Facebook bans, sends cease-and-desist letter to developer of Unfollow Everything extension

That'll help improve its image

By Rob Thubron October 8, 2021, 8:51 AM 10 comments

What just happened? Given the rough couple of weeks Facebook has been through, the company could definitely use some good PR right now, so here's exactly the opposite: it's been revealed that the social network has permanently banned the creator of a tool that unfollows all connections automatically, potentially making the social network less addictive and depressing.

Louis Barclay, creator of the Unfollow Everything browser extension that lets users unfollow—not unfriend—all their friends, groups, and pages simultaneously (rather than individually), writes that his program has not been welcomed by Facebook.

Unfollow Everything essentially gets rid of your entire newsfeed, something highlighted as an addictive factor in keeping people on the service. "I still remember the feeling of unfollowing everything for the first time. It was near-miraculous. I had lost nothing, since I could still see my favorite friends and groups by going to them directly," Barclay writes in an article for Slate. "But I had gained a staggering amount of control. I was no longer tempted to scroll down an infinite feed of content. The time I spent on Facebook decreased dramatically. Overnight, my Facebook addiction became manageable."

Facebook responded to the tool by sending Barclay a cease-and-decease letter threatening legal action. It claimed he violated the site's terms of service through a program that automates user interactions. The company then "permanently disabled my Facebook and Instagram accounts" and "demanded that I agree to never again create tools that interact with Facebook or its other services."

Barclay notes that Switzerland's University of Neuchâtel expressed interest in using his software to study the news feed's impact on the amount of time spent on Facebook and the happiness of the platform's users, which may explain why the company wanted it removed.

The last few weeks have been Facebook's worst since it was rocked by the Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2018. It began with leaked internal studies that showed the social network knows how damaging Instagram is for teenage girls' mental wellbeing. Mark Zuckerberg was then forced to deny claims he told Donald Trump that Facebook wouldn't fact-check politicians in exchange for less severe regulations. It's also been dealing with the FTC lawsuit, one of the site's worst outages in years, and a whistleblower testifying to US senators that Facebook prioritizes making money over doing what is good for the public, which most of us already knew.