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# News Feeds, Old Content: A Brief History of Algorithmically Curated Feeds on Facebook and Twitter

Anna Chung Follow 6 min read · Apr 29, 2019

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On September 5, 2006, Facebook introduced what some might consider the defining feature of their platform: the News Feed. The News Feed began to show us every interaction our friends were having on Facebook, whether it was liked pages, relationship updates, or profile picture changes.

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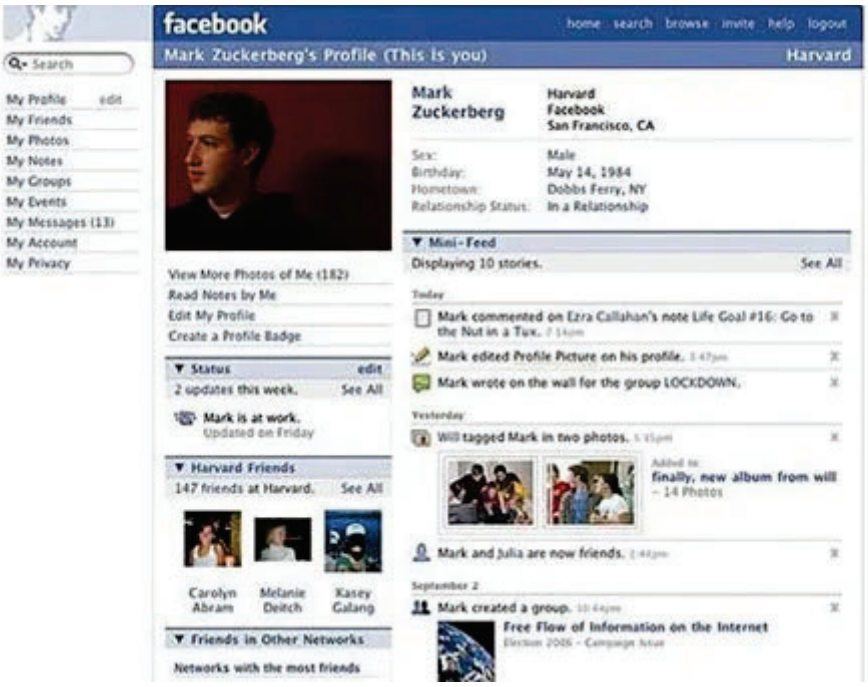
Facebook's user home page in 2005 — before the News Feed was introduced (via Ryan Watson on Behance)




Facebook's user home page in 2006 — after the News Feed was introduced (via Ryan Watson on Behance)

At this point, it seems hard to imagine a version of Facebook without the News Feed. Before the News Feed, people had to go directly to their friends' Facebook profiles to see content about them, and the content was much more limited. After News Feed was released, people were outraged, confused, and creeped out. People protested these changes on Facebook itself, creating Facebook groups to express their concerns and annoyance through posts and memes. The biggest concerns for users were around privacy (over a decade later, these concerns still ring true), and the uproar was so immense that on the same day the News Feed was released, Mark Zuckerberg acknowledged the backlash in a Facebook blog post titled, "Calm down. Breathe. We hear you."

