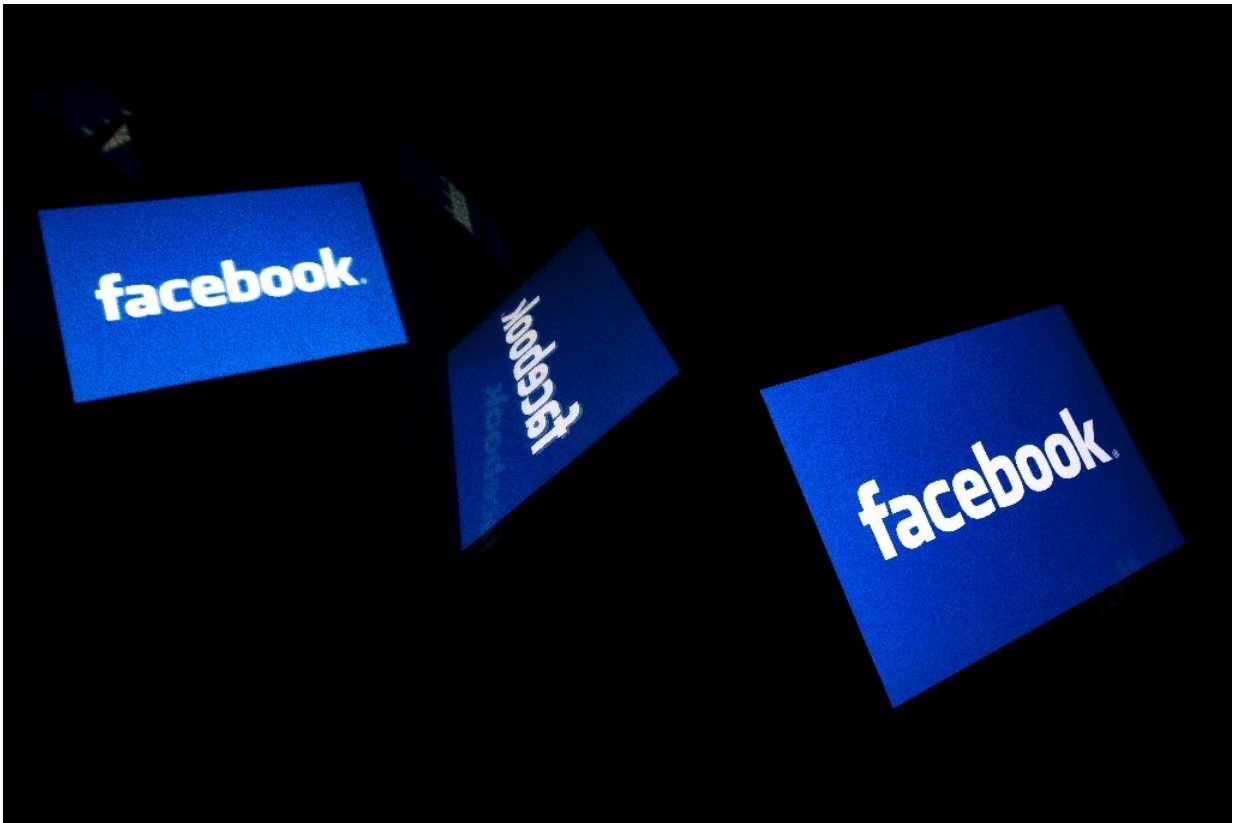


Facebook will use journalists to curate news, opening itself to more bias allegations

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Facebook's News Tab will be curated by a team of journalists who select relevant, reliable breaking and top news stories

Mark Zuckerberg is a consistent guy. For years, he has worn the same gray T-shirts, idolized the same Roman emperor and repeated the same

denials that Facebook Inc. has any desire to become a media company.

But after a punishing few years for his company's public image, Zuckerberg has softened that stance, green-lighting development of a new feature that will deliver news stories handpicked by editors employed full time by Facebook. The News tab, which is slated for a public debut sometime this year, will highlight five to 10 stories a day, chosen by those editors to reflect that day's most important events.

However faithfully they approach that task, for Facebook to take ownership of news curation in this way is sure to fire up critics, including President Trump, who believe the company suppresses conservative viewpoints. But it may help placate those in the news industry and beyond who accuse the social media giant of decimating America's information ecosystem and replacing professional news with viral garbage and partisan humbug.

Facebook still being Facebook, the tab will also host a much larger volume of algorithmically selected news, personalized through signals such as what pages a user follows on the social network and what content he or she has engaged with. Facebook is in talks with a number of major news publishers, including the Los Angeles Times, about licensing their content in exchange for fees of as much as \$3 million a year.

"Our goal with the News tab is to provide a personalized, highly relevant experience for people," Facebook's head of news partnerships, Campbell Brown, said in a statement.

Hiring journalists isn't in itself a departure for Facebook, or for Silicon Valley. Brown, a former CNN anchor, has been building her team over the last two years largely through hires of people who have backgrounds in journalism. Apple and LinkedIn both have sizable teams of professional reporters and editors overseeing their news operations.

But relying on those journalists' news judgment to select the headlines that hundreds of millions of users will see is very much a new development for Facebook. Zuckerberg has long been reluctant to have the company take responsibility for making editorial content decisions, for reasons both practical—algorithms don't need vacations or health insurance—and political. In 2016, the company fired a small team of editors responsible for tweaking the content of a "Trending" module that surfaced stories in the process of going viral, after leaks sparked accusations of bias against conservative news outlets.

But firing those editors, who were contractors rather than full-time employees, did little to dispel accusations of bias—including from Trump, whose White House is reportedly drafting an executive order that seeks to defend conservative viewpoints on social media. Despite a lack of evidence, Facebook has been at pains to appear responsive to conservatives' concerns, hiring former Republican Sen. Jon Kyl to lead a survey of conservative groups. Kyl's interim report, released Tuesday, delineated the various ways conservatives fear they might be discriminated against on Facebook, but it contained no proof that such discrimination happens.

It's all but guaranteed that the bias allegations will escalate as soon as Facebook launches a daily slate of stories handpicked by its own employees. Those in-house editors will also have to reckon with the likelihood that the biggest stories of the day will sometimes be about Facebook itself, which has been rocked by a series of privacy scandals and is looking down the barrel of a federal antitrust investigation.

But Zuckerberg, keen to reestablish Facebook as a source of trustworthy information after being used to disseminate Russian-sponsored "fake news" during the 2016 presidential election, has accepted the importance of granting the News tab team editorial independence, according to a company source who was not authorized to speak publicly.

Facebook is "dogfooding" the news product, techie lingo for internal testing. At launch, it will probably have a team of five or so editors choosing the daily "Top News" stories and reporting to Brown. Facebook will recruit for those roles both internally and externally.

In addition to national importance, the editors will select stories based on originality. In discussions with Facebook, publishers have expressed concerns about how its News Feed—the central feature in the Facebook app—often drives the biggest surges of traffic to stories that are rewritten using other outlets' reporting. "One of the things we want to reward is provenance," Brown said.

Another problem with Facebook's role in the news ecosystem is News Feed's susceptibility to websites that look like news outlets but aren't. During the last presidential election cycle, phony news stories published for profit or as propaganda outperformed the biggest news publishers, according to a BuzzFeed analysis. To prevent fake news from infiltrating the news tab, Facebook is considering imposing eligibility requirements, only featuring websites that are registered in the company's news index and barring those with a history of being flagged as misinformation providers.

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