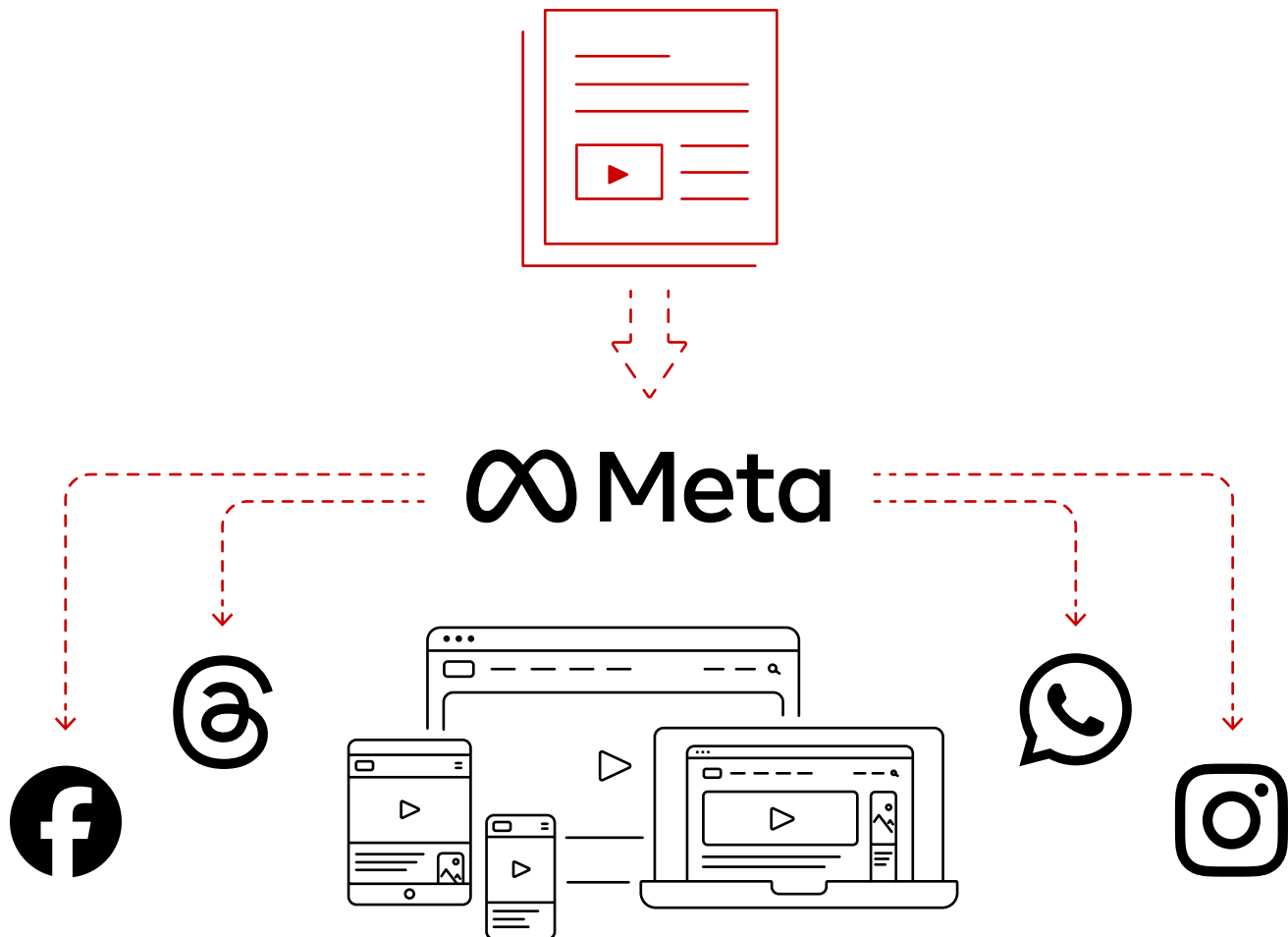


The Evolution of Meta

Facebook has evolved into Meta, the largest social network platform in the world with an expanding portfolio of products and services. How should today's Meta be leveraged by journalists, and which of its offerings should be given the most time and attention?

