

# Former Facebook executive: social media is ripping society apart

By Julia Carrie Wong

Chamath Palihapitiya, former vice-president of user growth, expressed regret for his part in building tools that destroy ‘the social fabric of how society works’



‘It is eroding the core foundations of how people behave by and between each other,’ says the former Facebook executive Chamath Palihapitiya. Photograph: Toby Melville/Reuters

A former Facebook executive has said he feels “tremendous guilt” over his work on “tools that are ripping apart the social fabric of how society works”, joining a growing chorus of critics of the social media giant.

Chamath Palihapitiya, who was vice-president for user growth at Facebook before he left the company in 2011, said: “The short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops that we have created are destroying how society works. No civil discourse, no cooperation, misinformation, mistruth.”

The remarks, which were made at a Stanford Business School event in November, were just surfaced by tech website the Verge on Monday.

“This is not about Russian ads,” he added. “This is a global problem. It is eroding the core foundations of how people behave by and between each other.”

Palihapitiya’s comments last month were made a day after Facebook’s founding president, Sean Parker, criticized the way that the company “exploit[s] a vulnerability in human psychology” by creating a “social-validation feedback loop” during an interview at an Axios event.

Parker had said that he was “something of a conscientious objector” to using social media, a stance echoed by Palihapitiya who said that he was now hoping to use the money he made at Facebook to do good in the world.

“I can’t control them,” Palihapitiya said of his former employer. “I can control my decision, which is that I don’t use that shit. I can control my kids’ decisions, which is that they’re not allowed to use that shit.”

He also called on his audience to “soul-search” about their own relationship to social media. “Your behaviors, you don’t realize it, but you are being programmed,” he said. “It was unintentional, but now you gotta decide how much you’re going to give up, how much of your intellectual independence.”

Social media companies have faced increased scrutiny over the past year as critics increasingly link growing political divisions across the globe to the handful of platforms that dominate online discourse.

Many observers attributed the unexpected outcomes of the 2016 US presidential election and Brexit referendum at least in part to the ideological echo chambers created by Facebook’s algorithms, as well as the proliferation of fake news, conspiracy mongering, and propaganda alongside legitimate news sources in Facebook’s news feeds.

The company only recently acknowledged that it sold advertisements to Russian operatives seeking to sow division among US voters during the 2016 election.



Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg in Lima. The social media giant has faced increasing criticism for its power to polarize. Photograph: Ernesto Benavides/AFP/Getty Images

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Facebook has also faced significant criticism for its role in amplifying anti-Rohingya propaganda in Myanmar amid suspected ethnic cleansing of the Muslim minority.

Palihapitiya referenced a case from the Indian state of Jharkhand this spring, when false WhatsApp messages warning of a group of kidnappers led to the lynching of seven people. WhatsApp is owned by Facebook.

“That’s what we’re dealing with,” Palihapitiya said. “Imagine when you take that to the extreme where bad actors can now manipulate large swaths of people to do anything you want. It’s just a really, really bad state of affairs.”

Facebook responded to Palihapitiya’s comments on Tuesday, noting that the former executive had not worked for the company in six years.

“When Chamath was at Facebook we were focused on building new social media experiences and growing Facebook around the world,” a company spokeswoman, Susan Glick, said in a statement. “Facebook was a very different company back then, and as we have grown, we have realized how our responsibilities have grown too. We take our role very seriously and we are working hard to improve.”

The company said that it was researching the impact of its products on “well-being” and noted that the CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, indicated a willingness to decrease profitability to address issues such as foreign interference in elections.

- This article was amended on 13 December 2017 to correct misspellings of Chamath Palihapitiya’s last name from Palihapitaya.

Source: [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com)



*That’s not the end.  
Go to the next page for  
a language workout. 😊*

## Check your vocab!

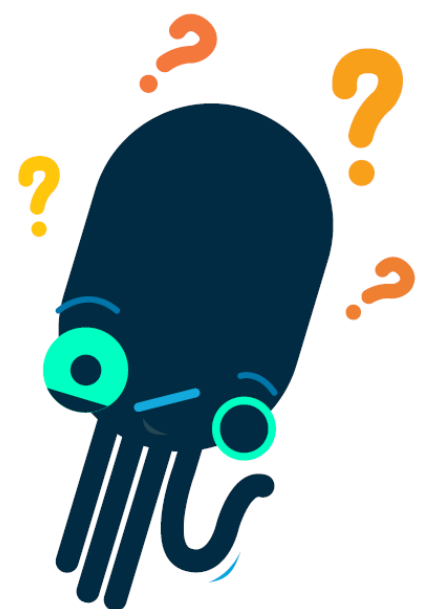
Match the highlighted words with their definitions.

1. to rip apart (verb)
  2. vulnerability (noun)
  3. scrutiny (noun)
  4. proliferation (noun)
  5. to amplify (verb)
- 
- A. careful and detailed examination of something in order to get information about it
  - B. to completely destroy something by tearing it into pieces
  - C. to make larger or greater (in amount, importance or intensity)
  - D. ability to be easily physically, emotionally, or mentally hurt, influenced or attacked
  - E. rapid increase in the number or amount of something

## Check your understanding!

Choose the correct answer.

1. How does Palihapitiya feel about the fact that he used to work on Facebook's growth?
  - A. Responsible for creating some manipulation mechanism.
  - B. Proud of his achievements.
  - C. Thankful for the opportunity.
  
2. What do the terms "feedback loop" and "echo chamber" refer to?
  - A. Facebook executives' response to the controversy around it.
  - B. Information on users collected by Facebook.
  - C. Manipulative bubbles of information influencing one's views.
  
3. What is NOT one of Palihapitiya's accusations towards Facebook?
  - A. Interfering with the outcome of national elections.
  - B. Encouraging people to buy expensive products.
  - C. Depriving people of their own opinions.



To check your answers, click [here](#).