

Facebook rolls out Live Audio Rooms, podcasts in new push to take on Clubhouse

June 21 2021, by Jessica Menton, Usa Today



Facebook began its push into audio with the US launch of its 'live audio rooms' and podcasts, which are available directly on the Facebook app.

Facebook has officially jumped into the audio space.

The social-media giant rolled out a suite of Live Audio Rooms and

podcasts on Monday, giving its platform a new foothold in a space that has seen a surge of interest following the meteoric rise of audio-only social apps like Clubhouse during the coronavirus pandemic.

Clubhouse has drawn more than 10 million users and has amassed a \$1 billion-plus valuation, joining the ranks of Uber and Airbnb as a unicorn startup. That's inspired Facebook, Twitter, Spotify and others to develop their own Clubhouse competitors.

"The audio market is fundamentally very fragmented. Every single platform is doing something specific, either the live audio component or the podcast component," Fidji Simo, head of Facebook's app, told U.S. TODAY in an exclusive interview. "Facebook, however, is approaching audio as all of the formats working together."

In April, Facebook announced a series of new audio products, including its Clubhouse rival, called "Live Audio Rooms," which will be available across Facebook and Facebook Messenger.

Starting Monday, the audio rooms are available to public figures and select Facebook groups in the U.S., according to Simo. Facebook is starting with public figures, creators and groups for now and will roll it out further in the coming months. It hasn't released specifics yet for expansion to people, organizations or businesses, but that expansion is on the horizon.

Select podcasts will be available to listeners in the U.S., and more will be rolled out over the coming weeks and months. Facebook is also building new audio tools for creators to develop and launch "Soundbites," or short-form audio clips that will launch later this year.

Here's what to know about Facebook's audio-only push:

Who can use Facebook audio rooms?

Public figures and select Facebook groups in the U.S. can create Live Audio Rooms on iOS.

In the coming weeks, Facebook will expand the ability for more public figures and groups to host audio rooms.

Facebook has also partnered with public figures for the audio rooms. They include Grammy-nominated electronic music artist TOKiMONSTA, who will discuss female excellence and overcoming obstacles; Seattle Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson, who will talk about how to train someone's mind like an elite athlete; and producer and independent journalist Rosa Clemente, who will host a discussion around affirming Blackness in the Latinx community.

How do Live Audio Rooms work?

Users can listen and join live conversations with public figures, experts and others about topics they're interested in.

Users on iOS and Android can find audio rooms to join in places like Facebook's news feed and via notifications. People can also sign up to be reminded when an audio room goes live. When listening to a conversation, a user will be notified when friends or followers join.

To participate in real time, people can enable live captions, request to join the conversation and use reactions.

Who can be invited to speak?

Public figures can invite anyone on Facebook to be a speaker, including

friends, followers or other public figures with a verified badge. During the conversation, the hosts can invite speakers in advance or choose listeners during the stream to join as a speaker. There can be up to 50 speakers, and there is no limit to the number of listeners.

In groups, admins can control whether moderators, group members or other admins can create an audio room. In public groups, both members and visitors can listen to the audio room, but in private groups, only members can listen.

Live Audio Room hosts can also select a nonprofit or fundraiser to support during their conversation, and listeners and speakers can directly donate.

How do podcasts work?

More than 170 million people are already following podcast pages on Facebook's platform, and more than 35 million people are members of fan groups around podcasts, according to the social media company.

Until now, users had to leave the Facebook app to listen to the episodes. Now users will be able to listen to podcasts directly on the Facebook app, both while using the app or when the app is backgrounded.

Users can listen to podcasts while browsing Facebook, via a miniplayer or a full-screen player with playback options, including with their phone display turned off.

People can listen to select podcast creators on their Facebook pages and in the news feed. Users will have access to a catalog of podcasts and be able to react, comment, bookmark and share their favorite podcasts, their posts and episodes.

What podcasts are available?

Select podcasts will be available to listeners in the U.S.

The initial slate of podcasts will include Joe Budden of The Joe Budden Podcast; "Jess Hilarious" of Carefully Reckless from The Black Effect Podcast Network and iHeartRadio; Keltie Knight, Becca Tobin, and Jac Vanek of the LadyGang; and Nicaila Matthews Okome of Side Hustle Pro.

Facebook said it will continue to add more podcasts in the coming weeks.

Later this summer, it plans to add additional features, like captions and the ability to create and share short clips of a podcast, which has been a highly requested feature, according to Simo.

"We're still very much in the early stages of this product," Simo added. "There's going to be a lot more work that we want to do to create an even better experience for the podcast community."

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Citation: Facebook rolls out Live Audio Rooms, podcasts in new push to take on Clubhouse (2021, June 21) retrieved 30 April 2024 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2021-06-facebook-audio-podcasts.html>

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