This article is part of a NewsSource series on Journalism and Social Media platforms. For related content see [Journalism and the Next Wave of Twitter](#) and [The TikTok Conundrum](#).



The rise of Facebook

In February 2004, a college student named Mark Zuckerberg launched a new social network. While its evolution as a company has expanded to what is now known as Meta platforms, Facebook is still the world's largest and most widely used social platform. As of January 2023, Facebook had 2.93 billion active users. Per [Hootsuite](#), "For marketers trying to reach almost every demographic, Facebook is a required component of a social marketing strategy."

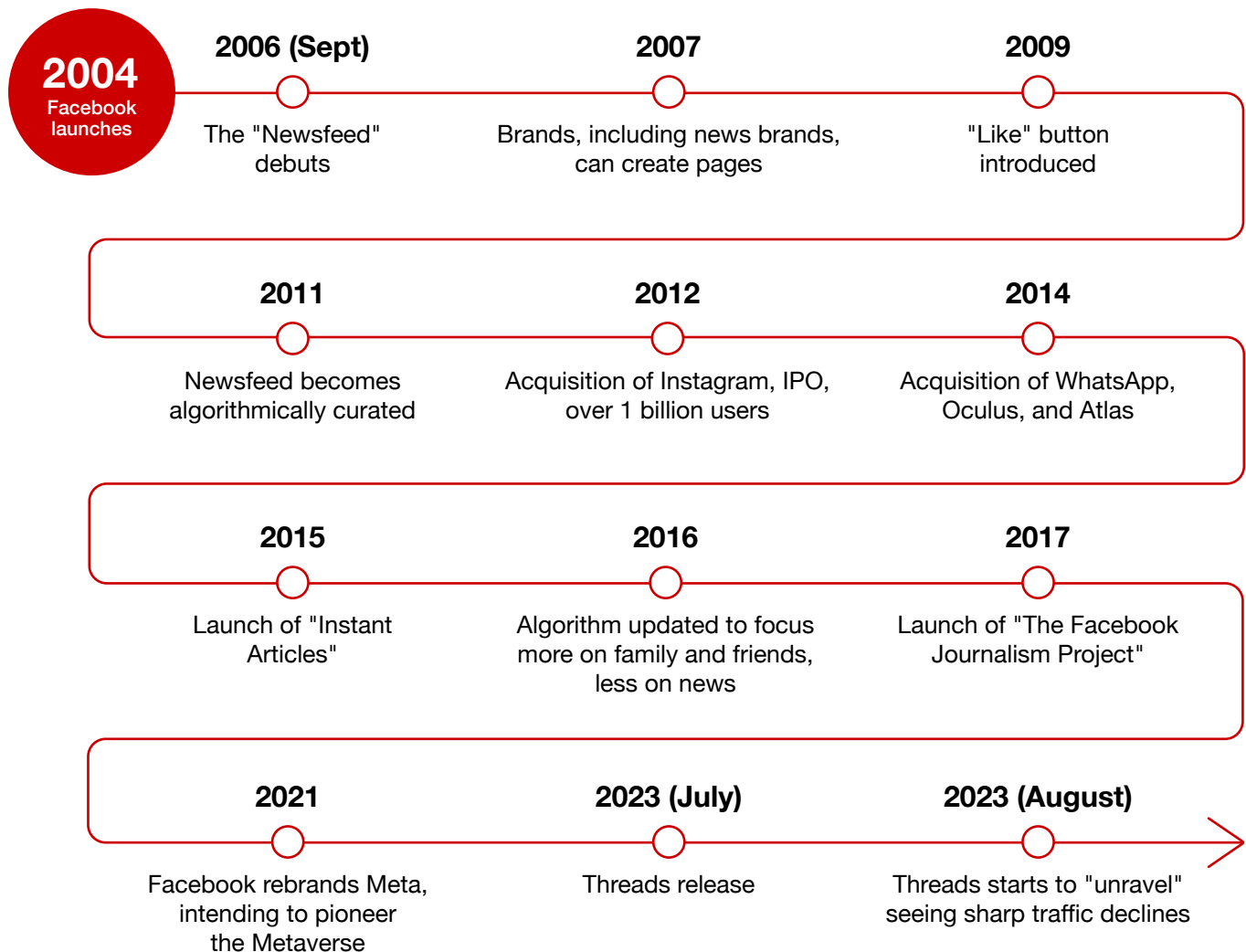


(Source: [CNN](#))

