Editorial Article

Everything is connected

True to the motto "connect your world," the Graz-based start-up e.com, with its *connect* app, wants to bring a data-secure social network to the market. Does this mean competition for Facebook and co.? We have taken a closer look at the new platform.

With around 1.86 billion monthly active users, Facebook is leading the statistics of the most popular social networks worldwide. At more than 80% market share, the network founded by Mark Zuckerberg is also the undisputed market leader. However, the zenith seems to have already been reached or exceeded: this year, the company is still recording a profit, but the direct Facebook clicks are sinking. Users are increasingly switching to other services. For example, WhatsApp has replaced the Facebook messenger as the most popular messaging service, and also Instagram recorded strong growth last year. Not a problem for Facebook, though, as both, Instagram and WhatsApp belong to its empire.

Increasing awareness on Facebook

This form of social network, however, seems to no longer be as interesting for younger target groups. Only around 30% of all 11 to 20-year-olds have a Facebook account. Older generations are increasingly sceptical of the social media giant because of the regular headlines on data misuse. As a result, Facebook is slowly but surely becoming an advertising desert in which personal information is disclosed very sparingly.

Data protection — A gap in the market

Data protection is an issue for all major social networks. Even networks such as LinkedIn and Xing which focus on professional contacts gather data, evaluate it, and sell it for advertising purposes. Time and time again, companies are trying to claim the market gap "Secure Social Network" for themselves, for example the Berlin-based start-up Whispeer. End-to-end encrypted communication platforms are financed largely through co-operation, in the case of Whispeer, with companies that prefer internal communication to be data-protected. Some providers also require a one-time or monthly fee, or offer additional features. Despite the promise of data protection, however, the huge success is yet to come for many such providers. Among various other reasons because new social networks all suffer from the same major problem: they are initially empty. And a social network without social contacts can only expect modest success.

Connected from the beginning

The Graz-based start-up e.com also plans to bring a data-safe social network to the market: the free app "*connect*," which can be downloaded from summer 2017 onwards will not only allow end-to-end encrypted communication, but will also offer a Virtual Reality platform, multimedia features, and numerous other extras. The initial emptiness of the platform will be avoided by the multi-messenger which bundles the communications from various different messaging services. "From the beginning, we will ensure that everyone can reach all their contacts through *connect*. However, for technical reasons, data protection can only be secured on messages that are sent via the app between two *connect* users," summarizes e.com CEO Michael Schöggl. Services such as Facebook messenger, text messages, or emails are incorporated in *connect*, thus saving the user time as they do not have to open and answer all their messages in different apps.

Numerous possibilities

We want to distance ourselves from Facebook and co. not only through data protection: the app is structured completely differently from established social media platforms. *connect* is in a virtual loft which, with 3D glasses, can also be experienced in Virtual Reality. You will find a desk for communication and entertainment functions and thanks to cooperating partners in media from all over the world, a reading corner that ensures a constant supply of new media information. If you are interested, you can even have a virtual pet. The usual features such as sending photos, video calling, streaming TV and radio broadcasts, and smaller online games are enhanced by more innovative options such as alternative 3D environments (e.g. the Oval Office as an exclusive Kickstarter reward,) aircraft dispatches, and treasure hunt games.

Using a modular design

What initially sounds like pure confusion and an excess of possibilities is an issue that has been solved creatively by e.com. As Michael Schöggl explains, "Our app can be customized using a modular design. Everyone can set up exactly the functions they need. For example, if you have an older smartphone, or want to consume less memory, you just select the stripped-down version of the app which only shows the desktop.” The operation is simplified by the use of photorealistic objects such as the camera for the photo function, TV for streaming movies, and the address books — as you might have guessed correctly — for the contact list. This way, the developers of the app also want to appeal to older people who prefer an intuitive operation.

For both, young and old

With virtual pets, small in-app games and gimmicks such as weather changes seen from the window of the virtual loft, we can appeal to the younger target group who is predominantly active on Snapchat at the moment. According to statistics, over 40% of the 18 to 34-year-olds use this app on a daily basis in the US alone. Even though Snapchat cannot compete with the user numbers of Facebook, the network hugely out-performs the blue "f" within this age group. This is partly due to the fun aspect of Snapchat, and to the stories which are automatically deleted after 24 hours. *connect* is also active here: content can be posted for limited periods of time, sent messages can be deleted, or made readable only for a specific target group. "With us, every user can decide freely what they want to reveal“, says Michael Schöggl. A form of the Snapchat face effects will not be available on *connect* to begin with, but users will have other fun ways to communicate, and can, depending on their mood, send each other nice weather, rain or storms, virtual pets, or accessories for their virtual loft.

Financing through Product Placement

The virtual loft itself can be designed according to the user’s current mood. This is where the financing of the free app comes into play: we will cooperate with other companies so that they can use our app as a platform to present their product, and pay for this representation. The users can then furnish their loft with furniture from various real furniture suppliers — and should they plan a move in real life, could buy their favourite piece from the app for their real home as well. "We have already presented our business idea to several companies and all of them were very impressed”, says Michael Schöggl, confident in the plan’s future success. In addition to fixtures and fittings, product placement through soft drink cans, books, or electronic devices is also possible. "However, all branded products must have a function or at least a playful value for the user in order to be included in the selection," promises the young entrepreneur.

A virtual home as a start in the new VR world

Users can also upload content to the app and determine who can access it; just themselves, a selected circle of friends, or everyone. This makes it possible to decorate the virtual home with works of art and pictures on the walls, your own hand writing, or a 360° photo as an alternative view from the window. "In addition, we are planning on co-operations with film studios and game manufacturers to offer completely new, 3D-scenes with cool functions or playful content like a space ship, an archaeologist's camp, a children's room with toys, and the stomach of a whale. The possibilities are endless," continues Michael Schöggl.

A great vision with European values

The goal is to close the gap between social networking, media, games and virtual reality, so that *connect* becomes a "digital life network" that connects all aspects of your digital life in a single, intuitive, customizable, and device-independent software.

These are huge goals for the young Graz-based start-up which is entering the ring with this vision, up against opponents like Facebook or Google. In the fight between David and Goliath, it remains to be seen whether the technical lead and the argument of data security will be enough to cope with the overwhelming competition from Silicon Valley. Whether the world is ready for an internationally successful social network from the heart of Europe will be revealed at the Kickstarter release in July at the earliest. If you do not want to wait that long, you can already get a first impression of the app on our homepage 4connect-e.com.

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