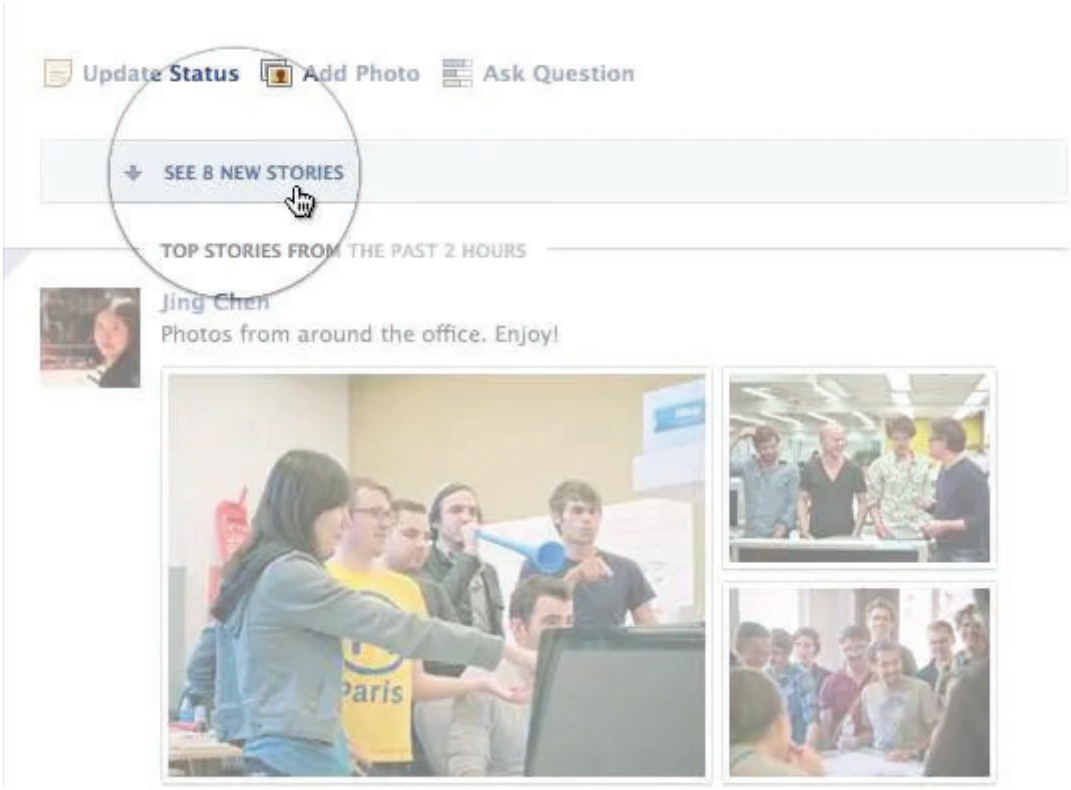
Just three days later, Zuckerberg published another post apologizing for the lack of privacy controls and explaining the subsequent changes made to offer better control. However, Zuckerberg also re-validated the idea of News Feed, writing:

> *"This may sound silly, but I want to thank all of you who have written in and created groups and protested. Even though I wish I hadn't made so many of you angry, I am glad we got to hear you. And I am also glad that News Feed highlighted all these groups so people could find them and share their opinions with each other as well."*

The News Feed was here to stay, but it certainly didn't stay the same throughout time. From visual design changes to added features, such as the now iconic like button, the News Feed continues to evolve. But I argue that the most significant change to the News Feed — and to modern social media more broadly — took place on September 20, 2011 with the introduction of the *algorithmically curated* News Feed. In a product update written by Mark

Tonkelowitz, an Engineering Manager at Facebook at the time, the News Feed was described as "your own personal newspaper":

> *"When you pick up a newspaper after not reading it for a week, the front page quickly clues you into the most interesting stories. In the past, News Feed hasn't worked like that. Updates slide down in chronological order so it's tough to zero in on what matters most.*
>
> *Now, News Feed will act more like your own personal newspaper. You won't have to worry about missing important stuff. All your news will be in a single stream with the most interesting stories featured at the top."*




Facebook's News Feed Update in 2011 (via WayBack Machine)

This was a significant shift from reverse chronological feeds, which other major social media platforms, like Twitter, were using at the time. Algorithmic curation became based on non-time-based metrics like virality

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and our "preferences." In a way, algorithmic curation solved a problem (or perhaps, the intentional choice) that Facebook created with the original introduction of the News Feed: the hypersaturation of information on social media. As our social networks grew and the News Feed began to function as — well, a place for getting the traditional kind of "news" — it became increasingly impossible to see all of the content that passed through our feeds.

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This wasn't actually the first case of algorithmic curation on Facebook — in 2006, Facebook had a feature called Pulse, which showed "popular listings and trends on Facebook in the last seven days" in categories like music, movies, and television. However, algorithmic curation wasn't explicitly incorporated into the News Feed until 2011. Facebook, for better or for worse, led the social media industry's move towards algorithmically curated feeds and arguably influenced Twitter into adopting its own version of the algorithmically curated feed.