36.7% of the World's population uses Facebook monthly ([Hootsuite](#))

70% of the Internet users are active on at least one Meta platform ([Hootsuite](#))

Key features introduced for news distribution:

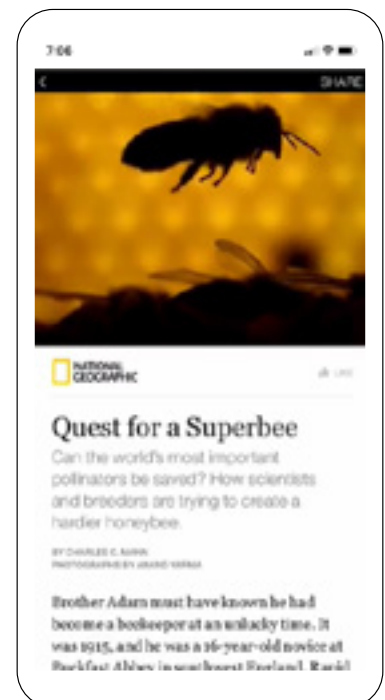
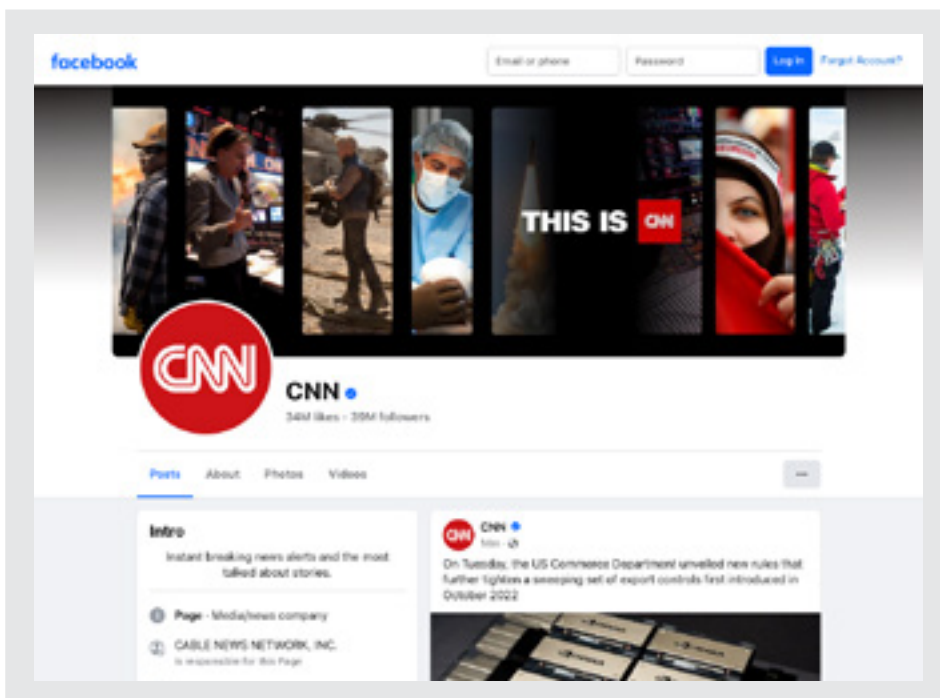


Facebook as a source of news

In 2007, Facebook began allowing brands to create pages. News organizations such as *The New York Times*, *CNN*, and many others created fan pages, encouraging viewers on Facebook to engage with their posts, and linking to their sites for news articles. Two years later, the “Like” button was introduced, allowing users to react to a piece of news and creating another way to easily engage audiences.



