

# For social platforms, the outage was short. But people's stories vanished, and that's no small thing

March 7 2024, by DEEPTI HAJELA and WYATTE GRANTHAM-PHILIPS

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In this Sunday, Aug. 11, 2019, photo an iPhone displays the apps for Facebook and Messenger in New Orleans. One the face of it, a short-term outage that made certain social media platforms temporarily unavailable would seem to not be worth more than a shrug or passing interest. But the widespread attention given to the blanking of Meta's Facebook, Instagram, Threads and Messenger

platforms on Tuesday shows that it does matter. Credit: AP Photo/Jenny Kane, File

Once upon a time, there was a brief outage on some social media platforms. It got fixed. The end. On the face of it, kind of a boring story.

But the widespread attention given to the blanking of Meta's Facebook, Instagram, Threads and Messenger platforms on Tuesday suggests another, perhaps less obvious tale: the one that shows that social media platforms, like the books or newspapers or insert-medium-here of other times in history, matter more than just being entertaining pastimes.

Wait, you mean those posts from that cousin you rarely see, sharing updates from her kids' lives? That reel from the influencer, introducing you to a culture or bit of knowledge you never knew? That photo collage you put up as a memorial to a loved one whose loss you're grieving? The back-and-forth debate between people on your feed trying to one-up each other on topics that interest you?

Yes. The technologies might be recent. But the things we use them for? That taps into something age-old: Humans are wired to love stories. Telling them. Listening to them. Relating to each other and our communities through them. And, of late, showing them to the world piece by piece through our devices—so much so that one of Instagram's primary features is called, simply, "Stories."

"Our narrative capacity is ... one of the best ways through which we are able to connect with one another," says Evynn McFalls, vice president of marketing and brand at the NeuroLeadership Institute, a consultancy that incorporates neuroscience into its corporate work. "Our brains like stories because it makes it easier for us to understand other people, other

circumstances."

## **Social media as a community of stories**

In his book "The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human," scholar Jonathan Gottschall says this: "The human imperative to make and consume stories runs even more deeply than literature, dreams and fantasy. We are soaked to the bone in story."

And in these times, social media is so often where they're told—whether in pictures, videos, memes, text threads or mashups of all four. People can get news and information (and OK, yes, misinformation) there, learn and possibly sympathize with others' plights, see things in ways that help us make sense of the world. We tell our own stories on them, make connections with others that might not exist in any other space.

In many ways, these social spaces are where we do "human."

"It's almost impossible for many people, especially in the United States, to think about their lives and communication without thinking about social media," says Samuel Woolley, an assistant professor at the University of Texas at Austin's School of Journalism and Media.

So when they're disrupted? Uh-oh. Threads of connection can disappear. Endorphin-generating activities get cut off. Routines—for better and for worse—are interrupted, and [expected flows of information](#) and storytelling hiccup and falter.



In this March 13, 2019, file photo Facebook, Messenger and Instagram apps are displayed on an iPhone in New York. On the face of it, a short-term outage that made certain social media platforms temporarily unavailable would seem to not be worth more than a shrug or passing interest. But the widespread attention given to the blanking of Meta's Facebook, Instagram, Threads and Messenger platforms on Tuesday shows that it does matter. Credit: AP Photo/Jenny Kane, File

"Outside of the trivial nature of these platforms, they've also really morphed over the last 15 years into an advocacy space," says Imani Cheers, associate professor of digital storytelling at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. "Those types of outages can really cause disruption in the passing and service of information."

It can also ratchet up the impact if the interruption comes at a moment when communication and information are perceived to be needed the most, Woolley notes: In the United States, the outage corresponded with the moments many were heading to the polls for Super Tuesday.

"Even though the recent outage only lasted a handful of hours for most people, it still resulted in a lack of access to the news," Woolley says. "And that's a problem."

## **A creeping sense of unease?**

After the outages happened Tuesday, Andy Stone, Meta's head of communications, [acknowledged them](#) on X, formerly known as Twitter. "We apologize for any inconvenience," he wrote. But for some, it was more visceral than simple inconvenience. Their stories and their online lives were at stake.

When Taylor Cole Miller, an assistant professor of communication studies at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, first realized that he wasn't getting into his Facebook account Tuesday, his initial concern was security—that he had somehow been hacked.

Shortly afterward came creeping panic: What if he had lost almost two decades of his Facebook existence, including some connections with people he only had over the platform?

"I hesitate to say that my life flashed before my eyes, because that's just so overwrought," he says. "But the fact of the matter is that as someone who's been on Facebook for 20 years, a significant amount of my life is archived" there.

"Many of the ways that I connect with people is merely through Facebook. What happens if poof, it just goes away really fast? What



does that mean for who I am as a person and how I interact with other people?"

That type of reaction about losing something that's so part of the fabric of one's day speaks to the power of story to connect us, says Melanie Green, a professor in the department of communication at the University at Buffalo. And, not incidentally, to the platforms that amplify those stories.

"Humans have a need to belong. We're social species, our survival often depends on being part of groups," she says. "Stories can help us feel that sense of belongingness."

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