

Mark Zuckerberg

Mr Facebook shares and shares and shares

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I was told not to expect a human whirlwind, but when Mark Zuckerberg walks into the room there is barely a breeze. He is 24, on the short side, shy in the way that short, ginger-haired people often are, and he walks with his head down, as if he is carrying a heavy burden, such as being the richest young person in the world.

Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, has one thing that most geeky-looking guys don't have - \$3bn. Unfortunately, he doesn't actually have it with him, it is paper money, an estimate of his net worth. But the money is mentioned every time he is written about in the newspapers, as if it is an extension of his name. The sum was calculated when Microsoft paid \$240m for a 1.6 per cent stake in Facebook in October 2007, valuing the company at \$15bn, of which Zuckerberg owned 20 per cent. In these recessionary times Facebook is probably worth considerably less, but who knows? A company like his has never faced recession before, and hundreds of new customers are still flocking to it every hour. It is a genuine internet sensation, and it shows no sign of becoming less of one because it is based on an idea so simple, and so fundamental to our emotional and personal growth, that when people discover it, even four years after its formation, they feel that it is exactly what they've been looking for all their lives. They feel it is designed exclusively for them, and that is its trick: it makes more than 100m people feel like treasured individuals.

Facebook is based on the idea of sharing. Not long after he walks into the room (an almost empty conference room apart from a table with tea and biscuits and a photographer readying his gear), Zuckerberg tells me 'sharing' was the only word on his mind when he dreamt up Facebook in his college dormitory at Harvard in 2004. He was not thinking about money, nor personal aggrandisement; he just wanted to know more about the other students in his year. Harvard produced the traditional yearbook with grinning pictures and brief biographical sketches, but it would take a long time to appear each year and would be impossible to update until a year later. It also wouldn't contain one vital piece of information: was that person you found attractive in your class single or 'in a relationship'? Zuckerberg thought he could do something better online. You could put up as much personal information as you liked – your favourite bands, your favourite hobby, even your real name – and you could change it as situations changed. Four years on, his vision is in every street in almost every country in the world.

Zuckerberg has expanded Facebook to the point where it is among the fastest-growing websites in the history of the internet, but he says the principal mission is the same: sharing. In fact, he uses the word so many times that I wonder if I am talking to a machine. 'The idea was always, tell people, "share more information",' he tells me. 'And that way we could gain more understanding about what's going on with the people around you.' He says there are 12.5m registered users in the UK who share. Aaron Sorkin, the creator of *The West Wing*, has announced that he will soon be sharing the story of the birth of Facebook in a movie.

'People have always spent a lot of time communicating, connecting, sharing with the people who are around them and are important to them,' Zuckerberg continues. 'It's a very human thing. Facebook helps you share more efficiently with the people you talk to all the time, your family and close friends, but I think where it really excels is

helping you stay connected with the people you know but don't get to talk to that much.'

What started this quest for knowledge?

'All my friends at school, we always talked about how the world would be better if there was more information available, and if you could understand what was going on with other people more - essentially if people shared more information about themselves.' A forthcoming book about Facebook has another theory: it was Zuckerberg's way of meeting women.

Zuckerberg looks up at the ceiling. 'Is it me, or is there a killer echo in this room?' he asks in his deep voice. There is a slight echo, and it is enough to prompt one of his advisers (he is accompanied by two, a man and a woman) to ask if he would be happier moving to another room. But Zuckerberg decides to stay put. He is at ExCeL, an exhibition and conference venue in London's Docklands, at the tail-end of a European visit that has taken in Germany and France. He has come to take part in something called the Future of Web Applications, those little pieces of software that let us simplify and glorify our lives online. His contribution will take the form of a 'fireside chat', but he won't be wearing dressing gown and slippers, he will be wearing what he is wearing now, which is what he always wears - jeans, T-shirt and dark North Face fleece. Zuckerberg, like Steve Jobs in jeans and black polo neck, has a uniform, and it is exactly what he wore on the day he began to get rich. There is a photo of him taken more than a year ago at Facebook HQ in Palo Alto, California, and he is wearing the same clothes. In a photo taken to accompany a magazine article at the end of last year, the fleece is identical. Sometimes he takes the fleece off, such as when he poses for our main picture. But when these shots are done, he feels a little naked and starts to pull it on again. 'Are you cold?' the photographer asks him. 'Not really.' 'Well, it would be great if you kept the fleece off.' Zuckerberg looks over at his advisers, shrugs, and then puts it on

over his head. By way of explanation, one adviser says her boss is 'a pretty fleece kind of guy'.

