

# Mark Zuckerberg: People are spending 50 million fewer hours on Facebook a day

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A new AI tool created to help identify certain kinds of substance abuse based on a homeless youth's Facebook posts could provide homeless shelters with vital information to incorporate into each individual's case management plan. Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Mark Zuckerberg warned in January that radical changes he's making to

return Facebook to its roots connecting friends and family would curtail how much time people spend there.

He wasn't kidding. Those changes that got underway last quarter are already hitting engagement numbers, reducing time users spend on Facebook by 5%, as the giant social network shows people fewer viral videos.

"In total, we made changes that reduced time spent on Facebook by roughly 50 million hours every day," Zuckerberg said, in announcing the social media company's fourth-quarter results that topped Wall Street expectations.

Pressure has been building on Facebook and its CEO as the toxic content flowing through Facebook—violent live videos, fabricated news articles and divisive messages from Russian operatives that rocked the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign—has been blamed for social ills. Facebook is also under fire for exploiting vulnerabilities in human psychology to hook people on social media, hijacking their time and attention and undermining their well-being. In recent months, Facebook has admitted that passive use of Facebook—aimless scrolling through the news feed—can be bad for mental health.

As people show signs of gravitating away from Facebook, Zuckerberg says his personal challenge for 2018 is to fix what ails the giant social network. The focus is no longer on how much time its 2 billion-plus users spend on Facebook, but whether that time is "well spent."

So Facebook is altering the formula that determines what shows up in people's news feeds to favor status updates from friends and family that spark more "meaningful social interactions" over videos and [news articles](#) that don't get people talking to each other.

Meaningful social interactions are the new buzzwords for Facebook executives. Going forward, Zuckerberg said Facebook would measure success by how many of those interactions take place on Facebook. He did not say how Facebook determines which social interactions are meaningful.

"I expect the amount of time people spend and some measures of engagement will go down as a result" of the changes Facebook has made, he told analysts during a conference call Wednesday. But, if Facebook does its job well, the changes "should increase the number of meaningful interactions people will have," Zuckerberg said.

It's unclear if the decline in engagement is a direct result of Facebook's interventions. Frustration with Facebook, which seemed to peak during the U.S. presidential election, may have already been driving people away, analysts say.

In January, Pivotal Research analyst Brian Wieser told USA TODAY his analysis of recent Nielsen data showed use of Facebook declined in August and September.

"Facebook is responding to a decline in consumption, not just encouraging a decline in consumption," Wieser said at the time.

RBC Capital Markets analyst Mark Mahaney said his most recent survey of Internet users found a slightly more negative bias towards expected time spent on Facebook.

## **User complaint: too much noise**

Lexi Felder, a 33-year-old Facebook user from Atlanta, say she used to spend five hours a day on the service. Now she says she spends five minutes there, switching her allegiance to Instagram, also owned by

Facebook.

What frustrates her the most: "The algorithms shower my feed with a lot of content that I don't really care for. The people who I do want to see don't show up in my feed."

Felder, who works in digital marketing for entertainment websites and has a lifestyle blog, still has the Facebook app on her phone but she's turned off notifications. And she says she's not alone.

"I definitely see my social circle abandoning Facebook as well," Felder said. "I talk about Facebook more than my friends do. They are completely off Facebook."

In the fourth quarter, Facebook experienced its first-ever decline in daily active U.S. and Canadian users to 184 million from 185 million from the prior quarter. Facebook's chief financial officer David Wehner told analysts he did not expect the drop of 700,000 daily users in the U.S. and Canada to continue, but it will likely fluctuate.

Facebook offered more upbeat news for investors in its fourth-quarter financial results, which once again beat Wall Street expectations, with \$12.97 billion in revenue, up 47% from a year ago. Analysts had expected the [social media](#) giant to report revenue of \$12.55 billion.

Diluted earnings per share were \$1.44, up from \$1.21 a year ago. That included a one-time charge as a result of the recently introduced tax reform law that reduced earnings per share by 77 cents. Without the adjustment, Facebook would have earned \$2.21, exceeding consensus of \$1.94.

Daniel Ives, chief strategy officer and head of technology research at GBH Insights, says Facebook is taking "the right medicine and the right

time" in trying to show Facebook users more content from the people they care about. Eventually it should drive up ad pricing. It "was a move Zuckerberg & Co. needed to make," Ives wrote in a research note.

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