

**Series Name: The Power and the Danger**

**Article Title: Facebook Apps**

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In the next couple of months, Facebook is expected to complete its massive Initial Public Offering (IPO) of stock. The company has \$4 billion in cash and generates over \$200 million in net income each quarter. With over 900 million active users, the online social network is clearly a massive force on global society. If Facebook were a religion (and for many, it's at least an idol), it would be the third largest in the world, behind Christianity and Islam. If it were a country, it would also be the third largest, behind China and India. However, it is growing faster than Christianity, Islam, China, and India combined.

Is that a good thing? I'm certainly not convinced that it is.

In the book *The Facebook Effect* (Simon & Schuster, 2010), written with strong support by the company, author David Kirkpatrick says that Marshall McLuhan is a favorite of the company and quotes from a 1964 book of his to describe the kind of impact Facebook is having on society: "Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man – the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of society." Beyond the scary "New Age" spirituality reflected in this vision is the reality that Facebook is extending "knowing" to all of society and actively trying to knock down our sense of privacy.

Kirkpatrick quotes Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg as saying "To get people to this point where there's more openness – that's a big challenge. But I think we'll do it. I just think it will take time. The concept that the world will be better if you share more is something that's pretty foreign to a lot of people and it runs into all these privacy concerns." To advance this mission, Zuckerberg's company has continuously pushed the envelope on privacy. At times, they've had to pull back, but it's been a constant march forward – two steps forward, one step back.

In fact, the core of how most people use Facebook today, the News Feed telling you everything your friends are doing, was initially met with a user revolt over privacy. Kirkpatrick quotes from a group post when the feature was launched in 2006: "You went a bit too far this time, Facebook. Very few of us want everyone automatically knowing what we update... news feed is just too creepy, to stalker-esque, and a feature that has to go." Of course, the feature didn't go – it became the definition of how Facebook works – but the company did have to pull back slightly by providing some level of privacy controls. That pattern has been consistent throughout the company's history – pushing privacy limits beyond public comfort, pulling back a half step, and later successfully being able to step beyond the original concerns.

Zuckerberg's vision for a more open world extends beyond Facebook, to the whole world, and to enable that, the company has progressively extended social sharing beyond Facebook's boundaries. In May of 2007, Facebook held an event called f8 (read as "fate") to launch a development "platform" so that software developers could create new applications that leverage Facebook users' personal information.

Within six months, 250,000 developers had registered with Facebook and had created 25,000 applications. According to Facebook's website, "At the end of 2011, more than 7 million apps and websites integrated with Facebook."

Late in 2008, the company introduced Facebook Connect, which enables any web site to have visitors log in with their Facebook id. The site can then benefit from your Facebook information, and can send updates about your actions on their site back into Facebook for all of your friends to see. For example, when I visit TripAdvisor, it can tell me the hotels and restaurants my (Facebook) friends have highly rated, and when I review a destination, that can be reported to all my friends within Facebook. Millions of websites have implemented Facebook Connect. In April of 2009, Facebook introduced the Open Stream API, which enables any website to integrate Facebook's News Feed into their site. Each year, the company pushes the Facebook experience further into the rest of the world.

### **What are Facebook apps?**

A Facebook application is a program written to leverage Facebook's social network. It might integrate information from your personal profile, it might integrate your network of friends so that you can interact with them through the application, it might even integrate information from your friends' personal profiles, or it might simply report your use of the application in your friends' News Feeds (e.g. your new high score in a game).

With millions of applications, there's an incredible diversity of different applications. An early favorite called Causes made it easy for nonprofits to raise money (and has helped 27,000 nonprofits raise \$40M to date). There are also Bible apps that make it easy to share favorite passages with friends and to have friends hold you accountable with your daily reading plan. But, the most successful Facebook apps have been games and there have been some incredible stories of companies formed to create games for Facebook that have made their founders and investors rich because of the viral growth Facebook enables. One recent example is the game "[Draw Something](#)." The app was launched on February 6 of this year. By the third week of its life, users had used it to draw 10 million images. The next week, that doubled, and the following week it exploded to 500 million drawings. By the sixth week, users had created 2 billion drawings! On March 21, Zynga (another Facebook game company) acquired the maker of Draw Something for \$200 million!