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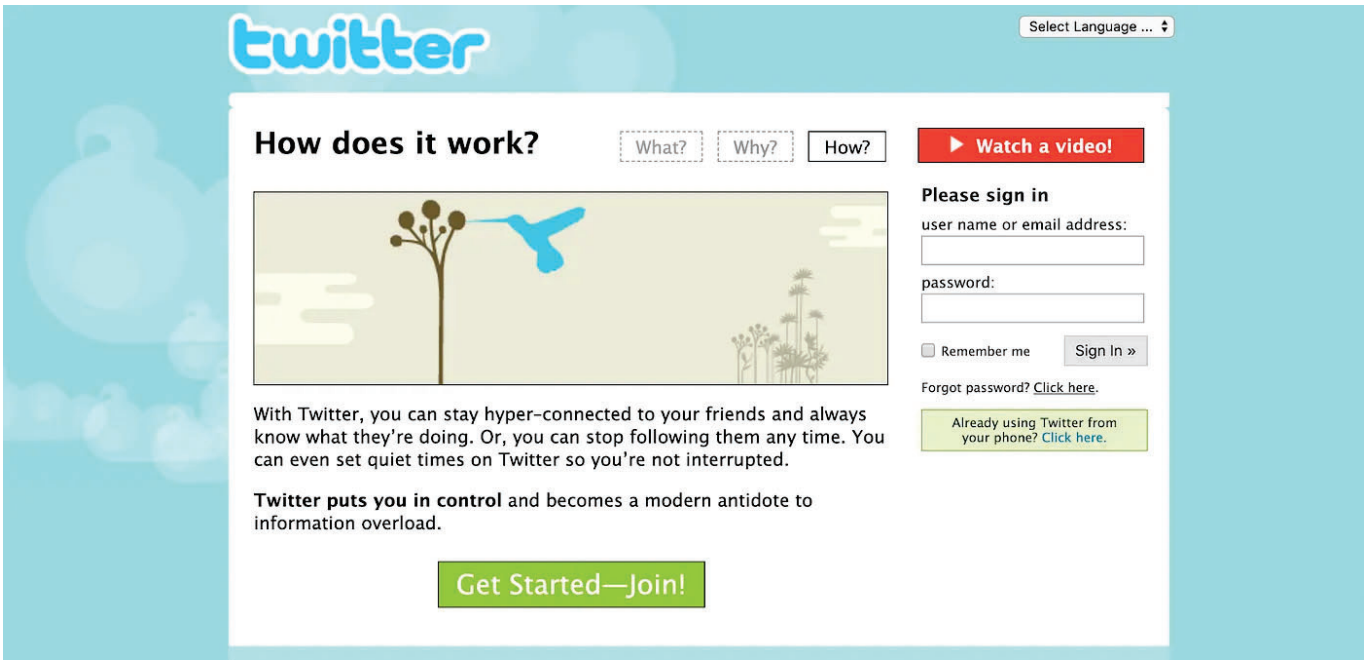
