

Oh Facebook, Say It Isn't So

For better or worse, reports surfaced again this week that Facebook is developing its own phone.

I've lost count of how many times we've heard talk of "the Facebook phone." The New York Times says [this latest effort](#) [1] would be Facebook's third effort at building a smartphone. AllThingsD [reported last year](#) [2] that Facebook and HTC had entered a deal to work on the smartphone code-named "Buffy." According to the Times, a Buffy phone is still in the works, only Facebook's work is going much deeper thanks in part to a bunch of former Apple engineers that Facebook reportedly poached.

While not the same animal exactly, some will recall that HTC President Peter Chou talked up the "Facebook phone" during a 2011 keynote at Mobile World Congress. HTC's "Cha-Cha" and the "Salsa" had buttons dedicated to connect with your Facebook friends and they were going to "redefine" mobile social networking.

In 2008, you'll remember, a little-known company named INQ, a Hutchison Whampoa company, tried to make a name for itself as the creator of "the world's first Facebook phone." They offered up the first real iteration, in my memory, of a device built from the ground up with social networking at the core. While they deserve kudos, they haven't exactly achieved superstar (i.e., iPhone) status in the commercial smartphone market.

I admire the efforts of these non-Facebook entities, regardless of how much direct cooperation they have had with the social network, but what's being talked about today is more about Facebook itself pursuing its own version of an OS. That, in my mind, is too little and way too late.

At the risk of sounding like an also-ran, I have to agree with the chorus of bloggers who say a Facebook phone is a bad idea – regardless of how closely Facebook is involved and for all the reasons people have already stated. I still think Facebook would do better improving how it works on existing operating systems. My primary use of Facebook is on a smartphone and while my experience has been OK/mediocre, I've heard others complain bitterly about bugs. Surely there's room for improvement and more original thinking outside the usual parameters.

Besides, isn't it too late for Facebook to be getting into the smartphone OS game? Paul Amsellem, president of the Paris-based mobile marketing company Mobile Network Group, doesn't think so. He wrote a column back in 2010 that predicted Facebook would create a "Facephone" with Microsoft as an eventual partner. This week, when I caught up with Amsellem, he said he still thinks Microsoft would make a decent partner. Facebook also could benefit from buying the troubled Research In Motion (RIM), which boasts how its BBM is a bandwidth-efficient technology for carriers.

Amsellem says he thinks Facebook needs time to think about its mobile strategy,

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even if that ends up being 18 months, and it should be open to all the opportunities, including the possibility of buying Opera to get deeper into the OS. Facebook also could get together with Microsoft to make a move for Nokia and thereby obtain its distribution expertise and relationships with operators. But that, too, seems too pie-in-the-sky. After all, we've seen proof positive in telecom that not all acquisitions/mergers, even when they reach the completion stage, are the best idea.

Just because Facebook needs to justify its IPO doesn't mean a Facebook-dedicated phone from Facebook is the right path forward. Probably not the kind of opinions Facebook would "like" these days, but they're getting a lot of them.

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Links:

[1] <http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/05/27/facebook-tries-tries-again-on-a-smartphone/>

[2] <http://allthingsd.com/20111121/the-facebook-phone-its-finally-real-and-its-name-is-buffy/>