

Facebook unveils big audio push, adds podcasts

19 April 2021, by Glenn Chapman



Facebook is moving to broaden its audio offerings on the heels of the rise of audio-only social network Clubhouse

Facebook on Monday said it is adding podcasts and "live audio rooms" in a push to get people talking and take on the fast-growing audio-based app Clubhouse.

"We think a lot of magic happens at the intersection of audio formats, as well as at the confluence of text, audio and video," Facebook app chief Fidji Simo said in a blog post.

Facebook's plan to weave audio offerings into the social network comes as it works to prevent losing users to Clubhouse.

Facebook has seen a steady rise in users opting for voice, from audio calls at the social network to leaving spoken messages using WhatsApp or Messenger.

The Silicon Valley titan is building new audio creation tools Simo described as "like having a sound studio in your pocket."

The tools will let people create short-form

Soundbites such as jokes, anecdotes, or spontaneous thoughts, according to Simo.

"While we're big believers in the power of short-form audio, we also know that some stories and conversations deserve more airtime," Simo said.

People talking

More than 170 million people are connected to Facebook pages centered on podcasts, and some 35 million users are members of podcast fan groups, but listening to one required leaving the social network.

"Within the next few months, you'll be able to listen to podcasts directly on the Facebook app—both while using the app or when the app is backgrounded," Simo said.

As part of the move into podcasts, Facebook will be expanding its partnership with Spotify so users can share and listen to podcasts, according to the company.



Facebook's push into audio comes following growing interest in the audio-only startup and competing services from Twitter and others

Facebook also planned to begin testing Live Audio Rooms, expected the feature to be available to all users by the middle of this year.

To make its audio offerings sustainable for the longterm, Facebook is building in ways for people creating content to make money, according to Simo.

Creators hosting Live Audio Rooms will be able to get paid directly by fans, and Facebook plans to add the option to charge for access, Simo said.

Safety and privacy safeguards are also being added to audio features, according to the social network.

The news came a day after Clubhouse said it closed a new funding round as the popular live audio app struggles to scale up in response to demand. The latest round gives the startup a valuation of some \$4 billion, according to sources.

Launched last year, the San Francisco-based platform is looking to establish itself as the standard-bearer for digital audio and has already inspired copycat products.

Facebook's move is "a natural response to a competitive threat," tech analyst Rob Enderle of Enderle Group.

"It you do nothing, you could become MySpace," he added, referring to a pioneering social network that faded into oblivion after Facebook arrived.

Facebook's pattern has been to either buy startups the pose potential threats or to copy features that are attracting users, the analyst noted.

While riding the hot trend in audio-centric online socializing is smart of Facebook, squashing Clubhouse could add to scrutiny it already faces from antitrust regulators, according to Enderle.

"When a competitor comes along providing your customers something that you aren't, you don't have a lot of choices in how to respond."

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