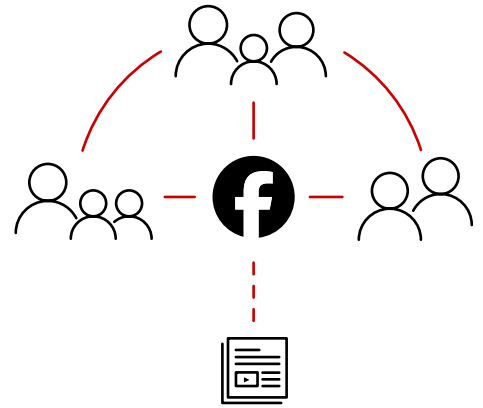
In 2015, Facebook decided to streamline news consumption by launching Instant Articles, allowing users to view articles inside the Facebook platform, avoiding long delays when linking to external sites. Facebook received publisher feedback along the way, ensuring that news organizations could continue to earn ad revenue and retain their brand’s look and feel within the articles ([Techcrunch](#)), thus pitching it as a win/win for readers and publishers alike.



“ People share a lot of articles on Facebook, particularly on our mobile app. To date, however, these stories take an average of eight seconds to load, by far the slowest single content type on Facebook. Instant Articles makes the reading experience as much as ten times faster than standard mobile web articles. ”

– Facebook’s announcement of instant stories

This win for publishers was quickly tempered in 2016, when Facebook regrouped and decided that content from family and friends should take precedence over news ([Techcrunch](#)). Publishers who had come to rely on Facebook for a significant portion of traffic to their digital properties saw usage and ad revenue decline, creating a strained relationship with the platform. Issues around Facebook disseminating [false information](#) also stirred controversy for the platform around this time. Facebook reacted by launching, “The Facebook Journalism Project”, hiring journalist Campbell Brown to lead the effort in January 2017. At the time she described her new role as one to “help news organizations and journalists work more closely and more effectively with Facebook” ([The New York Times](#)).



Source: [NY Times](#)

Brown’s tenure at the company included a \$300 million “news programs, partnerships, and content” effort to support local journalism and to help local news organizations build sustainable business models ([Facebook](#)). Upon launching this effort, [Meta’s announcement](#) also stated that when they had asked those in the news industry how to better work with them...

“ We heard one consistent answer: people want more local news, and local newsrooms are looking for more support. That’s why today we’re announcing an expanded effort around local news in the years ahead.”

– Meta’s announcement of local journalism support

A recent analysis of Facebook (and later Meta) grants to publishers by the Tow Center traced 559 news organizations that benefited from these programs. A total of \$29.9 million of these funds were used for everything from subscription acceleration programs to COVID-related grants ([Columbia Journalism Review](#)). While Brown continued at the company until 2023, over time her role was expanded to include other partnerships such as in sports and entertainment, while some of the news-focused products she helped launch were “left to languish” ([New York Times](#)).

Facebook becomes Meta

In 2021, The Facebook Company rebranded to Meta, described as a “[Social Technology Company](#).” The goal was to pioneer what they called the Metaverse, which Mark Zuckerberg described as a “*hybrid of today’s online social experiences, sometimes expanded into three dimensions or projected into the physical world.*” This change split the company into two operating segments, “Family of Apps” and “Reality Labs”, but did not change the overall corporate structure ([Meta](#)).



Unfortunately for Meta, Reality Labs has been a costly venture. According to [CNBC](#), since 2022 the division has lost more than \$21 billion, resulting in layoffs and potential restructuring ([Reuters](#)). On the Family of Apps side, things are looking more optimistic and Mark Zuckerberg has pledged that 2023 will be a “Year of Efficiency” after declining revenue in 2022 ([CNBC](#)).



(Source: [CNN](#))

Threads is Announced

Not long after Meta was established as a new kind of company, X (formerly Twitter) started to experience some turbulence including a notable change in ownership to Elon Musk, and subsequent controversial product and service model changes. Meta took note. In July 2023, Meta [introduced Threads](#) to Instagram users through an “invitation to join a brand new app for sharing text and joining public conversations” ([Meta](#)). Threads was quickly seen as a “Twitter killer” by some observers ([Reuters](#)), and while the two platforms share similarities, there are also plenty of differences.



