

Facebook Blocks News In Australia Over Government Plan To Force Payment To Publishers

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Technology.

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Facebook on Wednesday announced it would restrict Australians from accessing news articles on its platform. **Richard Drew/AP hide caption**

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Richard Drew/AP

Updated 8:45 p.m. ET

Facebook said Wednesday that it is preventing people inside Australia from accessing news stories on its platform. In addition, Facebook users elsewhere will not be able to view or share news stories from Australian outlets. The moves are a response to proposed legislation that would force social media platforms to pay Australian news organizations for links shared on its sites.

Facebook's announcement came the same day Google said it had reached a deal with Rupert Murdoch's News Corp., which owns *The Wall Street Journal*, to pay for its journalism.

Facebook, however, chose the nuclear option rather than bargain with news publishers in Australia.

"Today we made an incredibly difficult decision to restrict the availability of news on Facebook in Australia," said Campbell Brown, Facebook's vice president of global news partnerships, in a blog post. "What the proposed law introduced in Australia fails to recognize is the fundamental nature of the relationship between our platform and publishers."

Australians can't see any news stories on Facebook this morning after the company banned local users from posting article links. Both local and international outlets are blocked. E.g. This is what the BBC looks like in Australia pic.twitter.com/SJ4XBM8RnC

— Frances Mao (@francesmao) February 17, 2021

News publishers, according to Brown, choose to share stories on Facebook, which allows the outlets to find new readers and subscribers, leading to revenue the news organizations would not have found without the social network.

Media organizations in the country, like the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, expressed dismay over Facebook's move.

"Despite key issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic having ongoing effects on all Australians, Facebook has today removed important and credible news and information sources from its Australian platform," David Anderson, the broadcaster's managing director, said in a statement.

Lisa Davies, editor of The Sydney Morning Herald, wrote on Twitter that "Facebook has exponentially increased the opportunity for misinformation, dangerous radicalism and conspiracy theories to abound on its platform."

According to Facebook, news stories make up less than 4% of what people see on the the site.

When Facebook began disabling pages on Wednesday, it cast a wide net. Local reports indicate that weather forecasting sites, public health agencies and support services, including resources for victims of domestic violence, were blocked along with news.

In a statement, Facebook said it was working to reverse the ban on government pages and other non-publishers that were "inadvertently impacted."

Facebook's news ban hammer having a lot of collateral damage.

pic.twitter.com/mP4pfd3nL5

— Josh Taylor (@joshgnosis) February 17, 2021

'A stark reminder' of Facebook's power over information

Under the proposed Australian legislation, tech platforms would have to negotiate with publishers over access to links to news stories. If no deal is reached, the tech companies and media organizations would move to arbitration. In addition, the bill requires platforms to give news outlets notice when algorithms are changed that may affect the visibility and reach of news stories.

The law could pass in the Australian Parliament as soon as this month. For years, Australian-born Murdoch has been lobbying the government to push tech companies to pony up for news articles linked in search results and social media. The agreement Murdoch struck with Google is a three-year deal under which News Corp. will receive "significant payments" from Google for featuring stories from publications based in the U.S., U.K. and Australia

Facebook and Google have vigorously fought the proposed legislation in Australia and have publicly threatened to pull out of the country over the effort to compensate news organizations.

But Google, whose business model relies on fast and reliable news links, hammered out a deal, whereas Facebook, which depends less on publishers, put up a fight.

Siva Vaidhyanathan, a professor of media studies at the University of Virginia, said the proposed law is an attempt to reinvigorate flailing news organizations, which have seen substantial amounts of advertising revenue siphoned by tech giants like Facebook and Google.

"It's not about the money. It's about the fact that Facebook wants to maintain its powerful position everywhere in the world," Vaidhyanathan said of Facebook's resistance. He said the social network's action shows it hopes to "continue to build their fortunes off the work of others."

Other experts said Facebook playing hardball with Australia is likely intended to send a message to other governments mulling proposals to push platforms to pay news publishers.

"It is kind of a stark reminder of the control that they have over what people see and obviously with respect to people who use Facebook as their primary source of news," said Enrique Armijo, a fellow at Yale Law School's Information Society Project.

"This could have serious consequences. And I think any government that's trying to be kind of interventionist in this area is going to be more mindful now that Facebook," he said, "at least has the intention of shutting down news access on the platform entirely."

Microsoft says U.S. should copy Australian law

While Australia's news market is substantially smaller than the U.S., tech companies and lawmakers are carefully watching the proposal.

At least one tech giant, Microsoft, would like to see a version of Australia's plan in this country.

Microsoft President Brad Smith wrote in a [blog post](#) last week that the well-financed tech sector has an obligation to support independent journalism.



"The United States should not object to a creative Australian proposal that strengthens democracy by requiring tech companies to support a free press," Smith wrote. "It should copy it instead."

Facebook has paid publishers in limited circumstances, including to license headlines and for story summaries to be featured on the platform.

"We pay hundreds of publishers for access to more of their content for [Facebook News](#), a product we're working to bring to more countries this year," Facebook's Brown wrote.

"I think a lot of countries are going to wait and see how this works out in Australia," Vaidhyanathan of the University of Virginia, added.

"Will one side blink or will Facebook just keep going with this petulant attitude until everybody forgets about it and life goes on without Australian news services flowing on Facebook?" he said. "That's not the worst possible outcome. As long as these news organizations remain viable and independent, reporting can remain viable."

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