### **What is the ministry opportunity with Facebook apps?**

Assuming Facebook demographics parallel the world's population, at least two-thirds of Facebook users aren't Christians. Leveraging Facebook's social network creates an unparalleled opportunity to spread the Gospel. Although the Internet, as a form of media, has always promised incredible reach, Facebook actually makes it easy for ideas to spread virally and to enable Christians to engage their friends with the Gospel's life changing truth.

Furthermore, most of your church members are probably on Facebook. The service represents a unique way to reach and serve them.

## So, what's the problem, then?

Mark Zuckerberg's vision is playing out in ways that are potentially dangerous to your congregants.

[The Wall Street Journal recently studied](#) the 100 most popular apps on Facebook. I recommend reading the article ([click here](#)) "[Selling You on Facebook.](#)" Their findings are summarized in the article's subtitle "Many popular Facebook apps are obtaining sensitive information about users—and users' friends—so don't be surprised if details about your religious, political and even sexual preferences start popping up in unexpected places."

The poster child for this problem is an app called "Girls Around Me." A blog called "The Cult of Mac" exposed the dangers this app. I don't recommend reading the article, but I link to it [here](#) to provide attribution for the following selected quotes. The blog post was in the form of one person demonstrating the app to another.

(Note – I have never used, nor seen this app used. These are quotes from the article.) "Immediately, Girls Around Me went into radar mode, and after just a few seconds, the map around us was filled with pictures of girls who were in the neighborhood. Since I was showing off the app on a Saturday night, there were dozens of girls out on the town in our local area." "These are all girls with publicly visible Facebook profiles who have checked into these locations recently using Foursquare." "Most privacy settings on social networks default to share everything with everyone, and since most people never change those... well, they end up getting sucked up into apps like this." "I tapped on Zoe. Girls Around Me quickly loaded up a fullscreen render of her Facebook profile picture. The app then told me where Zoe had last been seen (The Independent) and when (15 minutes ago). A big green button at the bottom reading 'Photos & Messaging' just begged to be tapped, and when I did, I was whisked away to Zoe's Facebook profile." "Okay, so here's Zoe. Most of her information is visible, so I now know her full name. I can see at a glance that she's single, that she is 24, that she went to Stoneham High School and Bunker Hill Community College, that she likes to travel, that her favorite book is *Gone With The Wind* and her favorite musician is Tori Amos, and that she's a liberal. I can see the names of her family and friends. I can see her birthday." "I tapped on the photo album, and a collection of hundreds of publicly visible photos loaded up. I quickly browsed them." "So now I know everything to know about Zoe. I know where she is. I know what she looks like, .... I know her full name, her parents' full names, her brother's full name. I know what she likes to drink. I know where she went to school. I know what she likes and dislikes. All I need to do now is go down to the Independent, ask her if she remembers me from Stoneham High, ask her how her brother Mike is doing, buy her a frosty margarita, and start waxing eloquently about that beautiful summer I spent in Roma."

Based on the uproar from this article, this particular app has been shut down, but the privacy issues that enabled it have not been addressed. I hope the dangers are clear to you.

It is my hope and prayer that these articles on the power and danger of technology will encourage you in your daily walk with Christ. Whether it is the printing press, personal computers, the Internet, mobility, Wi-Fi, social networks, or 4G LTE, new technologies continue to advance our ability to know God and to serve Him, wherever we go.

*Russ McGuire is an executive for a Fortune 100 company and the founder/co-founder of three technology start-ups. His latest entrepreneurial venture is Hschooler.net (<http://hschooler.net>), a social network for Christian families (especially homeschoolers) which is being built and run by six homeschooled students under Russ' direction.*