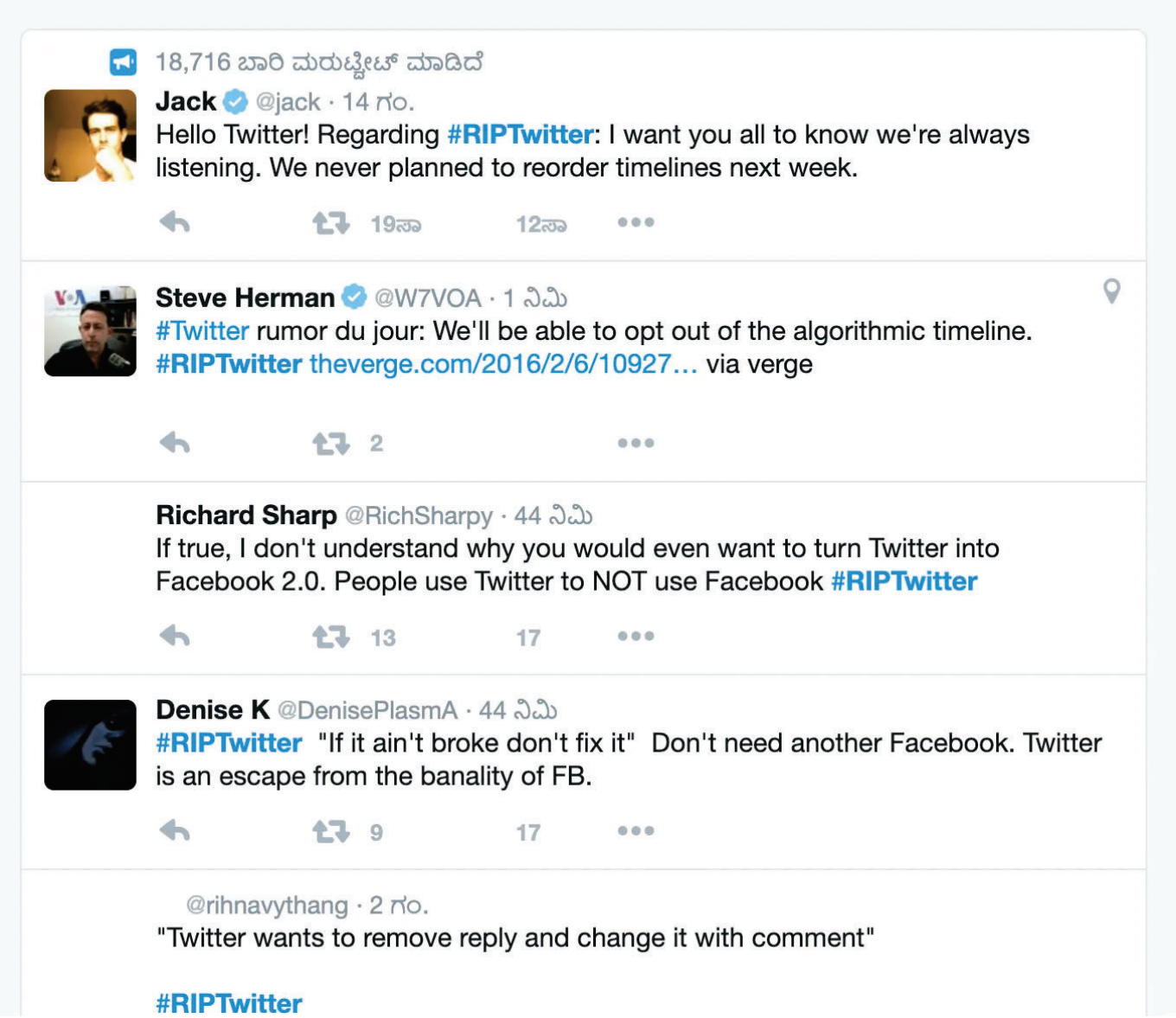
Facebook Pulse in 2006 (via WayBack Machine)

