

Behind Facebook's unfriending of Australia

[Zoe Samios](#) February 20, 2021



Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg was directly involved in the decision to pull news content from the platform on Thursday.*Pool EPA*

On Thursday, Australian employees at human rights organisation Amnesty International convened for a crisis meeting.

Hours earlier, and with no warning, its most important amplification channel had been hobbled. All news articles on its Facebook page, which it spent years cultivating and has 360,000 followers, were fine but its partner organisations had all been affected.

"It was obviously an enormous shock," says Tim O'Connor, Amnesty

International's campaign manager. "It [Facebook] has been a place that has been ubiquitously available for individuals and organisations to get information and take action and now that is greatly reduced. It means that our community is not as well informed as it could be."

Amnesty, together with a range of [charities, government health departments and emergency services](#), had been caught up in a decision by Facebook to ban news in Australia. [Stopping news articles was an intentional step taken by the social media giant](#) in response to new government laws designed to force it to pay news publishers for content. But blocking non-news pages was not.

It was the culmination of an intense, months-long debate over the most ambitious attempt to regulate to date. But yet again Facebook is being criticised for overstepping the mark.

How it came to this

The move was made in response to the government's media bargaining code, which is designed to force it and Google to pay publishers for news content.

Facebook executives - in consultation with founder Mark Zuckerberg, vice-president of global partnerships, business and corporate development Marne Levine and head of global news partnerships Campbell Brown - were weighing up what to do for weeks.

The tech platform made its intentions to remove news content from its main platform clear last September, after a draft form of the media bargaining code was made public.

Even Simon Milner, Facebook's director of policy for the Asia-Pacific

region, wasn't sure if Facebook would follow through with the threat when he fronted up at a parliamentary inquiry in late January. In fact nobody was certain until the eleventh hour, when the Facebook's most senior executives saw the final bill to be debated in parliament and decided to pull the trigger.

Under the direction of Zuckerberg, the company's founder, major shareholder and most powerful figure, the company pushed through tweaks to its algorithm to restrict news content for Australians.



Facebook's head of public policy Simon Milner wasn't certain the social media platform would pull news content when he appeared in front of a Senate hearing last January.*PA Archive*

The problem was, it used a broad definition of news that ensnared a range of pages that had nothing to do with professional media.

The move shocked the media industry and key figures in Canberra. As late as last Friday, Facebook was in talks to sign arrangements with

major news outlets.

"There has always been a lot of US interest in this. Clearly a decision as significant as this goes right to the top of the company"

Senior Facebook executive Simon Milner

Treasurer Josh Frydenberg was unaware of Facebook's plans as late as Wednesday night. In the four walls of Parliament House he had been celebrating a different milestone - [Google had struck lucrative agreements](#) with two of the nation's biggest media companies, Seven West Media and Nine Entertainment Co (owner of this masthead). It was also about to sign an agreement with Rupert Murdoch's News Corp globally. For Frydenberg, perhaps the central government figure in this saga, the political victory was years in the making.

Yet as the deals with Google were agreed, Facebook, which had refused to remove a "poison pill" allowing it to terminate any deals it struck with publishers upon the passage of the new laws, was silent. Media executives that were speaking regularly to local head of news partnerships Andrew Hunter hadn't heard from him in days.

"There was never a moment when we said 'we're fine with the law,'" Milner says.

"We absolutely held off in the hope that we would see changes that could enable us to continue to strive towards increasing our investments in news and enabling people to continue to share news on

our service. But I'm afraid those amendments didn't address the fundamental concerns that we had. We felt we had to do it in order to protect our business."

What the code is about

The proposed laws force Google and Facebook to enter commercial agreements with media companies or face an arbitration process and fines of up to 10 per cent of revenue. The bill for the code passed the House of Representatives on Wednesday night and is expected to be passed by the Senate next week. This means it could become law by the end of the month.

Facebook, adamant the laws were completely unfair, felt pigeon-holed. It is also concerned they could set a global precedent. "There has always been a lot of US interest in this. Clearly a decision as significant as this goes right to the top of the company," Milner says. "[Mark's] involved in these decisions. He is the CEO. That's where these decisions get made."

Brown, formerly a prominent journalist herself, announced Facebook's decision early on Thursday, Australian time.

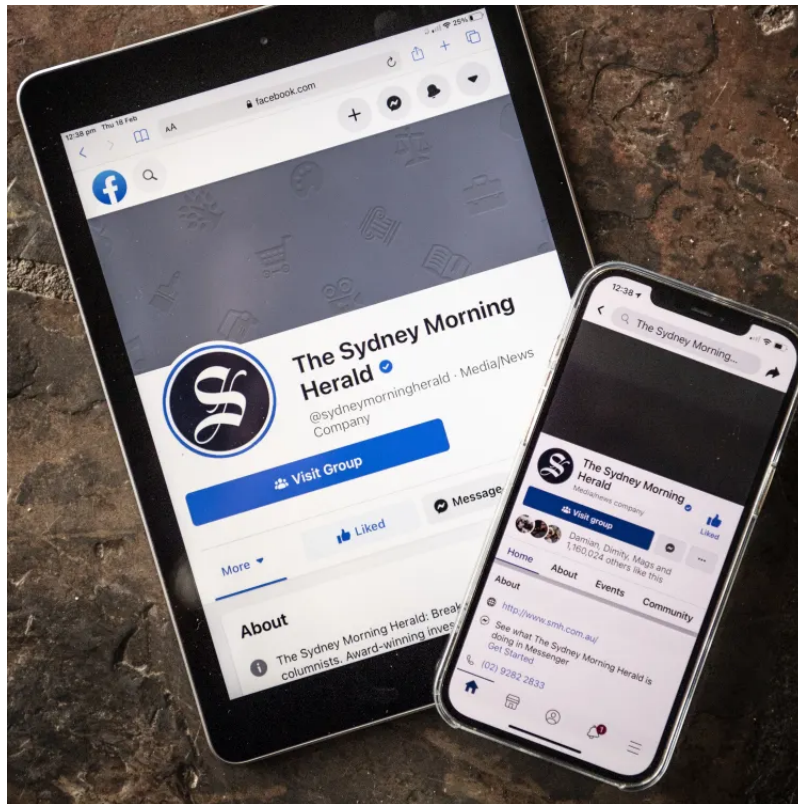


Treasurer Josh Frydenberg in talks with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg on Friday.

