

Global Journalist: Did Facebook's "pivoted to video" cause publishers to face plant?

Abstract: On this December 11, 2020 program, journalists discuss the media industry's "pivot to video." The trend was led by Facebook and lasted from 2015 to 2018. The journalists discuss the casualties of the failed trend and what lessons can be learned.

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- [Derek Thompson](#), The Atlantic
- [Max Willens](#), Digiday
- [Simon Owens](#), Freelance tech and media journalist

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Trevor Hook 00:05

Welcome to Global Journalist. This is a show by journalists, for journalists, and those who depend on our work. I'm Trevor Hook, one of the show's producers.

Various news anchors 00:21

Facebook says it is now banning all Q-Anon accounts from its platform... So let's talk about disinformation... the world's largest social media company, now under unprecedented pressure from its advertisers, to do more to stop hate speech online... do you concede that this false information is being spread on your platform... Facebook is really dropping the ball on how to respond to this moment, and it's creating a lot of harm.

Trevor Hook 00:45

You've probably heard a lot about Facebook lately, mostly its role in the 2016 and 2020 elections. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter have come under fire for being a venue for the spread of misinformation. And it becomes central to the debate about online censorship and freedom of speech. Today, we're gonna look at one way that Facebook changed a lot of the news you see online, but in a way that not that many people talk about.

Trevor Hook 01:11

Except if you talk to journalists. They can tell you about a period of time known as the pivot to video. This was a period of time starting in 2015, and which really picked up in a couple years after, when a lot of online publishers began producing a lot more video content, mainly for Facebook. This often led to writers and other staff members being fired as part of restructuring at news organizations to bolster the parts that made video. Those with expertise in traditional print reporting, writing and editing were let go, to make room for new staffers who could make video. Publishers from all over the industry did this from Vox to Vanity Fair to The Washington Post. This was the trend that helped popularize the "photo slideshow with generic muzak" style of short, social media friendly video content.

Trevor Hook 01:56

It was a trend that many publishers felt like they had to participate in, or risk giving up a huge chunk of advertising revenue from videos shared on Facebook. We'll hear from a few tech journalists about the pivot itself and the plight of one media company caught in the middle a little bit later. But first, we need to talk about two of the biggest factors that played into the pivot to video: algorithms and advertising.

Trevor Hook 02:32

First, let's talk algorithms. In very basic terms, an algorithm is a set of steps that a computer uses to accomplish a task. Algorithms are in nearly every aspect of our modern life. Video conferencing apps like FaceTime or Zoom use algorithms to compress audio and video, so the data can be sent to the other people on the call, who in return send their compressed audio and video back. Google Maps uses algorithms to determine the best route for you to travel from one place to another. Algorithms are really helpful in sorting a lot of data and making decisions from that large amount of data. But what do we mean when we talk about algorithms with social media? Science educator and youtuber Tom Scott gave a good explanation during a speech at the Royal Institution in London in September of 2019.

Tom Scott 03:17

Algorithm, in this context, means quite a bit different from what people with a lot of experience in mathematics and computer science might think it does. The algorithm is referred to in the singular, which is the almost anthropomorphized name that's given to, to this collection of machine learning systems. When I talk about the algorithm, I'm talking about this sort of almost magical black box of code. And the idea is that you've set up this this black box, and then you provide it with a list of human curated examples. And it works out their distinguishing features, provide some sort of categorization system, and then as you throw novel examples at it, it categorizes them, and learns from feedback.

Trevor Hook 04:01

Platforms like Facebook and Twitter rely on algorithms for a lot of practical and understandable reasons. Think about the hundreds of posts created in a given day by the many people you follow on social media. The algorithms have to do what newspaper editors have done in all the years before them, they have to figure out some way to show you what you'd like to see first. But above everything else, these

platforms want you to stay on their site or their app for as long as possible. Success is measured and keeping you on their platform. So these algorithms record a whole bevy of user behavior, and try to predict what you'd like to read or watch next. So when we talk about algorithms with social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, we're talking about the algorithms the platforms use to determine what posts pop up in your feed when you go to their site or their app. The order in which platforms show posts is really important. It determines what you see when you log on Facebook or check Twitter, and what you don't see. And that's where the media industry comes in.

