

Instagram is walking back its changes for now – Adam Mosseri explains why

Instagram will walk back some recent changes to the product following a week of mounting criticism, the company said today. A test version of the app that opened to full-screen photos and videos will be phased out over the next one to two weeks, and Instagram will also reduce the number of recommended posts in the app as it works to improve its algorithms.

“I’m glad we took a risk – if we’re not failing every once in a while, we’re not thinking big enough or bold enough,” Instagram chief Adam Mosseri said in an interview. “But we definitely need to take a big step back and regroup. [When] we’ve learned a lot, then we come back with some sort of new idea or iteration. So we’re going to work through that.”

The changes come amid growing user frustration over a series of changes to Instagram designed to help it better compete with TikTok and navigate the broader shift in user behavior away from posting static photos toward watching more video.

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On Monday, the TV star and entrepreneur Kylie Jenner – along with her sister Kim Kardashian – posted memes asking the company to “Make Instagram Instagram again.” And on Twitter, nearly every day people post tweets criticizing the new Instagram that quickly go viral.

Redesigns often incur the wrath of users who are hostile to change, but in this case the high-profile dissatisfaction was

backed up by Instagram's own internal data, Mosseri said. The trend toward users watching more video is real, and pre-dated the rise of TikTok, he said. But it's clear that people actually do dislike Instagram's design changes.

"For the new feed designs, people are frustrated and the usage data isn't great," he said. "So there I think that we need to take a big step back, regroup, and figure out how we want to move forward."

The company also plans to show users fewer recommendations. On Wednesday, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg said that recommended posts and accounts in feeds currently account for about 15 percent of what you see when you browse Facebook, and an even higher percentage on Instagram. By the end of 2023, that figure will be around 30 percent, Zuckerberg said.

But Instagram will temporarily reduce the amount of recommended posts and accounts as it works to improve its personalization tools. (Mosseri wouldn't say by how much, exactly.)

The retreat Instagram announced today is not permanent

"When you discover something in your field that you didn't follow before, there should be a high bar – it should just be great," Mosseri said. "You should be delighted to see it. And I don't think that's happening enough right now. So I think we need to take a step back, in terms of the percentage of feed that are recommendations, get better at ranking and recommendations, and then – if and when we do – we can start to grow again." ("I'm confident we will," he added.)

Mosseri made clear that the retreat Instagram announced today is not permanent. Threats to the company's dominance continue to mount: TikTok is the most downloaded app in the world, the most popular website, and the most watched video company. Meanwhile, Apple's App Tracking Transparency feature has blown a \$10 billion hole in Meta's core advertising business, and on

Wednesday Meta reported its first-ever quarterly revenue decline. Zuckerberg has assumed a war footing, and promised that many more changes are on the way.

One thing in the company's favor: in the most recent quarter, the amount of time people spent watching Reels grew 30 percent, Zuckerberg said on an earnings call. That suggests that user demand for short-form video – including, yes, short-form video recommended by algorithms – is real, and deserves a prominent place in Facebook and Instagram.

The challenge is figuring out how to integrate those videos into an increasingly crowded Instagram app, where friends, family, celebrities, creators, and various e-commerce projects are all fighting a daily war for attention. It's a tall order for Instagram, an app that historically prided itself on simplicity and craftsmanship.

So why can't Instagram stay focused on photos forever? Is the big shift to video something that Instagram itself caused by putting its thumb on the algorithmic scale? And how much trouble will the changes cause for celebrity creators like the Kardashians?

I asked Mosseri those questions and more over Zoom on Wednesday afternoon. Highlights of our conversation follow; the transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

Casey Newton: So this week you posted a video trying to explain what you're doing at Instagram. And I think it's fair to say that the reviews were not kind. One person said you're in your Minion era. What would you say you learned from from the response?

Adam Mosseri: I think we've learned a few things. In general, it's not surprising to us that there's a lot of anxiety around changing Instagram. I think that's always been the case. One positive way of looking at this is if people are passionate enough to get spicy on Twitter, that means they care about

Instagram. That's a good thing. The hope with the video was to start to pull apart a number of different things happening, and get a little bit more clear about which are more driven by Instagram, and which are just more out of our hands. And also to start to provide some context on where we've got more conviction, and where we're more in the experimentation mode.

