

Facebook: Free, until it isn't

By Seth Ginsberg. McClatchy-Tribune News Service | Posted: Wednesday, August 13, 2014 2:25 pm

A recent decision by Facebook to limit the content we see in our newsfeeds could have far-reaching and potentially deleterious unintended consequences for the global nonprofit and advocacy communities.

When the ubiquitous social network changed its algorithm to limit “organic reach” — the number of Facebook users who can potentially see any single piece of content in their newsfeed — the move was characterized as a way for the company to extract additional advertising revenue from corporate brands.

By limiting the ability of corporations to reach consumers, Facebook made the calculation that companies will pay to advertise on the social network to reach these same users.

Regardless of whether or not this proves to be a sound business decision, corporate brands like Pepsi, Nike and Geico will likely be able to absorb the additional advertising costs without experiencing a significant impact on their bottom lines.

The consequences, however, will be felt much more acutely by the many nonprofit organizations now subject to the same reduction in reach — reportedly down to only 1 or 2 percent of all followers. A nonprofit advocacy group with 5,000 followers, for example, might issue a critical call to action that is only seen by 50 of its followers.

The majority of nonprofit organizations do not have budgets for paid advertising. Most are operating on shoestring budgets, focusing on keeping their doors open during challenging economic times and finding a way to fulfill their core mission with fewer resources than ever before.

Yet many of these same nonprofit organizations have invested considerable time and financial resources in creating an active Facebook community, including encouraging members to join, training members how to interact with others on the site, and dedicating staff resources to maintaining pages populated with dynamic content.

For many nonprofits, Facebook has become an integral extension of the organization — a way to disseminate critical information in a timely manner, a fundraising tool, and a launch-pad for legislative advocacy. Thousands of nonprofits that work every day to improve human rights, gender equality, the environment, access to medical care, economic conditions, and the environment, among many other issues, have used Facebook to expand their reach into global communities. Beginning in 2011, the Global Healthy Living Foundation has convened thousands of health nonprofits at the annual Digital Health Advocacy Summit to discuss new mechanics and applications of social media tools like Facebook, and the pressing issues facing patients with chronic diseases. In a survey of

social media and executive directors attending last year, 58 percent of patient and provider groups feel that social media is “extremely important” for advocating for their constituents.

The rug has now been pulled out from under many of these groups.

There is little doubt that Facebook can be a transformative force for good — we have seen its potential in places like Egypt during Arab Spring and in local neighborhood Facebook groups during recent U.S. weather emergencies. In health care, Facebook has helped bring the voices of the homebound and infirmed to the halls of Congress and state legislatures. It has provided instant product recall information to unknowing patients minutes away from ingesting faulty therapeutics. It has become a place where patients and families battling countless conditions find community and support from others.

But the transformative power of Facebook — like the popularity of the site itself — is neither preordained nor guaranteed going forward. If nonprofit groups are no longer able to effectively reach the communities of followers they have worked hard to cultivate, they may be forced to look to recreate these communities elsewhere. How can you have a revolution if no one shows up? In the midst of a pivotal moment in patient engagement and empowerment, our microphone has been turned off. We recruited an audience to fill the room and then suddenly, only those in the first few rows can hear us.

Facebook is a business and as such is entitled to its business model. But as it strives to please shareholders and drive up its bottom line, it should be mindful not to inadvertently choke off the ability of nonprofit organizations to provide others with the help they need.

Facebook promises that the site is “free and always will be.” We urge Facebook to live up to the spirit of its motto and grant nonprofit organizations a waiver from the new reduction in organic reach.

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