Derek Thompson 05:01

Facebook has established itself as this critical organ for reaching the public. Which meant that anything Facebook did to its algorithm, any tiny, exquisitely sensitive thing Facebook did to its algorithm would be internalized by news publishers and then acted on. Right? Like they were wagging the dog of media. They would make a decision, and then media would adapt to Facebook.

Trevor Hook 05:27

That's Derek Thompson. He's a staff writer at the Atlantic. He writes about economics, technology, and the media. And he says that Facebook's aspirations for video lead the platform to strong arm publishers down that same path.

Derek Thompson 05:39

There was an announcement where they essentially said, if I recall, we are pivoting to video. Facebook was like "we want you to make more video, we will benefit. We will put our finger on the dial or put our foot on the accelerator, whatever the metaphor is, for your publisher if you make video."

Trevor Hook 05:59

Facebook to some degree caught onto a trend that had already been happening. As more and more people owned cell phones and as better cellular networks allowed viewers to watch video content on the go, it's natural that video content would increase. But on January 7, 2015, Facebook made a statement about the quote "shift towards video and visual content on the platform." Facebook would later tweak its algorithm to push this kind of content to more and more of its users. But this announcement on January 7, 2015, serves as the unofficial start to the pivot to video.

Trevor Hook 06:46

Also keep in mind, Facebook is a private company. There's currently no law or regulation limiting what Facebook as a platform can do with its own algorithm. So Facebook is well within its right to place videos directly uploaded to its platform higher on a user's newsfeed than other types of posts. This left publishers with a difficult choice. They can try to make money through advertising some other way. But that didn't seem promising at a time when most advertisers were moving away from legacy publishers to Facebook. After all, a platform that already knows so much about its users -- like how old you are, where you live, what you like and what you don't like -- makes it easy for advertisers to micro target

you. News outlets could try to raise revenues through subscriptions. But subscribers have never paid the real cost of producing news... that was always covered by advertising. And in a digital age, people wanted news to be free, and not to pay more for it. Or they could play by Facebook's new rules and make more and more video content.

Trevor Hook 07:45

But publishers wouldn't really need to chase the money from video advertising to such a degree if publishers were doing well financially. But that wasn't the case. And that's where the second factor comes in: advertising. Derek Thompson, the writer you heard from a minute ago, wrote about the abysmal state of media in 2017 in a piece called "How to Survive the Media Apocalypse." Thompson chronicled budget cuts and dropped revenue in outlets from Vanity Fair to BuzzFeed. Thomson pegged the downturn in revenues in part to advertising, specifically the lack of adequate website advertising like the ads you'd see next to articles you read online.

Derek Thompson 08:21

On the business side of things, newspapers are always this bundle of cross subsidies that were made possible by the fact that they had a monopoly on certain kinds of advertising. My hometown newspaper was the Washington Post. The Washington Post had lots of great coverage of international affairs when I was growing up and say, you know, 2000 to 2004, I was reading a lot about the wars in the Middle East and the Iraq war. But no one wanted to advertise right next to wars in the Middle East. They wanted to advertise next to articles about cars. But you had to buy the newspaper -- the entire thing, together. And so the car advertisements were subsidizing the Afghanistan reporters. But then that begins to be unbundled, those cross-subsidies began to be uncrossed, when you can do -- you can run car advertising with edmunds.com. You can run a classified advertising on Craigslist, not just in newspapers. As those cross subsidies became uncrossed, and as the bundle became unbundled, it took away the business model for a lot of newspapers.

Trevor Hook 09:24

Today's advertising revenue dollars aren't going to the publishers who produce the news. They're going to the biggest elephant in the room: Google and Facebook. Both companies are absolute goliaths of modern digital advertising. The two alone made up 61% of all US digital advertising in 2017, according to the Atlantic. No other companies came close.

Derek Thompson 09:47

Google and Facebook are just better at advertising -- better advertising business models for businesses -- than publishing ever could be. They have way more information. They have way more scale. They have way more data about both individuals and about companies. And as a result, they just eat our lunch. It was very clear that advertising was, was struggling in terms of a, in terms like a web page model. That we needed some other thing to work. And so that was the push, pushing people away from "oh, we'll advertising on webpages" to "oh, we'll advertise on videos."