Twitter was founded in 2006, and for the first decade of its existence, featured only a reverse chronological feed. The reverse chronological feed was, in fact, a key part of Twitter's brand, reflected in their early slogan, "See what's happening — *right now*" (which has only been slightly modified in 2019 to "See what's happening in the world right now.") Another part of Twitter's brand was about giving users control, through features like "quiet times", a setting for turning off Twitter updates for certain periods of time. In many ways, Twitter has explicitly differentiated itself from Facebook by maintaining the reverse chronological timeline and emphasizing its features for giving users control.



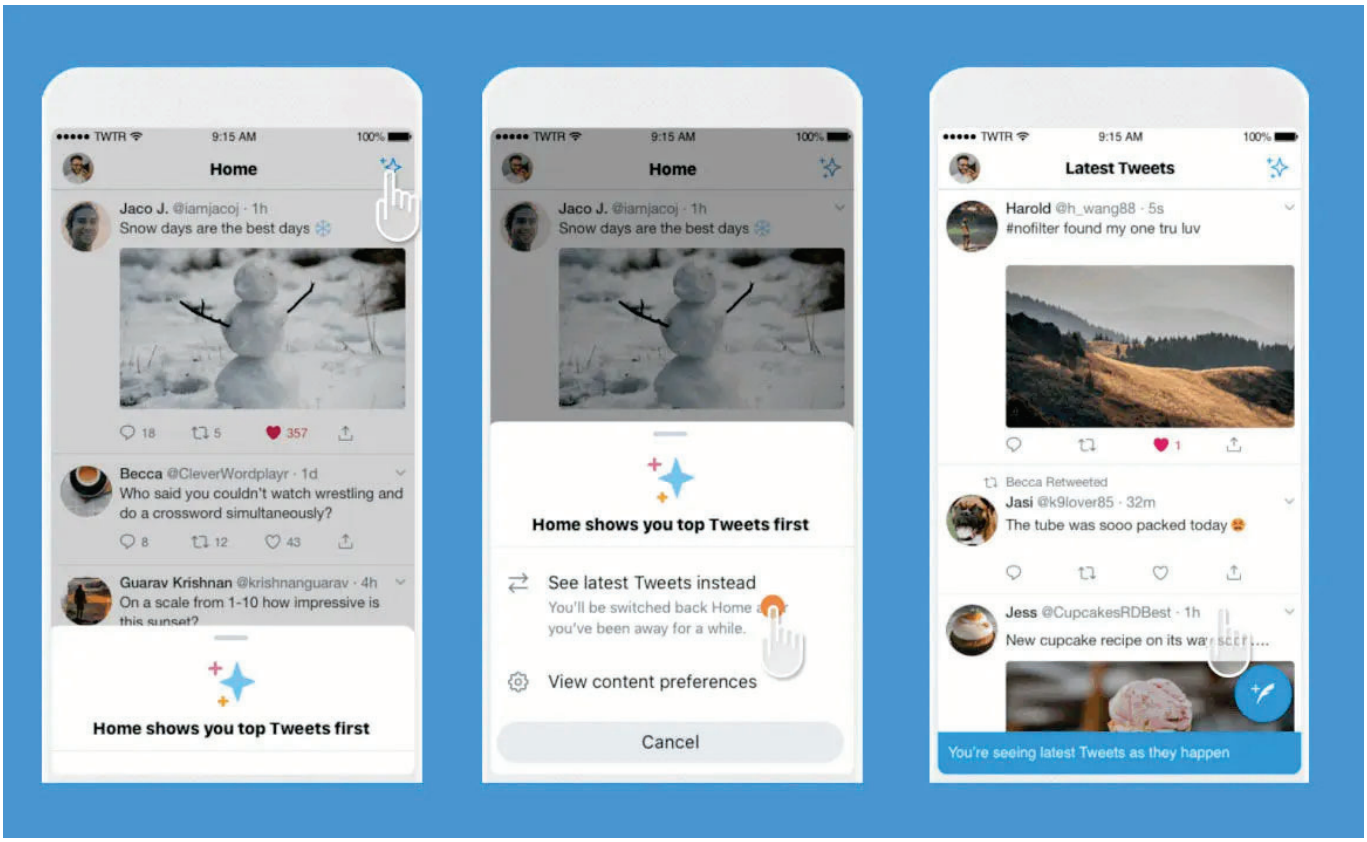

Twitter's home page in 2008 (via Wayback Machine)

Therefore, when Twitter decided to introduce an algorithmically curated feed in 2016, Twitter users were collectively upset with the change, even leading to the viral hashtag, #RIPTwitter, used to lament the shift away from Twitter's chronological timeline.




#RIPTwitter tweets in 2011 (via Wayback Machine)

I suspect that it wasn't only this initial outcry that made Twitter eventually reintroduce the reverse chronological feed but rather the sustained critiques against algorithmic curation since 2016 — fueled, in large part, by the increasing concerns over the spread of fake news on social media. The issue of fake news on social media is deeply tied to the ways in which certain kinds of content are prioritized on social media feeds — in other words, the algorithmic curation of these feeds. But algorithmic curation has many implications beyond this.




Twitter's "Latest Tweets" feature in 2018, which reintroduced the reverse chronological feed (via Engadget)

From a sympathetic perspective to social media companies, algorithmic curation is a user-oriented solution for organizing vast amounts of information, making it easier for people to "see what matters" on their social feeds. From a less sympathetic perspective, algorithmic curation is a commercial-oriented imperative for making it easier to feature ads and making social media feeds more addictive (which keeps people on social media for longer, so they can see more ads and give more of their personal information to social media companies, who can then help advertisers produce better, more personalized ads — and so on).

But from a critical perspective, algorithmic curation is ultimately about power — about who controls what we see and how we see it. It's about who gets to decide "what matters most." In this way, social media platforms are not neutral and, in fact, act as media curators more than we might like to admit. On the other hand, the reverse chronological feed is not necessarily a

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"neutral" solution, as some have suggested. While algorithmically curated feeds might operate under social media companies' social assumptions and commercial imperatives, reverse chronological feeds also operate under assumptions about who has time to post content and view content at certain times of the day. What if a different kind of algorithmically curated feed prioritized less viral content? Content from women and non-binary folks? Content from people who don't post frequently?

For many, the existing paradigm of algorithmic curation has become so ingrained that it's hard to imagine a viable alternative. But the history of algorithmic curation on social media is a relatively brief one and, at many points, a contested one. If we begin to understand social media platforms as embodying particular ideologies through their algorithmic or non-algorithmic designs, could we then envision new designs for a more equitable social media?

Social Media | Algorithms | Facebook | Twitter

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