one user's Facebook Timeline. Elderly users have to be taught that these are not all trustworthy and even some of the news outlets they might have had full faith in years ago, should be second guessed today. There should be programs introduced to make it easier to explain how to consume news, especially from sources like Facebook, to this age group.

Cyber Seniors is a program in Toronto that sees insufficient media literacy as an issue and is being proactive about it. It blends the programs that are built for students to learn critical thinking in media skills and allows them to teach it to seniors. Newaz explains the program, "The program creates opportunities for high school students to mentor senior citizens on basic computer and online skills while exposing both sides to the difference experiences they have with similar forms of media (Newaz)." This helps teach people of all ages to develop and practice media literacy skills on all levels (Newaz).

With addition of more programs like Cyber Seniors, there will be opportunity for seniors to be educated in their scrolling and less likely to be influenced by an article filled with misinformation. These are skills that every age group needs, but especially since 52% of people aged 50 to 64 and 32% of those over 65 are active Facebook users (Kiger).

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CURRENT FACEBOOK USERS

One of the main points discussed within this thesis is the importance of users of social media becoming educated in both digital and media literacy. Citizens should be made aware of the lack of regulation and the significance of teaching oneself to be digitally savvy. Many platforms depend on the users to educate and govern themselves while using the websites. As discussed earlier, there are several different programs to become involved in to establish more media literacy and critical thinking skills. For the purpose of this thesis and to reiterate the importance of educating oneself, some tips for those who currently use Facebook are listed below.

a. Media Literacy

According to the National Association for Media Literacy Education, media literacy is defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication (Patterson).” To be media literate, a social media user must slow down and pay attention to what they are reading and sharing.

There are two main reasons people do not research what they share: it takes time to verify the information and it is easier to relate to emotionally-charged topics than to know the truth (Patterson). Aleshia Patterson, blog writer, created a list of five simple things to do daily when exposed to news on a timeline.

First, stop before you share. It is easy to read a headline and quick share without reading the article. In order to prevent the spread of misinformation, no one should share an article before properly vetting it (Patterson).

Second, read the article. Reading is an overlooked, simple task that makes a significant difference. Instead of users sharing articles because of their emotional headlines, they should take a minute to read through the entirety of the article. This allows for users to fully understand the content that they are sharing, as well as the opportunity to engage in healthy, educated conversation with other users (Patterson).

Third, fact-check the article. When a user looks through an article, they need to ask themselves questions to establish the validity, if a Facebook fact-checker has not already. These questions include the following:

What is the origin of the content?

What is the date from the original article?

Are there any cited sources or links? Are the sources trustworthy?

What is the purpose of this article?

After asking these questions, a user will have a better interpretation of the authenticity of the article and can then decide if it is something that they believe is worth sharing or not (Patterson).

These four seemingly simple steps enable users to stop and think about what material they are consuming, which helps prevent the spread of misinformation.

Engaging in media literacy allows users to become involved in a digital society where they are able to “understand, inquire, create, communicate, and think critically (“Information and Media Literacy”).” Increasing awareness of the importance of media literacy in today’s society serves just as of an important role as being literate. Users of social media platforms should not only partake themselves, but educate those around them.

b. Facebook Purity Browser Extension

Facebook is one of the biggest news sources on the internet. A survey from Pew Research Center found that more than half of the U.S. adults surveyed – 52% - get their news from Facebook (Lunden). This makes Facebook the most popular social platform for news sourcing by a significant amount, YouTube comes in second with only 28% of adults getting their news from it (Lunden).

There are a massive amount of news articles that are shared on Facebook every day. In effort to help with sorting through the misinformation and unreliable news sources, GetConnected TV created a browser extension to combat this. According to the creators, users download the extension to the browser of their choice and when turned on, it alters the user’s view of Facebook. It will only show information that is relevant to that specific user and it gets rid of irrelevant stories, spam, and any other clutter that the typical user might find aggravating (Purity). There are 461,000 current users of this browser extension. The browser extension has a lot to offer, but in this case, the most

important aspect is that it allows users to customize the news they receive by specifying their preferences and by blocking website or applications that a user might deem untrustworthy.

The Facebook Purity extension is an option for users to enable to strengthen their ability to become media literate. If they recognize certain sites to have an abundance of untrustworthy information, they have the ability to block that news source from coming back into their news feed. It is a simple tool that could benefit Facebook users.

VII. CONCLUSION

Facebook is a social networking site that, in a little less than two decades, has gained a substantial amount of influence. With more than 2.45 billion monthly active users, it is the biggest social network in the world.

Facebook is a global network and is responsible for creating its own policies and guidelines. Because it is a social media platform and publicly owned, Facebook follows standard business regulations but can largely determine the content it distributes with only some exceptions. As social influence for the company grew, so did the problems. Facebook has been responsible for, but not taken accountability for, several globally influential events. Having loose guidelines surrounding the spread of misinformation, impacting a presidential election and being the host of years of anti-Muslim propaganda are three current events that influences our society.

A global consensus and agreement on universal standards for the internet is near impossible. There is still not one solution for the issues at hand. While the world waits, users have a responsibility to learning how to be media literate online. There is no global entity to keep Facebook accountable, but the company's users can. By becoming media literate, users reduce the risk of spreading false information and learning when to report something.

The information presented in this thesis is current and extremely relevant to society today. During this research, I was able to use my prior knowledge of false

information to gain a more in-depth understanding that the underlying problem was lack of media literacy. My goal during this entire research and writing process was simple: to educate. The findings of this paper allow readers to understand the amount of influential power Facebook is capable of. Not only is the power of Facebook discussed, but also the consequences with that because of the overwhelming lack of digital literacy. After elaborating on *why* media literacy is crucial in society today, I offer ways on *how* any user can develop literacy skills of their own to help combat this problem.

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