How Facebook is struggling to lay out Zuckerberg's vision

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As I wrote in this article headlined ["Why 2009 was Facebook's year"](), it's clear that the site has had a tremendous 12 months - growing from 150m users around the world to more than 350m.

But while it has been an incredible period for the world's favourite social network, the company is facing a number of challenges - in part precisely *because* of its size and influence. How does it carry on growing at such a rate? How does it make money from new users in less wealthy nations? How does it tackle the growing sentiment of concern over privacy?

I spoke to a number of people quoted in the article, but I thought it was also worth sharing at length what [Chris Messina](), a designer and open source advocate, told me. He's spent a lot of time thinking, talking and writing about Facebook's approach to these sorts of problems, and while he's got a personal interest in some of the issues as part of the [Diso project]() (which is aiming to encourage and build decentralised social web services) he lays out things in a pretty lucid way. Here's what he said when I asked him for his thoughts.

What Facebook is doing right

"I think Facebook is continuing to both innovate and make good on their promise to 'make the world a more open place' — with the caveat that "open" means many things to many people. I think Zuckerberg has a vision and is pursuing it — just like Steve Jobs does. The mismatch is that people aren't used to visionaries telling them what they want, especially before they're ready for it. But I think the latest privacy stuff is like Apple's iPod moment — judged by the present and the past, it seems completely unintuitive; in hindsight, it'll turn out to define the new norm for the next generation.

"When I talk to people about Facebook, it's clear that they're on the one hand scared of Facebook while also benefiting immensely from its ubiquity. Even as people lament its apparent power, they relent to its utility and functionality.

"So, in general, what is Facebook doing right? They're providing leadership and changing culture — and scaling like mad."

What Facebook is doing wrong

"While I think it's really hard to do this well, Facebook isn't doing a great job of laying out their vision of the future — and what a more 'open' or transparent society looks like.

"In some respects, by making changes unilaterally, I think they're doing themselves a disservice and turning people away from trusting the brand. At the same time, I don't think sugar-coating and delaying changes would also work for Facebook. In some respects, there will always be haters when you're at 350M users... and it's much easier to complain than to create yourself.

"Facebook isn't doing a great job communicating to the world what it's doing and why. I'm sure it's trying, but in some ways, there's just far too much stuff coming out of them to be able to track it."

Can it keep getting bigger?

"Yes, if they push their energy into building out and making the web more social — which is what Facebook Connect is all about. I probably could have elaborated on the importance of Facebook Connect to this whole puzzle — but the privacy stuff is topical lately.

"I'll say one thing to tie these pieces together: in order for Facebook Connect to succeed and become a social, "identity medium" for the web, Facebook must change people's expectations about the content that they produce. This is why Facebook is moving forward with their "public by default" move. It has less to do with wanting to monetize your content on Facebook or violating your privacy — it has much more to do with facilitating your ability to take your data with you to other sites, thereby increasing the value and economic motivations for other sites to implement Facebook Connect.

"1 billion Facebook users by 2015? Totally possible if they get them to move *off* facebook.com."