

Facebook and Instagram could charge for ad-free services in EU

Publication Date: 2023-10-03

Author: Dan Milmo

Section: Technology

Tags: Meta, Instagram, Facebook, Advertising, Social networking, Technology sector, European Union, news

Article URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/oct/03/facebook-instagram-charge-ad-free-eu-meta-mobile-desktop>



Mark Zuckerberg's Meta is considering charging users in the EU €13 (£11) a month to access an ad-free version of Instagram or Facebook on their phones, as the company grapples with regulatory pressure on how it uses people's data. Meta is also weighing a €17 charge to use Instagram and Facebook without adverts on desktop, according to sources close to the discussions. Accessing both apps on smartphones would cost about €19 a month. The social media company is considering the charges after a July ruling by the European court of justice, the highest in the EU. The Luxembourg-based court stated that under Europe's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) Facebook cannot justify using personal details to target people with personalised ads – its core means of earning money from operating the platform – unless it receives their consent first. The use of subscription charges as an alternative was mooted in the court ruling, which raised the possibility of charging an "appropriate fee" to access an ad-free version. Meta is discussing its plans with Ireland's Data Protection Commission, which regulates the business across the EU because Meta's regional base is in Dublin, and with European officials in Brussels. It was also reported on Monday by the news site TechCrunch that TikTok was about to test a subscription to an ad-free service for \$4.99 a month for users in an unnamed English-speaking market outside the US. According to the Wall Street Journal, Meta's ad-free plan is called SNA, which stands for subscription no ads, and would give users the choice of continuing to access Facebook or Instagram for free with personalised adverts, or paying for ad-free versions. The plan could be introduced next month because Meta has until the end of November to comply with the ECJ ruling. However, it is understood that regulators are looking at the size of the fees and whether they are too expensive for people who do not want to be targeted by adverts. A Meta spokesperson said: "Meta believes in the value of free services which are supported by personalised ads. However, we continue to explore options to ensure we comply with evolving regulatory requirements." A leading campaigner against Meta's data practices said he would fight the proposals "up and down the courts" if the subscription fees were implemented. Max Schrems, who has brought successful legal complaints against Zuckerberg's platforms, said the proposals were tantamount to paying for fundamental rights. "Fundamental rights cannot be for sale," he said. "Are we going to pay for the right to vote or the right to free speech next? This would mean that only the rich can enjoy these rights, at a time when many people are struggling to make ends meet. Introducing this idea in the area of your right to data protection is a major shift." Zuckerberg, Meta's founder and CEO, said in a senate hearing that "there will always be a version of Facebook that is free", although he added that he would "certainly consider" a paid service. This year Meta moved into paid-for accounts by launching a subscription service that offered perks including a verified account

and direct access to customer support, although it is not ad-free. Sweeping new laws have come into force in the EU with the aim of regulating the competitive practices of the big tech companies, with the use of personal data for targeted advertising among the business models affected. Under the EU's Digital Markets Act legislation, Meta's platforms will have to gain explicit consent before tracking a user for advertising purposes. Companies within the scope of the legislation are already taking action. Over the past month EU users opening an app for the first time after a period of inactivity have been asked whether they wish to consent to services tracking their behaviour on their phone. The act follows the Digital Services Act, which came into force on 25 August and aims to curb online hate, child sexual abuse and disinformation, with the first laws ever governing online content.