Is Facebook going to reinvent TV with Facebook Watch? Well, it's trying

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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

Facebook is aiming for your TV-viewing time, not just the hours you

spend mindlessly scrolling through baby pictures and news links.

Facebook Watch, the social network's YouTube-like platform for original series and user-created video content, made its debut appearance at the Television Critics Association press tour Wednesday to make the case for Facebook's version of TV, and, much like the platform, it was a mixed bag.

Fidji Simo, VP of Product for Video, and Ricky Van Veen, Head of Global Creative Strategy, discussed how the platform has grown ninefold since it was launched in August of 2017, hyping the success of series like Jada Pinkett Smith's talk show "Red Table Talk," and "SKAM Austin," a teen drama based on the popular Norwegian series.

But as fun as it is to watch Pinkett Smith get candid about sex, there are real questions about what Facebook Watch is and how it's being curated, especially when it comes to the proliferation of misinformation, a problem that plagues the the social media giant, and not just in its video ventures.

"(We are) trying to find a balance between freedom of expression and safety," Simo said, adding that even if misinformation exists on the platform, the company is trying to prevent it from being distributed widely. "That's how Facebook deals with misinformation overall, not just on video. ... A lot of how misinformation spreads is by people sharing this content, and how we combat this is we have a pop-up" that labels it as inaccurate. "That decreases distribution dramatically."

Both executives skirted questions about why a show from Fox News, "Fox News Update," received such a prominent spot on the platform.

Facebook Watch wants you to watch TV as a interactive audience member, not a passive one.

"We also reimagine every genre of television for an interactive experience," Van Veen said. He referenced a recent episode of "Red Table," which garnered 20 million views and 300,000 comments.

He also hyped "SKAM Austin," which Facebook just renewed for a second season, as a different viewing experience.

"What appears to be a standard scripted teen series is really anything but. (We) approach the distribution in a way that wouldn't have been possible years ago," he said. "Instead of waiting for a weekly episode, we share scenes from the show in real time as they happen. If the kids are at a party Tuesday night at 9:00 p.m., that scene will show then, alerting all the fans. ... 'SKAM' audiences are also following text conversations and Instagram accounts from the characters."

So how successful is this new version of TV? Van Veen suggested that success isn't measured only by views.

"If you look at 'Red Table Talk, not only do we look at metrics for viewership of that show but we also look at the official group that is connected with that show," Van Veen said.

So how does the future for Facebook Watch look? Upcoming projects include scripted series starring Elizabeth Olsen and Catherine Zeta-Jones; a game show that allows viewers to interact with friends; , a singing competition that promises to "put the audience at the center;" and "Big Chicken Shaq,"a reality show about Shaquille O'Neal's opening of his own fast-food restaurant.

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