In the last few decades, social media usage has grown aggressively. Companies such as Facebook and Twitter were the first to develop the algorithms and online social spaces that sparked exponential growth in the tech sector. In 2008, Facebook had 100 million active users; by 2018 that number had increased to 2.26 billion.

As social media companies continue to grow, they have steadily manufactured different ways to generate revenue from the widespread use of their platforms. Today, the majority of their profits originate from advertising. This advertising can range from ads preceding Youtube videos to ads formatted like social media posts in users' feeds.

Behind this seemingly simple business model is a deeper layer: data.

As social media companies gained more users, they began to recognize the value in storing and utilizing the extensive consum-

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TikTok, a short-form video social media app, has been subject to suspicion regarding their possible unethical use of user's data in the United States.

-Samuel Brown

er data compiled by their programs. Social media companies quickly began implementing data-collecting systems that worked relentlessly to capitalize off of the idea of net neutrality, which is the idea that the internet should remain free and as open as possible. According to ProPublica in 2018, Facebook had "collected more than 52,000 unique attributes" that have been used to classify users. These unique attributes provide myriads of data as to what a user likes, dislikes and what evokes emotion. Facebook, among similar companies, sells and uses this data to further personalize users' experience and advertisements.

Jason Koch, the computer technician at Pleasant Valley, encourages students to be informed and cautious about using certain online services. "You really have to be careful with what you are doing online. It is essential to research any website you are using to avoid falling into traps or unintentionally giving data," he said.

Recently, amid the rapid growth of social media usage during the pandemic, there have been numerous—accusations and inquiries about how

tech companies use this data. TikTok, a short-form video social media app, has been subject to suspicion regarding their possible unethical use of user's data in the United States. TikTok has repeatedly denied claims of malpractice and has been working with the Committee on Foreign Investment in the U.S. to prevent the app from losing American users.

Senior Alexa Very uses TikTok daily and

has been alarmed by all the accusations against the company's use of data. "I use Tiktok almost every day. The possibility that such a large company could be abusing their influence makes me hesitant to continue to be an active user," she stated.

Recently, TikTok released details of a complex, \$1.5 billion plan to reorganize the company's operations in the U.S. and create more transparency in their data collecting tactics. The plan proposes that companies like Oracle and other third party monitors will have access to TikTok's data centers and algorithms. This transparency would eliminate TikTok's problems with Washington D.C. and give them the capability to continue to grow their user base in the U.S.

As attention has been drawn to social media companies' collection of personal user data, users have become more intent on ensuring their privacy and protection on social media. Among other initiatives, some people have made efforts to enable users to profit off of their own data. Digi.me is a new U.K. startup that aims to allow users to "take

Big Tech Under
Scrutiny As Suspicion
Arises Over Data Use

By Samuel Brown

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control of their own data." The possibility of individual data ownership could have an ample role in liberating individuals from large corporations.

Looking to the future, after cases settle and new precedents for privacy and business are established, users of social media must stay informed on what using social media platforms like TikTok and Facebook truly entails.



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