

As Facebook matures, is it losing its edge?

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NEW YORK (AP) --

To see what Facebook has become, look no further than the Hutzler 571 Banana Slicer.

Sometime last year, people began sharing tongue-in-cheek online reviews of the banana-shaped piece of yellow plastic with their Facebook friends. Then those friends shared with their friends. Soon, after Amazon paid to promote it, posts featuring the \$3.49 utensil were appearing in even more Facebook feeds.

At some point, though, the joke got old. But there it was, again and again - the banana slicer had become a Facebook version of that old knock-knock joke your weird uncle has been telling for years.

The Hutzler 571 phenomenon is a regular occurrence on the world's biggest online social network, which begs the question: Has Facebook become less fun?

That's something many users - especially those in their teens and early 20s - are asking themselves as they wade through endless posts, photos "liked" by people they barely know and spur-of-the moment friend requests. Has it all become too much of a chore? Are the important life events of your closest loved ones drowning in a sea of banana slicer jokes?

"When I first got Facebook I literally thought it was the coolest thing to have. If you had a Facebook you kind of fit in better, because other people had one," says Rachel Fernandez, 18, who first signed on to the site four or five years ago.

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And now? "Facebook got kind of boring," she says.

Chatter about Facebook's demise never seems to die down, whether it's talk of "Facebook fatigue," or grouching about how the social network lost its cool once grandma joined. The Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project recently found that some 61 percent of Facebook users had taken a hiatus from the site for reasons that range from "too much gossip and drama" to "boredom." Some respondents said there simply isn't enough time in their day for Facebook.

If Facebook Inc.'s users leave, or even check in less frequently, its revenue growth would suffer. The company, which depends on targeted advertising for most of the money it makes, booked revenue of \$5.1 billion in 2012, up from \$3.7 billion a year earlier.

But so far, for every person who has left permanently, several new people have joined up. Facebook has more than 1 billion users around the world. Of these, 618 million sign in every day.

Indeed, Fernandez hasn't abandoned Facebook. Though the Traverse City, Mich., high school senior doesn't look at her News Feed, the constant cascade of posts, photos and viral videos from her nearly 1,800 friends, she still uses Facebook's messaging feature to reach out to people she knows, such as a German foreign exchange student she met two years ago.

Fernandez uses Facebook in the same way that people use email or the telephone. But she prefers using Facebook to communicate because everyone she knows is there. That's a sign that Facebook's biggest asset may also be its biggest challenge.

"We have never seen a social space that actually works for everybody," says danah boyd, who studies youth culture, the Internet and social media as a senior researcher at Microsoft Research. "People don't want to hang out with everybody they have ever met."

Might Facebook go the way of email? Those who came of age in the "You've got mail" era can reminisce fondly about arriving home from school and checking their AOL accounts to see if anyone sent them an electronic message. Boyd, who is 35 (and legally spells her name with no capitalization), recalls being a teenager and "thinking email is the best thing ever."

Few people share that sentiment these days. Ian Bogost, professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology, recently listed email alongside "Blood, frogs, lice, flies, pestilence, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, death of the firstborn" in a Facebook post.

"I was just going through my daily email routine, reflecting on the fact that it feels like batting down a wall of locusts," Bogost says.

Although email has gone from after-school treat to a dull routine in the space of 20 years, no one is ready to ring its death knell just yet. And similarly, Facebook's lost luster doesn't necessarily foreshadow its obsolescence.

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"I don't see teenagers leaving in droves," boyd says. "I just don't see it being their site of passion."

In early March, Facebook unveiled a big redesign to address some of its users' most pressing gripes. The retooling, which is already available to some people, is intended to get rid of the clutter that's been a complaint among Facebook users for some time.

Facebook surveys its users regularly about their thoughts on the site. Jane Leibrock, whose title at Facebook is user experience researcher, says it was about a year ago that she noticed people were complaining about "clutter" in their feeds. Leibrock asked them what they meant. It turns out that the different types of content flowing through people's News Feeds - links, ads, photos, status updates, things people "liked" or commented on - were "making it difficult to focus on any one thing," she says. "It might have even been discouraging them from finding new content."