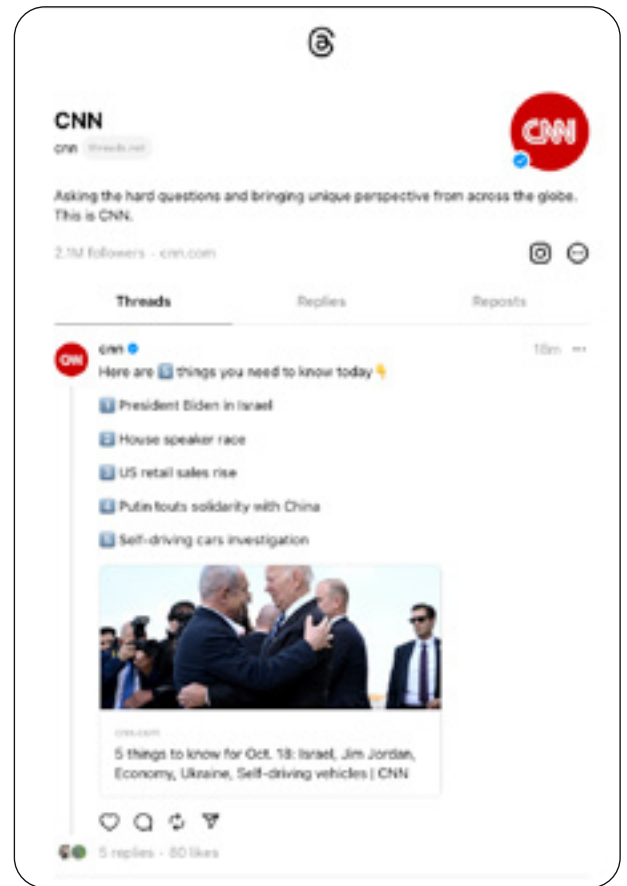
Platform Differences

[TechTarget](#) outlined some specific differences upon the launch of Threads:

- Ⓐ Does not have a direct message function.
- Ⓐ Does not have a trending topics section.
- Ⓐ Users cannot edit a post once published.
- Ⓐ Does not let users customize alt text.
- Ⓐ Does not show ads.

While Threads initially made a big splash, its novelty soon wore off, and usage dipped dramatically in just under a month. One disadvantage of Threads was that there was no web version, though that changed in late August 2023. Still, it did not appear to boost traffic volume. As of September 15, 2023 Threads boasted [128 million active users](#). While this was perhaps a disappointment based on initial projections, it is still a large following for such a new social network. Instagram’s leadership, which also oversees Threads, appears to be actively engaged in making continued improvements to attract more creators.

Specifically, according to [The Information](#), Instagram “plans to hold multiple focus groups with creators in an effort to learn what would make Threads more appealing.” Head of Instagram Adam Mosseri also noted that “post editing is coming, along with an API, which would enable scheduling and expanded Threads activity from publishers, while the Threads algorithm also needs to be more specifically attuned to Threads engagement as opposed to using your IG graph as a proxy for interest” ([Social Media Today](#)).



Threads grew rapidly in the days after its launch, but usage has declined and leveled off since

