

With an eye on past problems, Facebook expands local feature

28 November 2018, by Barbara Ortutay

Facebook is cautiously expanding a feature that shows people local news and information, including missing-person alerts, road closures, crime reports and school announcements.

Called "Today In," the service shows people information from their towns and cities from such sources as [news outlets](#), government entities and community groups. Facebook launched the service in January with six cities and expanded that to 25, then more. On Wednesday, "Today In" is expanding to 400 cities in the U.S.—and a few others in Australia.

The move comes as Facebook tries to shake off its reputation as a hotbed for misinformation and elections-meddling and rather a place for communities and people to come together and stay informed.

Here are some things to know about this effort, and why it matters:

THE BIG PICTURE

It's something users have asked for, the company says. Think of it as an evolution of a "trending" feature the company dropped earlier this year. That feature, which showed [news articles](#) that were popular among users, was rife with such problems as fake news and accusations of bias.

Anthea Watson Strong, product manager for [local news](#) and community information, said her team learned from the problems with that feature.

"We feel deeply the mistakes of our foremothers and forefathers," she said.

This time around, Facebook employees went to some of the cities they were launching in and met with users. They tried to predict problems by doing "pre-mortem" assessments, she said. That is, instead of a "post-mortem" where engineers

dissect what went wrong after the fact, they tried to anticipate how people might misuse a feature—for financial gain, for example.

Facebook isn't saying how long it has been taking this "pre-mortem" approach, though the practice isn't unique to the company. Nonetheless, it's a significant step given that many of Facebook's current problems stem from its failure to foresee how bad actors might co-opt the service.

Facebook also hopes the feature's slow rollout will prevent problems.

HOW IT WORKS

To find out if "Today In" is available in your [city](#) or town, tap the "menu" icon with the three horizontal lines. Then scroll down until you see it. If you want, you can choose to see the local updates directly in your news feed.

For now, the company is offering this only in small and mid-sized cities such as Conroe, Texas, Morgantown, West Virginia, and Santa Fe, New Mexico. Large cities such as New York or Los Angeles have added challenges, such as an abundance of news and information, and may need to be broken up into smaller neighborhoods.

The posts in "Today In" are curated by artificial intelligence; there is no human involvement. The service aggregates posts from the Facebook pages for news organizations, government agencies and community groups like dog shelters. For this reason, a kid couldn't declare a snow day, because "Today In" relies on the school's official page. Discussion posts from local Facebook groups may also be included.

For now, the information is tailored only by geography, but this might change. A person with no kids, for example, might not want to see updates from schools.

SAFEGUARDS?

Facebook uses software filters to weed out objectionable content, just as it does on people's regular [news](#) feed. But the filters are turned up for "Today In." If a good friend posts something a bit objectionable, you are still likely to see it because Facebook takes your friendship into account. But "Today In" posts aren't coming from your friends, so Facebook is more likely to keep it out.

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