

Facebook says more people are watching live videos amid coronavirus crisis

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Facebook said Friday that it's seeing an uptick in the number of people who watch live videos on the social network as more people social distance themselves from friends and family because of the coronavirus outbreak. From February to March, the number of Facebook Live viewers in the US increased up to 50%, according to the company.

The social media giant, which has 2.5 billion monthly active users, said it's also stepping up efforts to make live videos accessible to more people. That includes the ability to watch live videos without a Facebook account and a way to only listen to the audio of a video, a feature that could help users in areas with poor internet connections.



The surge in Facebook Live users means the social network will be expanding its focus on live video, a tool that also comes with moderation challenges for the company. While users have turned to Facebook Live to broadcast everything from concerts to cooking demos, it's also been used in the past to stream suicides and crimes such as last year's Christchurch mosque shootings.

A Facebook spokeswoman wouldn't share the total number of Facebook Live users in the US, but she said the increase was "significant." There have been more than 8.5 billion broadcasts on Facebook Live.

Fidji Simo, who heads Facebook's app, told Bloomberg the company is changing its product roadmap as user behavior shifts because of COVID-19, the respiratory illness caused by the coronavirus. Employees are focusing more on live video, news and groups versus features that encourage people to gather in person, like Facebook events and Facebook Marketplace (where people sell new and used goods). Those priorities will likely continue even if the spread of the virus dies down.

"It's a need that exists in times of physical distancing, but it's a need that exists in normal times as well," Simo told Bloomberg.

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