Daily active Android users, worldwide

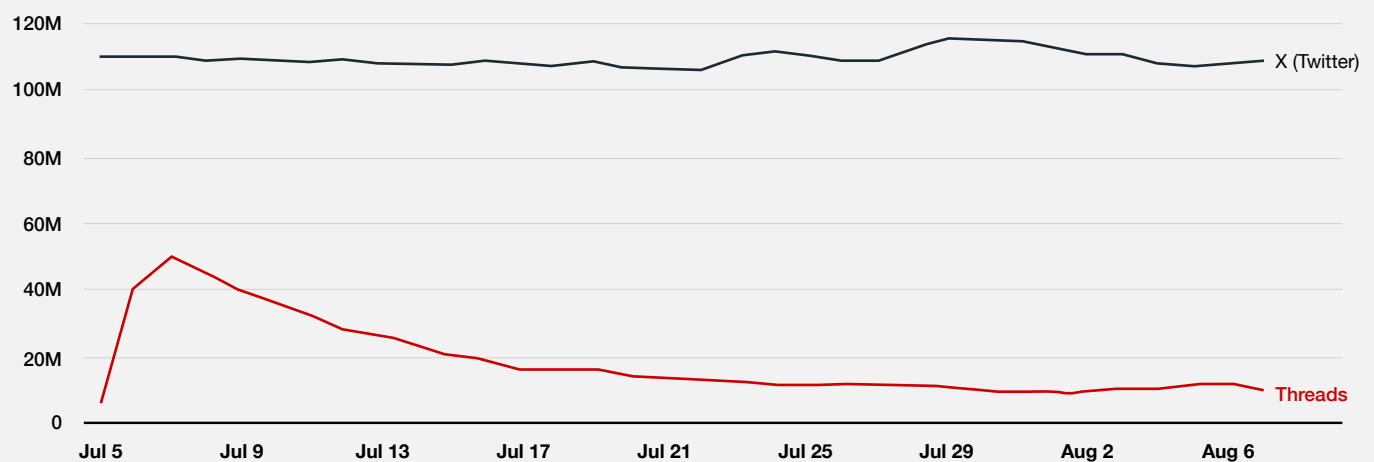


Chart: Will Henshall for TIME
Source: Similarweb • Get the data

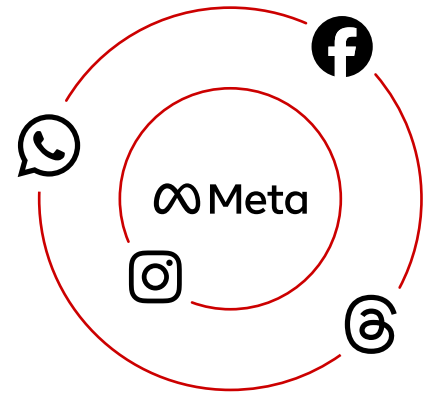
TIME

Today's landscape

The state of each product and platform in the Meta ecosystem remains in flux, and the amount of frequent (often major) changes to algorithms and features can make keeping up feel like a game of whack-a-mole. Diversification among social channels for journalists is a must. X is undergoing rapid changes as well, so building an audience on Threads, despite the challenges, is a good place to start.

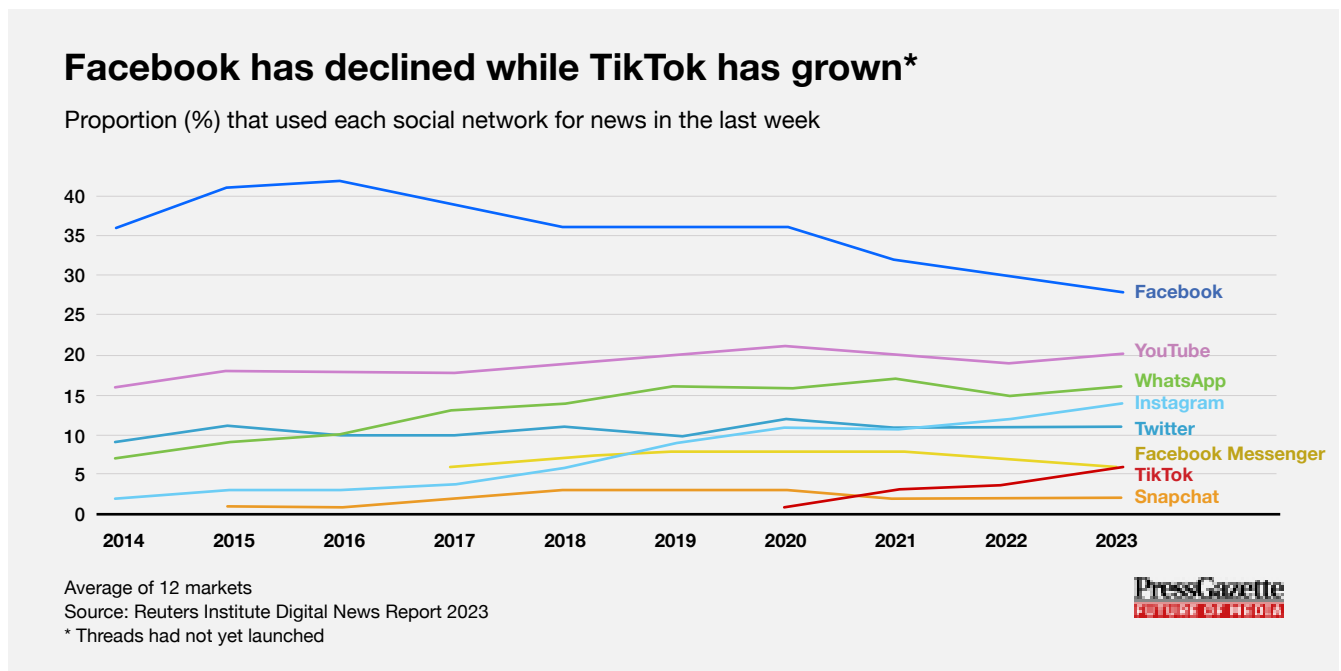
Given its large scale, it remains important for journalists to continue to leverage Facebook, however, it is important to realize Facebook is currently sending signals that do not bode well for news publishers, including Campbell Brown recently stepping down from her role at the company. Per [The New York Times](#) “top executives have become less concerned about what the news media thinks about it.”