It's still hard. I think a lot of things are still getting conflated. So one of the reasons why I wanted to talk to you, and one of the reasons why I continue to try to engage, is to try and pull apart things to make it more clear. Because whether or not everyone's excited about the changes that we make or not, I think it's super important for us to explain our reasoning, to set expectations, to talk about where we're going before we go. And I worry a lot of things are getting mashed into one right now. And I'm trying to untangle those things.

In a way this started with Kylie Jenner and Kim Kardashian posting a meme that said "Make Instagram Instagram again." And there's an idea in there that there is a true Instagram that is mostly about photos and your friends, and a false Instagram that consists primarily of recommendations and video, and you're moving it in the latter direction. Does that feel like a fair framing of the debate?

I think it's reasonably accurate. I actually recorded the video before we saw the Kardashian reposts. We had seen that the meme was growing – ironically, on Instagram. So I was like, okay, we need to explain things. And so I recorded the video the night before. I waited to post it to the next morning. And by then it had taken on a life of its own.

I actually do think there's a couple of different things going on. One thing that's happening is we're testing this new version of the feed as a new design. It's very immersive – it's full-screen photos and full-screen videos. It's a small percentage of users who are in it, but some of them really

dislike it. And so that is that's one thing that's going on.

Another thing that's going on is there's this consistent growth of video on Instagram relative to photos – which, by the way, long predates any of our work and recommendations in feed. It's just a paradigm shift that we've seen for many, many years now. And that is frustrating for people who are much more comfortable creating or consuming photos, and I understand that.

A third thing is there's people who just are upset about recommendations – seeing things from people you do not follow in your feed. Those things are related, because a lot of those are video, but then a lot of those are photos, too. And we've been trying to build more controls, but I think there's more work to do there.

And then the fourth is there are people who are frustrated with the amount of reach that they get. And they will guess that this thing is causing this problem. And sometimes it is; usually it isn't. And that's its own set of challenges.

So all four of the things just got wrapped up together. And depending on who you are, you might have actually just been talking about one or the other. And so we're trying to clean it up, trying to explain everything. But also we're going to make a couple of changes over the next week or two to also make sure that we are listening to the feedback and reacting responsibly.

Let me ask one question about creators, though. With respect to the Jenner/Kardashian family, I think it's a bit rich to say that what they mainly care about friends and family – Instagram is clearly a huge part of their business, and these changes could threaten that.

But that threat is worth addressing,, though – you've spent a lot of time over the past couple years talking about wanting to court creators. And creators have built some impressive

empires on top of Instagram. But it's an open question how they'll do in this new era. What do you see as the relationship between creating a space for creators to thrive and giving them a stable, predictable platform to operate on?

I think one of the most important things is that we help new talent find an audience. I care a lot about large creators; I would like to do better than we have historically by smaller creators. I think we've done pretty well by large creators overall – I'm sure some people will disagree, but in general, that's what the data suggests. I don't think we've done nearly as well helping new talent break. And I think that's super important. If we want to be a place where people push culture forward, to help realize the promise of the internet, which was to push power into the hands of more people, I think that we need to get better at that.

This has been a focus of ours for a year or two now, but we're only really starting to get a handle on that problem space more broadly. If you're going to be a platform for creators, it's gonna make more sense to try and grow the next generation of creators than court creators for other platforms.

And yes, creators need some stability, they need distribution, they need some predictability in their income, they need to be able to feel like they're staying safe. They need to be able to feel like they can express themselves comfortably. And so I'm trying to meet all of those needs, for all creators. I want to be clear I care about big creators – but I really want to do much better by small creators than we have historically.

Let's talk about friends and family, then. Years ago, you've talked with me about wanting to make Instagram the place where people to go connect with people close to them, as well as their interests. I know you'll say that Instagram is still a place for friends and family, but it also seems like that's less of a priority. When did that start? And why is it the case?

I think what is happening is people think of us as a feed app, because we started as a feed app. When we launched Instagram, there were no stories, there were no DMs. What's happened over the last decade is that how people share with friends has changed. It has shifted to stories, and it has shifted to DMs and to group chats. More photos and videos are shared in DMs in a day, then are shared into stories. And more photos and videos are shared into stories in a day than are shared to feed. I don't think connecting people with their friends and family is any less important to us than it was two years ago, or five years ago, or eight years ago. But how that works, and how we try and meet that need, has changed as how people communicate with their friends has changed.

