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Is Facebook's Instant Articles the end of the paywall?

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All the news that's fit to click. EPA/Peter DaSilva

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Ubiquitous social media giant Facebook has launched a mobile service called Instant Articles. It allows news stories provided by a number of partners to be read in their entirety from the Facebook iOS app.

Those who use Instant Articles will be spared the inconvenience of clicking on a link in their usual newsfeed, which may take up to ten seconds to direct to another page.

For news publishers, this means a visible presence on Facebook far beyond the current model of posting excerpts and images with a link attached. For Emily Bell, director of the Tow Center for

Digital Journalism at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, it's a vastly important development:

For the publishing industry this is the most significant moment of the past few years. It crystallises what has been happening since the invention of the iPhone, and that is a move towards producing quickly accessible material which can be viewed through a very small, responsive screen.

Instant Articles went live in collaboration with the New York Times, BuzzFeed, National Geographic, NBC News and The Atlantic, all of whom contributed articles. Also signed up to trial the product are the British media titans BBC News and the Guardian, together with Germany's Bild and Der Spiegel, all of whose content will start running in the summer.

It's unlikely that they will be alone for long. As Troy Young, president of Hearst Magazines Digital Media, which publishes Cosmopolitan, told Lucia Moses, "Obviously our brands will be in there, it's just a matter of time." Time Inc., CNN and other global publishers are expected to begin posting their content directly to the platform themselves in the coming months.

And why wouldn't they? At first glance the commercial opportunities that Facebook is going to provide seem ludicrously advantageous and uncharacteristically catch-free.

Domination

At the unveiling of Instant Articles, Michael Reckhow, Facebook's product manager, said that the initiative would "give publishers control over their stories, brand experience and monetisation opportunities" – and that crucially, publishers would be able "to track data and traffic through comScore and other analytics tools." Facebook Chief Product Officer Chris Cox added that "Instant Articles lets [publishers] deliver fast, interactive articles while maintaining control of their content and business models."

What this also means is Facebook allowing the likes of NBC and the Guardian to retain 100% of the revenue raised from ad sales around articles, together with the invaluable data on the people reading the stories.

What Facebook gets, meanwhile, is the opportunity to "deepen and strengthen its hold on users". Instant Articles is a means to Facebook's own end: consolidating its existing position and eventually becoming the principal platform to which the world's population looks for its news.





Riding high: Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg. Maurizio Pesce/Flickr, CC BY

And of course, it's well on its way. According to research published last year, 71% of online American adults now use Facebook, with about one third going there for news stories. On top of that, nearly half of Americans with internet access have signed up for news alerts, and the mobile news market has exploded: the American Media Insight project recently found that among smartphone owners, 78% reported using their device to access news.

Facebook's figures for 2014 indicated that 1.32 billion people log on each month, generating an annual revenue of \$2.91 billion. The social network's position has never been stronger – as Ellis Hamburger reported – in the second half of 2014 Facebook's year over year revenues were up roughly 60% and its profits more than doubled, and it's clearly committed to boundless expansion.

It's this desire to take over the internet, this position of power and considerable financial weight that deeply concerns many media analysts.

Watch out

The arguments against publishing journalism directly on Facebook are many and varied. News outlets are wary of giving up their own distribution channels and offering too much control to Facebook itself. There's the prospect of putting news at the mercy of algorithms, and then there's the risk of precious reader data effectively being given away – to say nothing of the potential for censorship.

Of course, those publishers already involved in Instant Articles have only waxed lyrical about its upside. Mark Thompson, president and CEO of the New York Times Company, gushed about “improving experience of our journalism and deepening their engagement”; Tony Danker, the international director of Guardian News & Media, was similarly effusive.

Facebook's monumental heft notwithstanding, as far as the future of journalism is concerned, it's what Danker called the "continued investment in original content" that's the key. Because in many ways, what is happening with Instant Articles is simply part of an ongoing process.

And the paywalls came tumbling down

As Timothy B Lee makes clear, the individual sites at places like the Guardian are not going to become extinct, and plenty of existing media companies already use YouTube and Facebook video to deliver video to consumers. As Lee writes:

No one thinks it's a threat to journalism when newspapers syndicate one another's articles. The value of a New York Times article is in its content, not the design of the webpage that surrounds it.

The smart money will tell you that Instant Articles will soon grow beyond iPhone-only access and the nine mega-companies already signed up. Unprofitable paywalls will become obsolete as the world's major media players shift their areas of strategic importance.

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