Trevor Hook 10:20

There's one big problem though. The video advertising revenue these outlets expected never came.

Trevor Hook 10:40

Just a reminder that you're listening to Global Journalist. I'm Trevor Hook, one of the show's producers, and a candidate for a master's degree at the Missouri School of Journalism. To hear more Global Journalist, check us out at globaljournalist.org or on the programs tab at kbia.org. On today's show, I'm sharing some of the research I did for my master's project, which takes a look at how and why so many news outlets pivoted to video in recent years, and what that's done to journalism. All right, back to the show.

Trevor Hook 11:15

So advertising revenue through print, newspapers and standard web pages were declining. That combined with the prospect of huge audiences and video advertising revenue led media executives to fire print journalists and other employees en masse to up video production. Their hope was that video on Facebook would work something like this. So let's say 10 million people watch a video, and Facebook was paid \$10,000 from advertisers to put their ads on that video. The hope was that Facebook would, at some point, decide to give a chunk of that money to the publisher, just like YouTube had been doing, to incentivize the creation of more video. So publishers started hiring and firing people and changing what a huge chunk of their businesses did in the hope that Facebook would begin paying creators because of their popular videos down the line. That didn't happen.

Trevor Hook 12:03

But what makes this even more complicated is that Facebook did start paying some outlets to make video content sometimes. This happened when Facebook introduced Facebook Live in early 2016. It was a live streaming service that was meant to compete with companies like Periscope. In March of 2016, Facebook started paying publishers like Vox Media, CNN and many others to make Live videos. The Wall Street Journal estimates that BuzzFeed and the New York Times were getting paid over \$3 million per year. In return, the publishers would be required to make a certain amount of live videos on a regular basis. Several articles cited one of BuzzFeed early live videos as proof that Facebook Live wasn't a joke.

Buzzfeed Staffers 12:45

Hi, I'm Chelsea. And I'm James. And this is our watermelon that we're gonna try to explode using rubber bands. And right now we're at 90 rubber bands and we're going... we've somehow gotten talked into sitting very closely to this and I'm nervous. I'm really scared. So yeah, we're gonna start, and...

Trevor Hook 13:07

BuzzFeed crushed a watermelon with almost 700 rubber bands.

Buzzfeed Staffers 13:10

(cheering)

Trevor Hook 13:20

It had more than 800,000 people watching live at one point, and got over 10 million views in five days. Publishers would go on to cite this video as proof of the potential reach of Facebook Live. But the thing is, when the money would dry up, so with the Live videos. An analysis from Columbia Journalism Review found that the number of Facebook live videos from 17 of the publishers identified as getting paid by Facebook cut in more than half once Facebook stopped paying them. Digiday later called Facebook Live a dud and the New York Times noted that it's quote, unclear how successful the effort was for Facebook and the news organizations that signed on. Columbia Journalism Review wrote that Facebook Live isn't a dud as a product per se, but it struggled because Facebook was unwilling or unable to figure out a way to compensate publishers consistently.

Trevor Hook 14:24

Publishing during the pivot to video could be best encapsulated by the fate of the media organization Mic. Mic was a venture funded startup. It was founded in 2012, and primarily aimed to explain complicated political topics to young audiences. Like many startups, Mic's short life was a series of pivots. It pivoted from doing explainers to news in 2014 and subsequent years would involve more pivots, including one to video. Initially, that ability to adapt helped the publisher gain early success on Facebook and beyond. The publisher gained early success on Facebook focusing on social justice issues and national politics.

Mic 15:02

Iran and the six countries involved in the negotiations have agreed to the deal.

Trevor Hook 15:06

Their editor-in-chief even interviewed then-President Barack Obama in 2015.

Barack Obama 15:11

The alternative to a negotiated agreement of the sort that we've put together is at some point, us having to potentially take a military strike against Iran.