Below is a list of the most relevant Meta products for journalists and where they stand today in the landscape of social media overall.



1 Facebook

Facebook remains the biggest social platform in the world, and the one with the biggest portion of users reporting they use it for news ([Reuters](#)). However usage has been trending downward, and leadership seems to have, at least for now, started to de-emphasize news ([The New York Times](#)). Given its reach and numbers, it should still be used by journalists, but not overly relied upon.

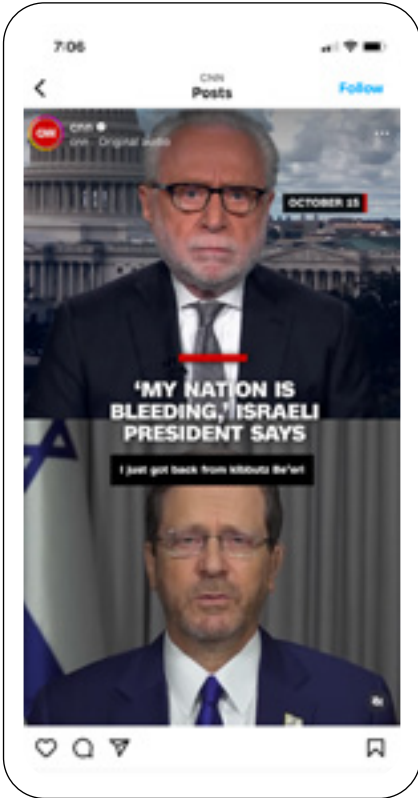


2

Instagram

While Instagram has not traditionally driven a large amount of traffic to news organizations, it is starting to trend upwards as a place to consume news. One of the best ways that journalists can leverage Instagram is through Instagram Stories, which can elevate storytelling in several ways including through sharing audio content and using it as a community response tool ([Reynolds Journalism Institute](#)). Another advantage of Instagram is that its audience skews young, with over 70% of its users under age 34 ([The Press Gazette](#)).

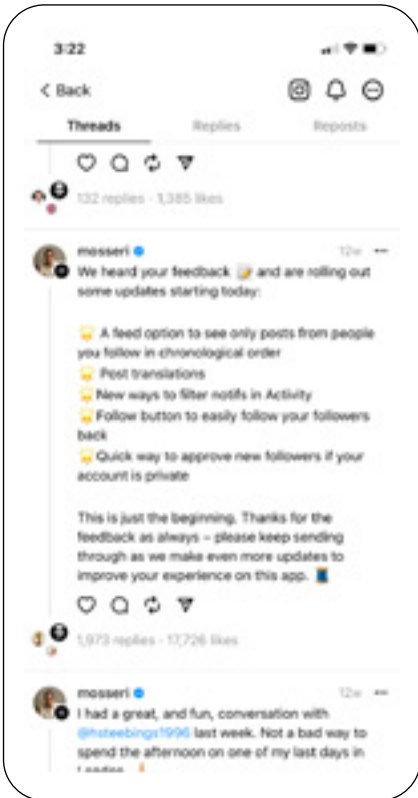
Finally, Instagram provides an advantage to those with established profiles as its new offering, Threads, is linked through existing Instagram accounts, meaning you do not have to sign up for Threads if you are already an Instagram user.