Which then begs the question, what's the future of feed? And in a world where more of the friend content has gone from feed into stories and DMs, I think that feed is going to become more public in nature. We want to steer it, to the degree we can, towards creators and individuals, and less towards publishers and institutions. (Though obviously they will always be the platform, too.)

But we also think that creators' public content can connect you to friends. Feed could be, and to some degree is, a place to discover things to talk about with your friends. With Reels, we're seeing this happen a lot. Reels are inspiring a lot of conversations – people just send funny videos to their friends that they've discovered in feed. And then they start talking about other things – and we think that is great, too. That's another way to connect with your friends. That is probably the most viable way for feed to help you connect with friends long term, given that personal sharing – photos of my kids, or my trips – a lot of that is moving to stories and to DMs.

One idea I've seen a lot of folks express over the past day is that to the extent that consumers are showing more of a preference for video, it's only because Instagram pressured

them to do so. How much of the recent shift in tastes is due to the way Instagram itself has pulled different levers over the past few years?

I think a minority of it. I want to be clear – we design the app, and that means that we can affect how the app is used. And we've got a bunch of responsibilities that come along with that. But we can't tell people how to use the app. You can decide to use it or not. You can decide to share to stories, or to feed. You can decide to post a photo or video. The growth of video we have seen long predates us leaning more into recommendations and unconnected content. And we regularly see that when the cost of data goes down and the speed of your connection goes up, video goes up.

[There was] a price war between the different carriers in India when Jio introduced themselves to that country years ago. They offered free data for, I think it was nine months. So all the other carriers had to slash their prices. The amount of time people spend on the internet exploded in India. But much faster than the amount of time people spending online went up, it mix-shifted towards video. So video grew way faster than the overall pie. And we just see this over and over again, for different people and for different countries around the world. When networks get faster, when data gets cheaper, people keep moving more and more to video. So yes, we lean into that. It doesn't make sense to me to swim upstream here.

I want to still not only support photos, but continue to do great work in the photo space. But we've done great work for photos historically. We haven't done great work for video. So we need to catch up there. Swimming against that trend, I think, is going to be really bad for Instagram long term. We *could* just not enable videos. We could not try to make our video offering as good as our photo offering, or as good as the competition's video offering. But I think that would be a mistake. And I think that over time, that would mean people

use Instagram less. Which is obviously bad for our business, but also bad for creators. Because then creators will have less reach – if the overall pie shrinks, the average reach for the average creator also shrinks along with it.

In your video, there is a sense that Instagram is resigned to following consumers wherever they lead, even if it's extremely different from what people are used to. To some extent, to stay in business, you have to do that. But is there any core vision that's still there?

I understand that criticism. I do think the heart of Instagram has been about helping you connect with the people that you love and care about, and the interests that you have. And that has stayed true. How to connect you with the people you care about, and how to connect you with your interests, I think is going to continue to change. Because how people communicate with their friends and entertain themselves changes. The world is changing more and more quickly.

And that's hard. Because change is hard. I also want to acknowledge, if you spend an hour at your desk every day talking to your friends and reading or watching TV, and then I came by and I just rearranged everything without telling you, you'd be pretty pissed. So I think we need to do a better job making sure it's clear why something is better, and explaining something before it happens, so we don't surprise people.

One of the most important decisions that Facebook ever made was to keep the News Feed even though it got a ton of criticism when the company announced it. And the reason Facebook did keep it is that the data showed that whatever people were saying about it, they were spending a lot more time on the site. To what extent is something similar happening on Instagram right now? Is the internal data showing you something different than the people quote-tweeting you are?

Yeah – there are some parallels here, particularly for video. People are sharing more video over time. And people are interacting more with video relative to photos more and more over time. And that's been true since long before we started leaning into recommendations in feed.

There are other areas where the data lines up more with the feedback. For the new feed designs, people are frustrated and the usage data isn't great. I think there we need to take a big step back, regroup, and figure out how we want to move forward.

So again, it varies. For video, that just seems like the shift to mobile, or the shift to messaging. It's of that scale; it's just happening to us. And yes, we are leaning into it – I'm not trying to absolve ourselves of any accountability here. But that is just a cross-industry trend that I don't think we would be responsible to ignore. Whereas the full-screen feed design, that's high beta. That's experimental. And we're gonna need to take a big step back in what we're seeing both in terms of sentiment and in terms of usage, and reevaluate.

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