The new design seeks to address the issue. There is a distinct feed for "all friends," another for different groups of friends, one just for photos, and one for pages that users follow. As a result, says Chris Struhar, the lead engineer on the new design, the new feeds give people a way to see everything that's going on.

"The amount of stories you have available to see has continued to increase," Struhar says. "What we try to do now is give you more control over what stories you see in your feed."

With that kind of control, the company hopes people will spend more time on the site and share more information about themselves so companies can target them better with advertisements.

Paul Friedman, a 59-year-old dentist in New York City, says he's using Facebook less now than when he first signed on four years ago, but he's not sure if the site has "become less interesting or that I am just less interested in it," he says.

"I think that it might have seemed more interesting in the past because it was a new `forum,'" Friedman says. "Now that it is not new, it takes more unique content to make it interesting."

That said, Friedman still uses Facebook to see if friends are organizing events, such as music gigs or yoga classes, or to check out interesting YouTube videos. He says seeing the same jokes reappear doesn't really bother him.

"Ninety-nine percent of it is a waste of time anyway," he says. "If it wasn't for the one percent, I'd close my account."

When it comes to people of a certain age, Friedman may be in the minority. Tammy Gordon, vice president of the AARP's social media team, says the 50-plus set is just now settling into Facebook. The organization's own Facebook page grew from 80,000 fans to a million last year. This age group is growing the fastest because

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older people tend to be latecomers to Facebook. According to a recent Pew survey, 32 percent of people 65 or older use social networking sites, compared with 83 percent of those 18 to 29.

"They are not necessarily at that point where some of the younger generation is, where they have News Feed overload," Gordon says.

Robert Worden, who is 62 and has nearly 1,100 friends on Facebook, isn't overwhelmed. He says he got on Facebook two or three years ago primarily to establish a relationship with his estranged son, whom he didn't see for a quarter century before he found him on Facebook.

Through his son, he also found out he had a granddaughter, who has been adopted and used Facebook to find her biological family when she turned 18. They are now all connected.

Worden, who lives in Paducah, Ky., says he probably wouldn't have found his son were it not for Facebook, never mind his granddaughter. He also reconnected with people from his Memphis, Tenn., neighborhood using Facebook - people he had not seen in half a century. The neighborhood, he says, "literally fell apart" in the 1960s, "and we had never been able to get back together."

"So someone said `why don't you start a Facebook page?" he says. The group recently had its first reunion. Fifty people showed up.

Worden says Facebook is his "major communication tool to the world."

"Other people use news and I don't find the nightly news or daily news to be adequate," he says. "On Facebook I can actually hear from people who are living in the places where things are happening, and I can get instant information."

Daniel Singer is 13 and, according to his public Facebook profile, he enjoys "designing beautiful user interfaces and sitting down at my desk and creating great iOS apps." Last year, the eighth-grader created YouTell, a site that lets people ask for anonymous feedback from friends. You can use Facebook to log in, or email. As someone who designs applications, Singer calls Facebook's graphical design "brilliant." Still, he thinks the average teenager wants to see new stuff. Twitter comes to mind, along with Instagram and Pheed, a photo-text-video-audio sharing app launched last fall.

For Singer, Facebook is part of a daily routine. "Kind of like brushing your teeth," he says.

In the seven years since Mark Zuckerberg started Facebook in his Harvard dormitory, Facebook has moved from a closed social networking service available to college students to a place where one seventh of the world's population logs in at least once a month. No other social networking fad has accomplished such a feat.

Facebook predecessors MySpace and Friendster shone brightly but fizzled once

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finicky teenagers moved on to the next big thing. To boyd, though, Facebook is not only a destination site, but "a technical architecture that underlies many different things."

"It's not about new features to lure people back in," boyd says. A bigger question now, she says: What does it mean when your company is providing a vital service, rather than "a fun, glittery object"?

Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales, whose for-profit content creation site Wikia recently surveyed its young users about their technology habits, agrees. Teenagers, he says, "do see value in Facebook."

"I think we are seeing a shift from (it being) a place to talk to each other as just part of the world -the infrastructure of the world," he says. "I don't know if that's to the detriment of Facebook in the long run."

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