

## Have you been hit by a pillow recently?

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I have and it didn't hurt one bit, let me tell you more. Last week I was lured into the wonderful world of "Facebook", having managed to avoid social networking sites until now, I bowed to the pressure of countless friends who seemed to be talking about it constantly and pestering me to join. Curious to find out what all the fuss was about and a little concerned that I was missing out on the next big thing in the virtual world, I signed up to create my own Facebook profile.

That's how it all started; harmless enough I thought, just a place to put up a few innocuous details about myself, post a few photographs and contact a few friends that I'd lost touch with over the years. However, in a matter of days I'd been sucked into the Facebook vortex and was in serious danger of losing my grip on reality. I had been poked multiple times, taken part in several pillow fights, had received and sent countless drinks and presents (the only non calorific chocolates I'll ever receive!), had set up my own aquarium, garden and solar system, played at being a pirate and stealing my friends coins and watched my very own animal hatch from an egg. More alarmingly, through a newsfeed feature, I was now being subjected to every moment of my friend's daily Facebook lives and conversely I was submitting myself to their unceasing surveillance. For instance, I knew that at 10.30 am on Saturday, one friend was "praying that the England rugby team would get through to the semi-finals" (it must have worked because they did) and that another friend "was all loved up because she'd just met the man of her dreams" (he obviously wasn't because they only lasted 2 weeks).

All the Facebook addicts reading this will know exactly what I'm talking about, assuming that they can spare a few minutes away from the computer screen to read it, others will wonder what on earth I'm talking about. Well, the Facebook phenomenon, began in 2004 when a Harvard student, Mark Zuckerberg, launched a social networking site for his fellow students in Harvard College. Originally it was a way for students to stay in touch with their friends by exchanging messages and photographs. Membership was soon expanded to other local colleges and within months students from most USA universities and colleges were able to join, shortly followed by students from universities around the world. And join they did, in their millions. In 2006, such was the success of Facebook that it was reported that Zuckerberg had turned down an offer of \$750 million for the site and its meteoric rise didn't stop there.

On September 11th 2006 Facebook became open to all users of the Internet. Fast forward to September 2007 and the site now has 42 million members worldwide, of whom 5 million are based in the UK and it's still attracting around 200,000 new members each day. According to Nielsen/NetRatings Facebook has now taken over from MySpace as the UK's most popular social networking spot. It also appears that Zuckerman was right to reject his early suitors as recent press reports have speculated that Microsoft are interested in buying a 5% stake in Facebook for between \$300 - \$500 million, that deal would now value Facebook at up to a staggering \$10 billion. So that's zero to \$10 billion in 3 years – not a bad rate of growth for a new business venture.

With first hand experience it's easy to see why Facebook has become so popular in such a short space of time, and not just amongst teenagers either. I'm in my thirties (dare I admit it, rapidly approaching my forties) and plenty of my contemporaries are using it. In fact it's proving quite popular amongst parents who are joining it to become "friends" with their children giving them an insight (sometimes eye opening and often unwelcome) into just what their offspring are up to. Facebook is essentially about communicating, but communication with context. So instead of just getting a plain old e-mail from a friend you can see what they've been up to lately, you can see who else they are talking to, you can look at pictures of a night out that you might have missed and comment on them. It's an online extension of the normal banter, gossip and interaction that goes on amongst a group of friends but with the opportunity to include friends dispersed around the country or the world.

Another reason for its popularity is that it panders to people's sense of curiosity – you only have to look at the success of Friends Reunited to see what I mean. Facebook allows you to track down old acquaintances and friends that you've lost touch with and assuming that they accept you as Facebook friend, you have an immediate insight into their daily lives. It also allows you to make friends with totally random people from around the world. I can see how thrilling it might be to make contact with an old friend that you are genuinely sorry you lost touch with but on the other it could open up a Pandora's Box. I've heard of people using Facebook to spy on the activities of a recent ex-partners, Facebook does have the potential to be a stalkers paradise. There might be also be some danger in accepting "friendship" requests from total strangers, thereby giving them access to lots of personal information.

Facebook, despite its huge success, does have its detractors. The most prominent being employers. Since May this year, when Facebook opened up its site to games and applications from outside developers, the number of users in London has doubled to more than 800,000. This suggests that instead of using the site to expand their social network, many users are addicted to the hundreds of new games which seem to appear every week, playing them at the office and consequently at their employer's expense. Facebook is costing employers dear with an estimated 233 million working hours, £132 million a day or £30.8 billion lost a year according to recent research. Bosses are now fighting back and taking a hard line stance, there have been reports of staff being sacked and many are now blocking access to Facebook at work.

Security experts too are not over enamoured with Facebook. They suggest that Facebook profiles typically contain more than enough personal information to allow fraudsters to steal

identities for criminal purposes. While Facebook does allow users to restrict friend's access to their information, many members do not bother to invoke the safety measures. Sophos, a leading IT security company, created a fake Facebook profile, in the name of "Freddi Staur" (an anagram of ID Fraudster) and sent out befriending requests to random individuals. Surprisingly more than 40% of the users responded giving Freddi access to their profiles and personal details.

Facebook, like so many other social networking sites on the Internet, is neither good nor bad, it just depends as usual on how it's used or abused. After satisfying my initial curiosity I've decided to deactivate my account before it really starts to consume most of my spare time. I already spend at least 7 hours a day sat in front of my computer at work, so do I really need to spend more time living a virtual life as opposed to my real one? I've also discovered that Facebook has the power to turn adults back into teenagers, so I'm getting out before I'm tempted to play truth & dare, take part in another food fight or even worse, have my "stripper" name advertised to the world!