It doesn't cost anything to join Facebook, apart from the best part of your waking life. Once you register, and perhaps post a photo of yourself, you may feel you are connected to the whole world. Perhaps you begin by searching for all the people in your email address book (this takes one click), or all the people in your company. Once you locate someone you know you can ask to become their friend, and you can see all their photos and all their friends, and soon you could be arranging events, or creating groups for like-minded people (wood-turners in Yorkshire), or writing on your 'wall', or sending someone a virtual hug, or just telling people what you're up to. 'Simon is eating cake,' might be one such message, and suddenly your distant cousin in Ontario will say that she, too, is eating cake, and in this way nonsense can be shared; your site is a multi-media text message to everyone you know, all at once. Then you log on the day after, and you find that manufacturers of cake stands want to sell you something. This is the most effective and newest form of advertising, not only direct but subtle, as if your computer understands your basic needs. It is how Facebook makes its money.

A couple of years ago, Facebook was just another of those social networking sites we liked to call Me Media or Media 2.0 - MySpace, Bebo, Flickr, Friendster, Orkut - places where you could go and be yourself (or pretend to be yourself) and put up music and photos. Facebook was already an online epidemic, but it was confined to universities. These days it is available to anyone over the age of 13, but this alone isn't sufficient to explain its phenomenal popularity. Other sites have come up alongside it - most notably LinkedIn, the biggest network for the workplace - but none has rivalled Facebook's rapidly expanding activity areas or its invasiveness. Millions access and contribute to their Facebook page on their mobile phones, and millions more have Facebook as their computer homepage with so

many inbuilt applications linked to it free of charge. It has become the hub of a communicative digital life, a place where more than 100m photos are apparently uploaded in the UK every month, a platform for news and games, and a world of shopping that has extended far beyond the site's original concept as a slightly voyeuristic dating site. When the company changed the layout on everyone's profile pages a few weeks ago, the outcry was bitter and prolonged. It was as if Zuckerberg had personally come round to shift the seating arrangements in your living room.

Despite his love of worldwide sharing, the founder of Facebook is less keen to share information on himself. His Facebook page lets you know that he's a little tired after his European tour, but it's fairly tame stuff compared to the 'I had the best sex of my life last night' material volunteered by others. I have been warned against asking about how his life has changed by being a paper billionaire, so I ask him how his life has changed since Facebook took off. He doesn't answer immediately, but looks to his two advisers. One of them suggests that the better question would be how he spends his day. Zuckerberg is happier with this, and his response is masterfully boring: 'A lot of it is focused on product development. There are a lot of meetings and talking to people now, rather than doing code like I did a few years ago.'

I wonder if he has any mentors.

'A lot of the times the way I answer that question is, there is this guy who runs the Washington Post called Don Graham who I've looked to for a while because he takes a very a long-term view of things. And what we're trying to do - Facebook is really not a short-term thing - it's a 10, 15, 20-year thing.'

There are one or two other things we can glean from established sources. Zuckerberg was born in an affluent suburb near New York, where his father was a dentist. He was precocious with computers,

and was offered jobs at Microsoft and AOL while still at school. For later information we can go back to his old college. The Harvard online alumni site, 02138mag.com, recently took aim against Zuckerberg, spurred perhaps by jealousy, or the fact that he didn't complete his course and still ended up richer than all of his classmates combined. The article obtained his original application to Harvard, in which he stated he was very interested in fencing. He found it 'the perfect medium... I rarely find myself doing anything more enjoyable than fencing a good bout.' The story also found that he was skilled at Latin and Greek, and had once built a computer version of Risk, a game of world domination. It declared that he has 'a dry, mischievous sense of humour that sometimes verges on obnoxious', and that he had a preference for Asian women. The article began with Zuckerberg at a developers' conference in San Francisco in 2007, and he was wearing a T-shirt and a North Face fleece.

