

Deleting Facebook Won't Fix the Problem

When we tell people to get off the platform, we recast a political issue as a willpower issue.

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By Anand Giridharadas

When news broke that Facebook users' private messages were not necessarily private, Taunya Richards, 44, a real estate appraiser in Hillsboro, Ore., immediately panicked: Had she endangered her son? She thought back to her chats with her mother in Idaho, who prefers Facebook's messenger to texting. Her son is a specialist in the Army; using the Facebook-owned encrypted messaging platform WhatsApp, he had kept her updated as he traveled to what she described as a dangerous foreign base whose location she was supposed to keep secret. She had then sent those location updates to her mother using Facebook Messenger. Now she wonders who has that data.

"For a mother," she told me, "especially one whose whole life has been about protect your kid from these harms, and she's just doing what a mother does, which is responding to him telling her something that he needs her to know so he's protected, and someone can come in and take that and just sell it to people as data? You're putting my kid's life in danger."

But don't count Ms. Richards among the growing ranks of people deleting Facebook. "All it does is punish me," she said. "It doesn't punish Facebook. It doesn't change anything. It cuts me off from my family." Even if a boycott bankrupted Facebook, what's to stop the next company from doing the same thing? "We need the laws to say, You can't do this," she said.

Ms. Richards's dissension from the swelling chorus of #DeleteFacebook is notable and worth considering. In refusing to delete her Facebook account, she is refusing to turn the power abuses of the tech industry into an issue of personal responsibility.

The impulse to delete Facebook is understandable. In an era of political gridlock and dysfunction, it feels good to start somewhere. There is the hope that waves of deletions will send a signal to the company's leaders and to the lawmakers who are meant to regulate it.

But it would also seem to be the case that if millions of angry individuals were going to save us from the worst excesses of the tech industry, we would have been saved from them by now. Collective action is difficult against a global behemoth like Facebook. Even were such action to succeed, the company also owns WhatsApp and Instagram. With a couple of billion users on Facebook alone, it is hard to fathom how many deleted accounts it would take to drive genuine change.

And it's possible that #DeleteFacebook might actually play into Facebook's hands, by recasting a political issue as a willpower issue. As Ms. Richards asks, thinking of her son overseas, should the burden of fixing Facebook, and data privacy in general, really fall on her? Or is telling people

to delete their accounts on a platform to which there are few alternatives the digital equivalent of ordering women to smile more if they want to get ahead at the office?

If I were Mark Zuckerberg, I might actually relish seeing my users agonize over the question of “to delete or not to delete.” Every moment they are talking about whether to walk away from the content they’ve created and the network they’ve built is a moment they aren’t talking about Facebook executives being brought to justice and the company brought under proper regulation.

“Individual action is great, but count me as skeptical that we will collect enough of us to change the behavior of the biggest and most powerful companies in the world,” Senator Brian Schatz, Democrat of Hawaii, who is working on emerging bipartisan legislation, told me. “This is literally what government is for. This is what public policy is for. We need a federal law.”

Or perhaps we need a few laws. One priority may be privacy legislation to ensure that Facebook’s conscience isn’t the decider of what “private” means. Another could be the rewriting of antitrust law for the digital era. But an easy, obvious place for Congress to start is this: to do right by Ms. Richards and her soldier son. No tech company’s growth lust should come at the price of our soldiers’ safety and the peace of mind of those awaiting their return.