

Telegram ‘Premium’ subscription is showing up in beta builds of the app

Telegram appears to be testing another way for the super popular messaging app to start bringing in revenue. Beta testers for Telegram’s iOS app noticed something new in version 8.7.2, as first spotted by *Android Police*: a new set of stickers and reaction emoji that you can only unlock “by subscribing to Telegram Premium.”

Telegram Premium, of course, doesn’t exist yet. (And Telegram didn’t respond to *The Verge*’s request for comment.) But right now, users with access to Telegram’s TestFlight builds and its Test Server are able to send each other exploding-heart and flying-ghost reactions, a sticker in which that cute blobby yellow duck is just unbearably sad, and a few other new things. And it appears that, ultimately, even the recipients of those messages will need Telegram Premium to see them; if you send a non-subscriber a sad duck, they’ll get a prompt to sign up.

There’s no word yet about what Premium will cost, when (or even if) it’ll launch more widely, and what other features might be part of the subscription. But a subscription like this is a long time coming from Telegram. Founder Pavel Durov said in late 2020 that in order to not sell out like WhatsApp or disappear like so many other messaging apps, “Telegram will begin to generate revenue, starting next year.” He teased a plan for advertising in the platform’s large channels and said Telegram “will add some new features for business teams or power users” that would come with a price.

From the little we know so far, Telegram's approach to paid features appears to follow the Discord model of messaging app monetization. Discord's Nitro subscription costs \$10 a month and gives power users more toys to play with: more emoji, better bandwidth for video and audio, improved badges and avatars, and more. Nitro isn't something users need to use the service, but it's been popular enough to convince Discord it's a long-term business model.

Durov also promised in 2020 that all the parts of Telegram that have been free – and all the parts dedicated to private messaging – will stay free. That's the trick with messaging apps, really: the way to make money is not to get in the middle of chats among friends but to find other things for users to do in and with the app. That's why the WeChat-style "super app" idea is such a popular one. And, as Telegram has expanded into livestreaming, chatbots, cryptocurrency, and more, it's likely to keep finding ways to make money.

But making money without making users mad? That's harder. As ads started to appear in Telegram channels last fall, for instance, authors and subscribers alike revolted so aggressively that Durov said it would build a way to turn them off. (If I'm reading tea leaves here, I'd bet that disabling ads is a benefit of a Premium subscription.) That may be part of the reason Telegram appears to be taking this rollout slowly and starting small rather than pivoting the platform to freemium.

Still, with more than 500 million users on the platform, Telegram might only need to convince a small percentage to subscribe in order to become the break-even business Durov has always said he wants to be.

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