3

Threads

Despite some of the turbulence with its traffic after a strong launch, Threads remains one of the more viable alternatives to X and by the end of 2023 “may have a chance to close the gap” with its biggest rival ([The Verge](#)). What’s more, for journalists with an Instagram account the barrier to entry is quite low, and leadership seems very interested in continuing to improve its feature set and usefulness. This emerging platform is one to keep an eye on, and a good one to start experimenting with as Facebook and X continue to face their own issues with controversy, turbulence, and usage.



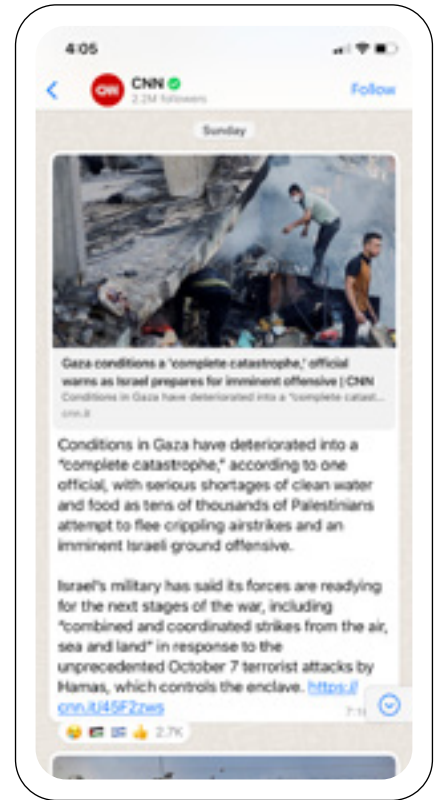
CNN uses Threads as one of many distribution channels to keep users informed

4

WhatsApp

As of June 2023 WhatsApp had over 2.78 billion active users worldwide (*Statista*), and can be an important tool for journalists, specifically when it comes to newsgathering. Journalists traveling internationally often use it for communication when phone lines are unreliable. As reported by *International Journalist's Network*, correspondent Nabih Bulos stated he uses it "at least 50% of the time" calling it "essential, simply essential" for the types of stories he covers in the Middle East for the *Los Angeles Times*.

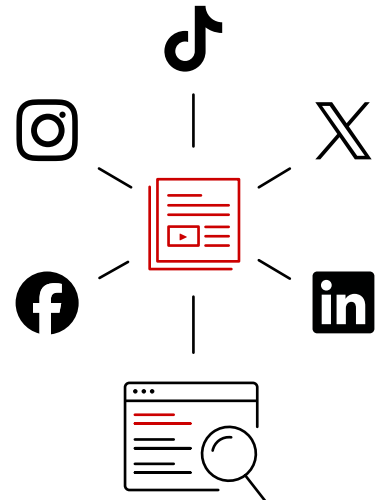
WhatsApp is also helpful for newsgathering in that it's encrypted, especially important for sources that need to retain privacy. Its chat-based interface can also lend informality and thus an intimacy between reporter and source (*International Journalist's Network*).



The Takeaway

The only constant for Meta continues to be change. Like other social media platforms, applying a balance of working within the apps to gain more audience while avoiding over-reliance is prudent. Ensuring that traffic is coming from multiple social media sources, rather than heavily relying upon one, is a good way to ensure diversification. Frequently leveraging analytics to analyze referrals can help achieve this balance.

Finally, ensuring your content and storytelling are easily findable outside of social media, such as through Search Engine Optimization, is another key to avoiding dramatic shifts in traffic when companies such as Meta tweak an algorithm or change priorities. Curating your own distribution lists of engaged audiences, such as email newsletter subscribers, can also help ensure longevity and a more personal, manageable connection to your audience.



CNN Newsource understands what it takes to win in the digital space. We work closely with our network of 1,000+ local news partners to offer valuable insights relevant to the news business while providing powerful, trusted news content.