Trevor Hook 15:23

The prospect of massive viewership from its Facebook following was an enticing offer to Mic and other publishers. But the optimism didn't last. A change to Facebook's algorithm in 2015 began to negatively affect the company's referral traffic. So it pivoted to focus on optimizing for search engine traffic from sites like Google. Search-engine-focused content made up more than 90% of Mike's daily output by 2017. Mic's early success was fueled by Facebook's distribution. They were attracting 30 million unique

users per month by 2017, and 70% of that was from Facebook. Digiday Senior Editor Max Willens says the company became addicted to Facebook as a source of traffic,

Max Willens 16:04

it became extraordinarily important to them as a way of attracting and building an audience. And it did help them grow really quickly. It helped them raise a lot of money. But then all of a sudden, they found themselves almost like riding this this big, unpredictable animal basically. And they wanted to avoid getting thrown off, they wound up sort of moving in whatever direction best suited the Facebook beast.

Trevor Hook 16:32

Willens says the prospect of massive viewership from its Facebook following was an enticing offer to Mic and other publishers.

Max Willens 16:39

Facebook again, they built video initially, and and privileged it in a way with their algorithms in a way that made audience counts just seemed too good to be true. You could post a video and it could, it could pick up tens of millions of views in a matter of days. The kind of thing that was just completely unheard of, if you -- particularly if you had been in media before and had been used to putting your videos here on website, for example. Where, you know, if you've got a video up to a million views, you pat yourself on the back every day for a week after that. And on Facebook, you could do that in 36 hours. What a lot of folks didn't count on was the possibility that the money would not materialize.

Trevor Hook 17:22

In August of 2017. Mike followed moves made by publishers like Thrillist, MTV News and Fox Sports earlier that year: they laid off employees devoted to text in an effort to double down on video production. By that point, Mic was receiving hundreds of millions of views per month. They were evaluated in 2017 as being worth hundreds of millions of dollars. They had been one of the first publishers to capitalize on Facebook's push to video, and they had been reaping the rewards. But Facebook changed its mind again.

Trevor Hook 17:51

Again, just reminder that you're listening to Global Journalist. I'm Trevor Hook, one of the show's producers. If you want to look up past episodes of Global Journalist, visit kbia.org and look into the program's tab or visit globaljournalist.org. Today I'm speaking with several reporters about a trend in media called the "pivot to video", which led a lot of newsrooms to fire traditional print and text writers in order to hire more video producers. In this episode, I'm exploring why that happened and why it matters to journalism today. All right, back to the show.

Trevor Hook 18:46

The journalists I spoke with all generally agree that the pivot to video ended in January of 2018. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced a major overhaul of the platform's newsfeed, which de-prioritized videos published by media outlets. The magazine trade outlet Folio published a story in March titled "What's Next for Video, Now that the Pivot to Video is Dead?" From December 2017 to October 2018, Mic's monthly Facebook video views plummeted by 90%. Despite this, Facebook then decided to bet on Mic again and paid the publisher \$5 million for a show that would equate to a year's worth of coverage. The show was called Mic Dispatch, and it aired twice a week. It pulled in around 100,000 viewers per episode. But Facebook was looking for about five times that and told Mic after a few months that it would not be renewing the agreement. Mic was later sold to Bustle Digital Group for only \$5 million after almost all the employees were laid off. Again, a year earlier, Mic's co-founder and CEO Chris Altchek had said its net worth had been evaluated at hundreds of millions of dollars. The Huffington Post obtained audio of an emotional Altchek, breaking the news to his staff.

Chris Altchek 19:58

But because of the situation, in order to move forward we have to lose many excellent team members today. Immediately... we have no choice but to give notice to the whole company in order to be in a good position to be able to pay severance. A majority of the teams, including people in finance, HR, productions, video, editorial, marketing, revenue, and executive team will be departing effective today.

Trevor Hook 20:45

Mic was one of the many publishers that struggled during the pivot. Alexis Madrigal and Robertson Meyer of the Atlantic argue Facebook's push to video led to more than 350 journalists losing their jobs at places like Upworthy, MTV News and Vice. Digiday's Max Willens says Facebook in part use their algorithms and metrics for defining what counts as a video view to paint a rosy picture for video on the platform.

21:09

The funny thing is, is that the the metrics that Facebook had concocted to measure engagement and to measure consumption of their video were really designed to paint a very incomplete picture of, of just how much engagement there really was. The thing about being a platform is you can create your own reality. You know, you can say that a view is, you know, less than three seconds. You can say that, you know, 10 million people saw something and because you make sure that every time someone opens the app, they are -- video is thrust in front of their face. You can do all kinds of, you can pull all kinds of levers to sort of manufacture the perception that video is, you know, a central part of everyone's Facebook experience and a sought after part of it.

