

# FACEBOOK'S NEW STREAM



Once a thing comes into being, it's hard to remember what existence was like before it; it's an act of re-imagination as much as of recall. But the news feed, the beating heart of the Facebook experience for its billion users that compiles the unending stream of updates, photos, links, videos, articles, game requests, and ads into a single-column digest, wasn't created until 2006, more than two years after the site erupted from a Harvard dorm. It had a difficult birth: announced with a [short blog post](#) proclaiming "Facebook gets a facelift" on September 5, 2006, at 4:03 A.M., the user outrage the next day was so blistering that C.E.O. Mark Zuckerberg [responded](#) on the Facebook blog less than twenty-four hours later, at 1:45 A.M., with a post titled "Calm down. Breathe. We hear you." Facebook, of course, [never had any intention of going back](#). The news feed became Facebook's defining feature, and it has gone essentially unchanged for six years. Until today.

While blogging, by 2006, had popularized reverse-chronological flows of content, and hardcore users had tapped the power of RSS, the make-up of the online lives of the masses had not yet been molded into a series of single-column streams—Twitter, Instagram, Foursquare, Tumblr, and Vine didn't exist then. “Pages” were still **the dominant metaphor of the Web**, and that was the case on Facebook, too, until the news feed. If you wanted to know what was happening with your friend, you had to visit her page and ascertain what was new, scanning her profile for highlights—sort of like stopping by for a chat. It was one-to-one, and it required real attention. It was personal. Aggregating every update from every friend into a single scannable stream was so powerful that it was genuinely startling to Facebook users: with little warning, every update was suddenly transformed into a true broadcast, even emotionally raw moments like breakups. The feed also liquefied individuals—everyone melted into the flow of the stream. And it rendered more visible than ever how much of users' lives were pouring into Facebook's servers.

Facebook's starkly redesigned news feed partly acknowledges what's become true since 2006: we're swimming in streams. The redesigned news feed is both visually rich and spare, with bigger, wider photos, videos, and maps set against vast expanses of pleasantly neutral space. (User complaints that the news feed is “overwhelming and cluttered” have existed as long as the feed itself, with Zuckerberg specifically mentioning that grievance in his 2006 mea culpa; this is Facebook's first real attempt to deal with those concerns.) The news feed's architectural overhaul allows users to switch between a handful of different streams, siloed by content type: photos, video, music, games, following (for pages that users “like”), and “all friends.” One stream has been replaced

by many.

The problem that Facebook has is that, as the technology columnist Farhad Manjoo [put it](#), the service doesn't want users to "miss stuff." But most "stuff" is noise—games we don't want to play, songs we don't want our friends to know we are listening to, ads and sponsored posts—so Facebook faces a monumental task: ensuring us that we see every single thing we want to see, and nothing we don't. Every annoying post is an invitation to go somewhere else on the Web. Though it might not seem like it, Facebook has long attempted to manage noise in the news feed by engineering our feeds to automatically show the things that we care about based on a variety of signals, along with [providing levers](#) to adjust our feed to our liking. The news feed's new architecture hones that strategy, splitting a single potentially overwhelming stream into a series of smaller constituent streams that are more broadly tailored to the type of content a user wants to see. The revamped news feed embraces the ubiquity of the convention of the stream and assumes that users do, too. It supposes that if users have been going to Instagram for a stream of photos, Foursquare for where their friends are, and Spotify for what their friends are listening to, why not bring all of those streams into Facebook?

By maintaining the fundamental architecture of the news feed, however, Facebook is either missing or ignoring the opportunity to address a more essential problem: Facebook fatigue. Though not easily quantifiable, it appears to be quite real. The *New York Times* columnist Nick Bilton [wrote last week](#) that engagement with his followers had noticeably degraded over the last year. A more striking example is [this post](#) by the Branch founder Josh Miller, detailing how his fifteen-year-old sister felt

about various social services; Miller noted that his sister felt “poorly” when she used Facebook. He concluded that “Facebook may have an irreversibly bad brand.” This may be due to Facebook’s method of dragging its users into the future, which follows a now familiar pattern: Facebook announces a new product or feature that exposes a bit more of users’ lives or activities than before; an outcry erupts from a vocal contingent of users; part of the feature is often rolled back or modified. It’s two steps toward the so-called Zuckerberg’s Law, which says that people share twice as much every year as they did the year before, and one step back. So Facebook users seem to be constantly on edge, tightly coiled and waiting to explode when the company reveals its next plan to get them to share a bit more. It’s little wonder they’re fatigued.

Facebook [bought Instagram](#), an app people dearly loved, for a billion dollars—and cloned the hit imaging app SnapChat—because it faces an emotional content problem. With a billion users, Facebook may now indeed be like a “chair,” [as its bizarre ad](#) proclaimed last year, but people don’t have emotional connections to any chair or to all chairs; only to the ones filled with the content (memories) that matter to them. The new news feed, as beautiful and as smartly designed as it may be, does little to encourage fatigued users to fill it up with the photos and personal updates that they’ve ceased posting on Facebook, or promise them that it’ll be loaded with more of the kinds of “can’t miss” things that will keep them coming back. It lacks the grand ambition of Facebook’s last major products: Graph Search, which aims to eventually make practically everything ever posted to Facebook searchable, and Timeline, a complete visual history of a user’s life, from birth to death. (One review called Timeline “[the greatest thing Facebook’s ever done.](#)”)

It's still just another stream, even if it is a more tranquil and manageable one. For some users, that may be enough to alleviate the feeling of inundation, quieting the flood into a pleasant trickle again, even if it's filled with the same stuff as before.