Much of the information on Zuckerberg was based on court records filed when he became legally embroiled with the founders of a social networking site called ConnectU, which also began at Harvard. In fact, ConnectU began at Harvard at about the same time as Facebook, and Zuckerberg was involved in the early computer coding for the site. ConnectU argues that Zuckerberg stole their ideas; Zuckerberg counterclaimed that ConnectU later stole a large chunk of Facebook users' email addresses. The first legal papers were filed in 2004, a few months after Facebook took off, and concluded in an undisclosed settlement earlier this year.

Before meeting Zuckerberg at ExCeL, I go to see Blake Chandlee, sales director at the Facebook headquarters in London's Soho Square. It is an open-plan office in which a group of young people ensure that everything is running well with the site and then try to sell advertising on it. It has imported some legendary Silicon Valley karma, such as a very casual dress code and chalkboards on which staff are encouraged to write inspirational messages. On my visit, one

of these reads, 'Gavin - he's massive!'

Chandlee is 41, a fun and open man, a perfect exemplar of the Facebook ethos. He tells me he is into honesty and sharing, but I am also informed that the Facebook high-ups in California would rather I didn't quote him directly. He told me Facebook was not such an amazing technological feat - it was just a group of tools and platforms. He called it an evolution of communication, as if that was a small thing. He also shared a little information about Zuckerberg, saying that he is highly focused on growing the business and that although he was a shy man and not a big personality, he was a deep philosophical thinker. He reminded him of a young Bill Gates.

Chandlee shows me many charts and graphs on his computer, including one that showed the fastest-growing user age was over 25, and one displaying the correlation between its users having a party one day and the hangover the next. Chandlee also demonstrates the rudiments of the advertising set-up, how anyone from private individuals to multinational companies can spend money to reach Facebook users by paying, say, 50p for each person they target. It is an impressive display, and it emphasises how much information Facebook can draw upon from its 100m-plus users. It knows, for example, how many people say they ate a Kellogg's breakfast cereal that morning. It can tell how many declared they were having a very bad day, and how many shortish people with ginger hair are indeed shy. As they used to say in 1945, let's hope they use it for peaceful purposes.

A few days after meeting Chandlee, I ask Zuckerberg about Facebook's responsibilities. No one so young has ever held the key to so much personal information; the sheer scale makes the data lost recently on MoD and NHS discs look like dropped homework. He replies that the most important thing in Facebook's success is the

trust its users place in its security software (Facebook has received bad press following reports of cyberstalking). In the last few months the site has greatly increased security controls to ensure that personal information is seen only by those the user has pre-approved.

But Facebook is happy to share our information anonymously, specifically with advertisers, and potentially with political organisations; the site represents the biggest and most immediately responsive focus group in the world. 'What we try to do is have a neutral platform,' Zuckerberg says. 'Facebook doesn't have an opinion about specific things, other than "people sharing and communication around topics is good". So everyone has a voice, and people can organise around whatever they want.'

There is now an online feature called Facebook for Good, in which people write about how they have used the site to help themselves or others. Zuckerberg mentions how, when a hurricane hit, people used it to send messages to people around them to say they were OK. 'Here in the UK, there's quite a large group trying to organise raising awareness about knife crimes, and, on a lighter note, there are an enormous amount of people who organised because they really wanted Cadbury to bring back the Wispa bar.'

But what about Facebook for bad, those looking to increase support for terrorism or race-hate groups? 'The way it works is that if anyone on the site finds something like that and they want to tell us about it, then they can write in. There is a balance there. On the one hand we want to be very neutral, but at the same time we are really careful in not allowing hate speech.'

