Facebook expands new tool aiming to shrink 'news deserts'

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This July 16, 2013, file photo shows a sign at Facebook headquarters in Menlo Park, Calif. Facebook is trying to coax "news deserts" into bloom with the expansion of a tool that provides people with local news and information, but says it still has a lot to learn. The social media giant said Thursday, Sept. 12, 2019, it is expanding its "Today In" service to 6,000 cities and towns across the U.S., up from 400 previously. (AP Photo/Ben Margot, File)

Facebook is trying to coax "news deserts" into bloom with the second major expansion of a tool that exposes people to more local news and information. But the social network confesses that it still has a lot to learn.

The social media giant said Thursday it is expanding its "Today In" service to 6,000 cities and towns across the U.S., up from 400 before.

Launched in early 2018, the service lets Facebook users opt into local information, including news articles, missing-person alerts, local election results, road closures and crime reports. Facebook aggregates posts from the official Facebook pages for news organizations, schools, government agencies and community groups like dog shelters.

The mobile-only tool lives within the Facebook app; turning it on adds local updates to a user's regular news feed. In areas with scant local news, Facebook will add relevant articles from surrounding areas.

Some 1,800 newspapers have closed in the United States over the past 15 years, according to research from the University of North Carolina. Newsroom employment has declined by 45% as the industry struggles with a broken business model partly caused by the success of companies on the internet, including Facebook.

Campbell Brown, head of global news partnerships at Facebook, said Facebook has a responsibility to support journalism, while also noting that the media industry has been in decline "for a very long time." Brown, a former news anchor and host at NBC and CNN, said local reporting remains the most important form of journalism today.

"There is no silver bullet," Brown said in an interview. "We really want to help publishers address challenges in local markets."

Warren St. John, CEO of hyperlocal news service Patch, said the service means potential new readers because it goes to people who haven't necessarily liked a Patch Facebook page.

"Facebook has taken its lumps, perhaps rightly so over the last couple of years, but I think what they have done around local news is pretty unique," he said. This includes grants and accelerator programs for local news organizations, "passing the expertise and knowledge of a Silicon Valley tech firm down to the local publisher ecosystem."

Today In won't automatically turn on for people even in the areas it serves, which could limit its reach. So far, Facebook says, 1.6 million people have activated the feature and receive news from some 1,200 publishers every week.

The service has no human editors and uses software filters to weed out objectionable content. Tweaking the algorithm to find relevant local stories has been complicated. Does a road closure matter if it's 100 miles away? How about a murder?

Already, Facebook says it's learned from publishers' input about what doesn't work. For instance, it now allows only posts from publishers registered with its "News page index," which means they meet guidelines such as focusing on current events and information, and don't have a record of publishing misinformation. Obituaries from funeral homes and real estate posts—both of which previously showed up under "news"—are no longer eligible.

Facebook has also learned that local news doesn't work like national news. Political stories, for instance, don't generate a lot of local interest.

Facebook isn't paying licensing fees or sharing ad revenue with these news outlets. But the company says publishers get additional referrals to

their websites, more so than when people see the same stories in their regular news feed, based on data from its test partners.

While people scroll through their news feeds passively, people engage with articles more when they appear in Today In, said Jimmy O'Keefe, a product marketing manager at Facebook.

Google also announced changes to its news service Thursday, saying it would slightly alter its search system so original news stories on a topic show up before follow-ups or repeated news from other publications. Similar to Facebook, the company has been working on showing news articles from authoritative, proven publications.

Outside researchers studying local news data provided by Facebook found that about half of the news stories in the Today In feature met what they called a "critical information need" in the communities it served.

The researchers said Facebook users interacted the most with stories serving a critical need—such as information on emergencies, transportation and health—even though "non-critical" stories such as sports were more numerous. The researchers—Matthew Weber at the University of Minnesota and Peter Andringa and Philip Napoli at Duke University—received no funding from Facebook.

Large metro areas such as New York City, Los Angeles and San Francisco are still excluded from Today In. The abundance of news and population density there makes it more difficult to provide relevant local information. A big local story in Brooklyn, for instance, might be irrelevant in the same borough just a few miles away.

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