"We've reluctantly made the decision to restrict the availability of news on Facebook in Australia," she wrote on Twitter. "Our goal was to find a resolution that strengthened collaboration with publishers, but the legislation fails to recognise fundamental relationship between us & news organisations."

Hunter sent a brief note to media companies in the morning to inform them of the news. But the chaos quickly engulfed the non-news landscape.

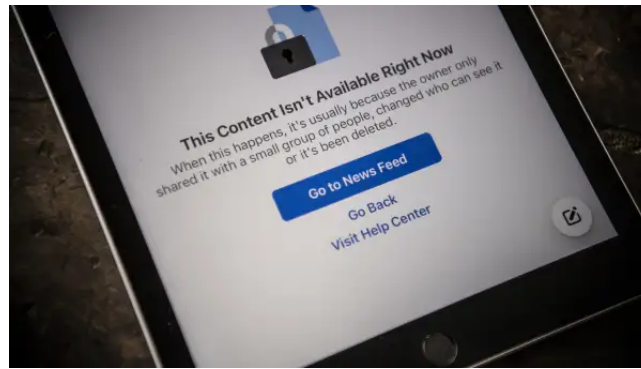
Nearly all these pages were recovered within 24 hours, but they gave the public a glimpse at a world where the primary source of news for millions of people had no news on it. It was particularly concerning to health organisations, which were blocked just days ahead of the vaccine rollout for the coronavirus pandemic.



Facebook media pages such as The Sydney Morning Herald's have been blocked from posting and news links can no longer be shared on the platform. *Wolter Peeters*

Health Minister Greg Hunt said he was concerned that vaccine conspiracies and misinformation would thrive on the platform in the absence of news. Facebook has fact-checking processes in place for this misinformation and is preparing a framework with the media regulator and other tech companies to manage it. But the absence still means a lack of balance between what is factual and what isn't.

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Seven West Media was the first large local media company to sign a deal with Google. Seven Group Holdings chief executive Ryan Stokes said it was in Facebook's interests to get information back on the platform.

"Their decision to ban legitimate news and information ... makes them seem more like a publisher than than just a digital platform," he told *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*.

"I think the government's commitment to pushing the code through and legislation through is a really important position and being resolute in that and not responding to these types of interim steps and decisions, I think is really important. And then I think it's going to be up to Facebook. And frankly, I think it's in their interest to get the information back on their platform, because that's what their users want."

A 2020 Digital News report found 49 per cent of respondents used Facebook as a "source of news" about the pandemic and that social media platform remains the most popular way for Australians to access news online (37 per cent). Scrolling through Facebook's newsfeed is a common way to find news and access news content. Seventeen million Australians use Facebook for information each month.

Facebook's former managing director Stephen Scheeler says the long-

term effect of the social media giant's move is deeply concerning.

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"In the short to medium term, quality, investigative journalism and important news is going to be absent from Facebook's feed and if that goes on for a day or two, it's not a big deal. But if it goes on for weeks and months and longer and it's not replaced by something that's an equally good substitute - in terms of quality of keeping people informed and keeping facts flowing around the democracy - we are winding up in an even worse place than we are now.

"I don't think we can just forget about this. This is one of those acts that you can't just dismiss and say 'everything's back to normal'. This has shown nakedly to every Australian that Facebook controls us in a way that we should not feel comfortable with under the current power dynamics. That is something we need to address."

Milner said Facebook's plans should not have been a surprise for the federal government. His team, along with Zuckerberg, had made their intentions clear. Frydenberg said on Friday morning he had met again with Zuckerberg to talk through the tech giant's "remaining issues". These three issues are a provision that prevents Facebook from discriminating between different news outlets that ask for money, a

"baseball" or "final offer" arbitration mechanism that allows an independent body to select one payment over another, and the obligation to enter commercial negotiations.

"I did my PhD on final offer for arbitration and I can tell you that the evidence shows this does not work, it does not produce a kind of in a meaningful commercial deals," he adds. "Quite the opposite - it leads to conflict."

Milner declined to comment on the proposals the company had put forward to the government in the coming days. He remains cautiously optimistic about reaching a compromise, but also suggests Facebook will not compromise on its principles.



Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg was directly involved in the decision to pull news content from the platform on Thursday.*Bloomberg*

"On the issue of is this permanent, it really does depend on what law

comes finally into effect. Once it goes through the Senate, our understanding was that the government had made its final amendments.

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"If the law continues to make it un-viable for us to have news on Facebook, there's no basis on which we can change this. If the law were to change then that creates opportunities for us to feel confident about being able to have news on the service without being unfairly penalised by this law."

Irrespective of whether the laws are implemented by next week, Scheeler says the control Facebook has over the Australian public is troubling.

"You can go to the ballot box and you can express in a democratic way how you feel about Scott Morrison - you can vote yes or no on his continuing [in] power because you agree to disagree with things that he does," Scheeler says.

"You can't do that with Facebook. You can't vote in or out Mark Zuckerberg even if your Facebook's shareholder, even if I owned \$100 billion worth of Facebook. I have no influence over Mark Zuckerberg.

That to me, right there, is the problem."