Nonfiction review: 'The Facebook Effect' by David Kirkpatrick

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Created in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, a geeky Harvard undergraduate, Facebook has become the second-most-visited site on the Internet (after Google), with more than 350 million active viewers worldwide. Already available in about 70 languages, the social network is growing at a mind-boggling rate of 5 percent a month -- and
having a profound impact on communications and connectivity in the 21st century.

In "The Facebook Effect: The Inside Story of the Company That Is Connecting the World," David Kirkpatrick, senior editor for Internet and technology at Fortune magazine, draws on unprecedented access to Zuckerberg to provide a fast-paced and fascinating account of the company's phenomenal success and an early-days assessment of the ways in which it is changing the values, interests and behavior of the "Facebook using hordes."

Kirkpatrick, it's clear, is a fan of Facebook. Zuckerberg, he believes, is a brilliant, high-minded, visionary CEO who refused to make his company's bottom line a priority. Kirkpatrick shares his view that it's good for society to encourage people to openly acknowledge who they are and act consistently with their friends. Like Zuckerberg, he hopes that Facebook can restore the kind of intimacy eviscerated by modern, post-industrial life and, at the same time, create what media theorist Marshall McLuhan called "the global village."

Noting that Facebook users want to share information about themselves and somehow control access to it, Kirkpatrick acknowledges that software cannot provide ironclad protections against invasions of privacy. But it helps, he points out, that Facebook provides mechanisms for users to put friends into groups and decide what to disclose to whom. And he gives "some credence" to the argument that in a more open and transparent world, people will behave more responsibly because they know they'll be held to the consequences of their actions, and standards about indiscretions will be relaxed.

Kirkpatrick may be right. For better and worse, Zuckerberg may turn out to have been right as well that if he built it (a company that connects the world), they (the marketers) would come. Although it has yet to turn a profit, Facebook recently was valued at $10 billion. With more -- and better -- data about users than any other website, it's become a magnet for investors and advertisers.

Facebook staffers often joke that the company aims at "total domination." The "reason it's funny," Kirkpatrick concludes, "is that it evokes a surprising truth."

THE FACEBOOK EFFECT
David Kirkpatrick
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-- Glenn C. Altschuler
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