So the community regulates itself?

'It's a set of different communities. The idea isn't that Facebook is one new community, but it's mapping out all the different communities that

exist in the world already.' Some of these Facebook does not like - the breastfeeding community, for example, who offended the company's sensibilities when mothers posted pictures of themselves feeding their babies with too much undone blouse.

And then there is Facebook for really bad. It is inevitable that when an institution reaches a certain size, it will attract crazy headlines, and a few weeks ago we had the 'Facebook Murder', in which a man was found guilty of murdering his wife in south London after she had thrown him out of their house and changed her Facebook status to 'single'.

I ask Zuckerberg if there is anything in his background that he regards as a key point in the development of Facebook - was he a lonely child with no friends, for example?

'When I was growing up, I was really interested in computers and making things, and when I went to college I studied computer science and psychology, which is pretty interesting for what we ended up doing, because Facebook is really at the intersection of these two things.'

That's a fair answer on a hobby level, but I'm thinking more of family. Did you ever wish you could communicate more, and more easily, when you were a kid?

'I don't know. I haven't thought that much about that.'

Instead, Zuckerberg spends much of his time thinking about how to keep Facebook expanding exponentially, and to keep people logging on (it is common for users to have a Facebook crush for a couple of weeks, a period where they say 'this is amazing', and even contact people they have never much liked, but the interest swiftly cools when they realise how much time it can consume, and how empty that level of communication can turn out to be). 'We're not focused on being cool,' Zuckerberg says. 'We're focused on sustainability, and

what we're really focused on is not how much time people are spending with us, but how much they're sharing.' In a year's time he says he sees Facebook having millions more users. And in three years? 'Hard to say, but a lot of the same stuff.'

Zuckerberg then retires for his nap and readies himself for his public event later in the afternoon. As he rests, Facebook has sent a warm-up guy into the main hall at ExCeL, and he is demonstrating something called Facebook Connect, which he says is designed to make the web 'a more social place'. Dave Morin talks very fast and says things like, 'You guys really want some how-to stuff.' There are three aspects of Facebook Connect, and one of them is called Feed. 'As you look out across the web,' Morin tells his attentive audience, 'your friends are doing many, many different things. You do things like Tumbling, Yelping about your favourite restaurants, Twittering about things that you care about and what you're doing every day, you also Digg things, articles that you think are interesting, you blog, and all of your friends are doing this too.' (Translation: Tumblr is another multi-media sharing site, Twitter is a microblog, where you leave little notes saying what you're up to, Yelp.com is a place to recommended places to eat, shop and party, Digg is a news and info sharing site.) 'But the real question is, if one of your friends does something on the web and you don't know about it, did it actually happen?' A Zen question, with a Facebook answer: because of Facebook Connect, you will now be able to know exactly when one of your friends updates and changes any of the applications on their site.

'And now I'm gonna do a couple of demos,' Morin announces. This is a very risky thing in the technology world, a live demonstration of a new product. If something can go wrong, it will, and so it proves. Morin decides to connect to a demo of a site called Runaround, in which you can publish news of your jogging activity. 'Let's see if I can get it to work here... so basically it's a site where you can talk about

the runs that you've done, share that kind of information with your friends... oops, it's a little bit big... sorry about the demo, the Gods of demos aren't liking me today... when I press Connect with Facebook it pops open a window...' Only it doesn't. 'Maybe I'll have to switch to a different network here... sorry about this...'

Then it is Zuckerberg's turn on the platform, and the little boy in the fleece steps up to great applause. He is asked what most excites him about Facebook Connect, and about how the developers in the audience can use it to best effect, and about how his life has changed in the past four years. In every answer there is one common message: everything is designed to help us share more. Many in the audience nod in appreciation, for what could possibly be wrong with that? The more we share, the more we will learn; the more we learn, the more we will know; and the more we know, the happier we will be. Facebook will also be happier, and progressively wealthier, and its advertisers will be both as well, so that in the end it may be impossible to tell sharing from spending, and community from commerce.