

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg Dismissed Tinder Cofounder As Irrelevant But Still Let Dating App Get Special Access To Users' Data

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg considered entering the online dating business as far back as 2014, but he put the idea on the back burner, instead giving Tinder special access to its users' data, leaked emails between top executives show.

Despite the preferential treatment, Zuckerberg rejected the suggestion he meet with Tinder cofounder Sean Rad, explaining, "I don't think he's that relevant. He probably just wants to make sure we won't turn off their API."

The leaked correspondence, released on Wednesday, is part of an ongoing lawsuit between Facebook and Six4Three, a now-defunct app developer that sued the social network in 2015 for restricting user data access, alleging the actions were uncompetitive. A spokesperson for Facebook, which is facing multiple antitrust investigations, said that these documents "are taken out of context by someone with an agenda against Facebook."

The documents shed new light on Facebook's deliberations to break into the multibillion dating market, a move that [pummelled the shares of Match Group](#), owner of Tinder and Match.com, when Zuckerberg eventually launched Facebook Dating in September. The free service borrows elements of popular dating apps Hinge, Bumble and Tinder with specialized features that take advantage of its 2.4 billion user network.

The correspondence also shows how perilously close Tinder came to losing key access to Facebook user information that helped Tinder grow rapidly in its early years, when members often used their Facebook logins to access the app. When Facebook further restricted the kind of information third-party apps could access after the Cambridge Analytica scandal broke in March 2018, [Tinder's app crashed](#).

The dating app known for its "swipe right" feature was on Facebook's radar in 2013, the year after it had launched, according to an email exchange between Monika Bickert, current head of global policy management at Facebook, and [Mike Vernal](#), a former Facebook executive who was then vice president of search. "I saw some folks complain about Tinder," Vernal wrote, in response to a note Bickert shared around enforcement of "sexually themed apps."

"I know a bunch of people who think this app is really interesting / could be big, so before we decide to take any enforcement action against them, can you let me know?"

The next year, Zuckerberg considered what a Facebook alternative would look like.

"[Facebook] isn't explicitly a dating service, so there's no stigma to being a part of it,"

Zuckerberg wrote. "I'd bet that more dates and relationships start on Facebook than all the other dating services combined."

That same year, he also expressed concern Tinder was growing too fast at Facebook's expense, echoing a worry shared by executives about other [apps including Vine around the same time](#). "I've been thinking a lot about Tinder," Zuckerberg wrote in January 2014 to two executives. "Tinder's growth is especially alarming to me because their product is built completely on Facebook data, and it's much better than anything we've built for recommendations using the same corpus."

Tinder was just one among thousands of other developers, from game developer Zynga to music sharing software Spotify, that had access to large amounts of data around Facebook's users and their friends.

In 2014, Facebook announced it would start preventing third-party app developers from having access to data on users' friends, including birth dates, photos and pages they liked. The company gave a May 2015 deadline for developers to comply with its new set of access rules.

However, Zuckerberg and other Facebook executives made some companies and apps an exception, documents show. Tinder was one. According to the documents, Facebook agreed to give Tinder a special data-sharing agreement, internally known as "whitelists," if the dating app shared trademark rights on "MOMENTS," which was the planned name for a photo app that Facebook wanted to launch, an email exchange in March 2015 showed.

"Facebook's decision to give Tinder special access to data that has been cut off to other developers presents 'value we think is far greater than [Tinder's] trademark,'" wrote Konstantinos Papamiltiadis, current director of platform partnerships at Facebook.

When asked about this agreement, a spokeswoman for Tinder at the time said, "Tinder never received special treatment, data or access related to this dispute or its resolution."

The trove of emails and messages are part of nearly 7,000 pages of confidential internal Facebook documents, which were leaked to Duncan Campbell in February 2019 but first published on Wednesday. According to [Campbell's website](#), he is an investigative journalist and a forensic expert based in Ireland.

The U.S. government has taken on a multipronged attack on Facebook for how it handles user data and privacy following the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which erupted in March 2018. A former employee of Cambridge Analytica, a British political consulting firm that included President Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign as a client, revealed that his former employer had inappropriately purchased data on what turned out to be 87 million Facebook users.

Zuckerberg testified before Congress as a result of that incident. In the months after, multiple federal and state agencies have launched investigative probes on Facebook, on charges ranging from engaging in anticompetitive behavior to violating consumer privacy laws.

Other online dating apps that had whitelist agreements with Facebook include Bumble, Badoo, Coffee Meets Bagel, Hinge and jSwipe.

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