

Facebook Stories could end up driving younger users away instead of attracting them

April 25 2017, by Raphael Velt

If you use Facebook's mobile app, you may have recently noticed the sudden appearance of circles at the very top of the display. The social media giant has previously tried pushing this "Stories" feature into three of its other products: Messenger, WhatsApp and Instagram. This point wasn't lost on many internet users, who quickly began [sharing memes](#) mocking Facebook's addition of Stories to everything.

What's more, the Stories feature wasn't even Facebook's idea. It mirrors the central feature of another social media app, Snapchat, which also allows users to create short-form videos overlaid with a range of filters, images and text. Introducing its very similar function was Facebook's way of responding to Snapchat's explosive growth among teenagers, who have been [using Facebook less](#) over the [last few years](#).

So, can Facebook compete with Snapchat just by offering the same features? Encouraging more users to create [content](#) for the social network may not be that easy, as I discovered when conducting research about media coverage of live events. After interviewing spectators involved in marathons and [music festivals](#), I found that there was high demand for individual views of an event, especially if the author was a friend of the reader or a celebrity. But I had mixed success in getting people to contribute their own stories.

cats will now have stories pic.twitter.com/EtiVwd51xC

— °•e•erie•° (@IhumeWild) [April 5, 2017](#)

What I learned was that creativity could be encouraged in a number of ways. First of all, it's about making content creation simple. Snapchat does that by offering ways to combine personal content – captured through the user's phone camera – with ready-made overlays. But this also involves creating a space that users find socially appropriate to publish in, which depends on having the right audience for your content and feeling confident enough to practice publishing.

Encouraging creativity

Snapchat encourages this confidence in two ways. Its interface offers a playful way to publish and receive immediate feedback that's far from the complex and prescriptive interfaces of professional software. And its main proposition was that published content would disappear after 24 hours, meaning users didn't need to worry too much about making it perfect (although it now has ways to save content).

Facebook has mirrored this ephemeral publishing idea with its Stories feature. But this is a completely different style of sharing content from the social network's original format, where published content generally falls into a state of limbo. Unless it is explicitly removed, content stays visible forever, generally buried deep down on a user's profile page and therefore enjoying little visibility, but sometimes [resurfacing unexpectedly](#).

The other issue is audience. People share different content on different platforms based on who they expect to reach. [Most of Snapchat's users are young](#) (under 25) so they expect their content to be seen largely by people of their own age. On the other hand, Facebook's demographics are [more spread out](#) and, importantly, it has the reputation of being a way for [parents to watch their children's](#) online activity.

Facebook has tried to address this issue by giving Stories creators more control over who sees their content, but this requires extra effort. The result is that Facebook Stories is more likely to appeal to older audiences who enjoy creating and viewing this type of content but wouldn't bother using Snapchat because they don't expect their friends to be on there. If this is the case, then Facebook Stories may end up cementing its appeal to older users at the expense of attracting younger ones – the opposite of what it was designed for.

But if Facebook succeeds in making Stories popular, it may have another problem: making money. Whereas Facebook's original format has made it one of the few companies to make [large profits](#) from online advertising, Snapchat [is running massive losses](#). How Stories will integrate meaningfully with Facebook's model of interweaving user content with ads in a newsfeed is yet to be seen.

If Stories become another update in the feed, users may start feeling their content isn't visible enough on Facebook and create it elsewhere. Compelling content doesn't need video filters to be called a [story](#), and people have been creating and sharing their own stories online for much longer than Facebook has existed. Facebook has also become more of a platform for sharing content than creating and storing it, thanks to the arcane algorithms that determine who sees what content in the newsfeed.

But [social media](#) is a world where the winner takes all thanks to what's known as the "[network effect](#)", where the more people use a service, the more attractive it becomes to other users. Building an audience is the hardest thing for both social networks and their users to do. That's why Facebook's existing popularity means that even outside content often ends up on there anyway. So if Snapchat can continue to steal users, its massive losses may only be collateral damage. Whoever wins the competition will get away with alienating its [users](#), bombarding them with ads, and make money anyway.

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