Trevor Hook 22:01

For reference, it's generally understood that YouTube counts a view as watching a video for at least roughly 30 seconds or half the length of the video, whichever is shorter. But as Madrigal and Meyer of the Atlantic argue, Facebook also promoted video through active deception, as the platform was sued in

late 2018 for allegedly inflating the time spent watching videos on Facebook by as much as 900%. The authors said some of the blame should go to media executives who chased the pivot to video, but that the platform, quote, "wrote the rulebook on the field and served as the referee", a possibly dishonest referee at that, for game publishers were trying to win. Facebook settled the lawsuit over the alleged inflation of the time spent watching videos on the platform for \$40 million in 2019.

Trevor Hook 23:03

So what lessons should media outlets take away from this failed trend? Tech and media journalist Simon Owens says: show me the money.

Simon Owens 23:10

So I think like, a lot of publishers now are go -- they still partner with Facebook. But they're much more skeptical going in, they're much more like "what is this... what's in it for me? And no, exposure isn't enough. Like you need to actually pay us, there needs to be an immediate business model."

Trevor Hook 23:27

Owens wrote about the pivot to video in late 2018 and asked if it was as misguided as people at the time said it was. He says Facebook might have been on the right track.

Simon Owens 23:36

As cord cutting accelerates, as people -- as more TV watching, especially devoted like couch TV watching becomes more digital, there's going to be a lot more opportunities for publishers to play in that space without having to go through a lot of the traditional gatekeepers in Hollywood. And that's going to open up a lot of opportunities. So I think there's, I think there's a lot of money there. And so you're gonna see pub -- the publishers that have already seen some success continue to double down and invest in that, that model.

Trevor Hook 24:11

Owens also says publishers could learn a thing or two from publishers like Vox and BuzzFeed who actually succeeded and survived the pivot to video.

Simon Owens 24:19

I think they kind of borrowed some tropes from TV in the sense of like, you look at a lot of the failed video strategies, pivot to video strategies, a lot of them were focused on kind of one-off concepts that weren't repeatable over and over again. So it was just like, "Yeah, this one video could go viral, but it didn't like hook me to that series." So just creating these like repeatable formats the same way that you see on like reality television, so that people would get hooked, and then they would keep on clicking on recommended videos of continuing to go down that rabbit hole and consume more and more of those videos. And I think that was key.

Trevor Hook 24:56

Owens says some of the blame should go to media executives made huge business decisions based on the promise of video advertising revenue, but without any certainty that it was going to happen.

Simon Owens 25:06

A lot of publishers just really had to learn the lesson that you shouldn't be building on someone else's platform because that platform can take away your reach and revenue at a moment's notice.

Trevor Hook 25:18

Derek Thompson of the Atlantic agrees.

Derek Thompson 25:20

It's possible that in a few decades, we'll look back and say, between say 2005 and 2018 -- the end of the pivot to video -- news media became obsessed with eating free lunch on other people's budgets. So it was like, "oh we'll win if we, like, optimize for like, you know, search... like SEO. We'll win when we optimize for Facebook. We'll win when we optimize for the new Facebook rule. No, now we're pivoting to video. No, now we're doing, you know, the clickbait headlines. Oh now we're doing this other thing." Like, like, there was a, there was this period where news media had no faith in like its own ability to attract readers. And it was just basically doing whatever Facebook was telling it to do. Right? And that period came to an end as like a lot of organizations for a variety of reasons became more anti Facebook, but also to do with like news, news organizations like reclaiming their ownership of their readers. Because if you rely on Facebook, to... for your business to work, then you're basically just like, Facebook's vassal. Your Facebook's serf. You're not actually your own company. You're entirely reliant on algorithmic technologists you'll never meet.

Trevor Hook 26:59

That's it for this episode of Global Journalist. Thanks to Derek Thompson, Max Willens and Simon Owens for speaking with me. Thanks also to Ryan Famuliner and Ryan Thomas for guidance in research and the editing of this episode. Some of the music was provided by Blue Dot Sessions. For more episodes of Global Journalist, visit kbia.org. For all of us at Global Journalist, I'm Trevor Hook. Thanks for listening.