

What happens when Facebook doesn't tell you a friend has died?

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By [Adi Robertson](#) | [@thedextriarchy](#) | Dec 19, 2017, 3:27pm EST



Yesterday, interface designer [Caryn Vainio wrote](#) about the unexpected death of a friend she kept in touch with through Facebook. Before his death, the friend posted a status update about being in the hospital. But Vainio hadn't seen the message, despite habitually reading every post on her feed in chronological order. Mutual friends didn't remember seeing the post, either. "Not only have I lost a friend, a bunch of us are horrified that we never knew, and we don't know if he KNEW we didn't know," [she wrote](#). "In the age of online relationships that social media companies claim to facilitate in a

positive way, this feels ... unacceptable.”

Vainio's story inverts a common complaint about Facebook accidentally [inserting painful memories](#) into people's feeds. In this case, she's saying, Facebook *didn't* surface a negative post at a time when it was vitally important. The platform guessed what a user wanted to do with some highly personal information, and it chose wrong. But do we really want a Facebook that consistently guesses right?

For those of you who work in social media, I need to share the story of my friend who died, and I didn't know because algorithms.

— Caryn Vainio (@Hellchick) [December 18, 2017](#)

It's hard to say why someone wouldn't see a Facebook post. Vainio believes that because her friend didn't post many status updates, Facebook considered his posts less important. [Detailed algorithm guides](#) say “relevancy” is determined by many factors, including how often you've interacted with a person, and how much engagement a post is getting. The “Most Recent” sorting method is supposed to reduce the influence of this algorithm, but even it doesn't make clear whether you're seeing all posts, or just a Facebook-chosen subset.

Facebook's promise is that you shouldn't need chronological sorting, because it will find and display the most important information. Along those lines, one person [told Vainio](#) that

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any post about good friends in medical trouble “warrants top billing on any feed.” In other words, Facebook ought to live up to its own rhetoric. But there's something very uncomfortable about treating Facebook like an important-life-event panopticon, determining what constitutes a close friend or

a personal emergency — and probably, if other social media algorithms are any indication, misclassifying a lot of posts in the process.

Vainio, along with many other people, suggests a more straightforward option with her thread: Facebook should just make it easy to see your entire feed of friends' posts, like Twitter does. But for lots of people, who might have hundreds of friends and "Liked" pages, there could be better options. There *is* value in tools that let us sort through information, from an old-fashioned gossip network to a series of Twitter lists. And Facebook offers its own Friend Lists, where you can add groups of people and specifically view their messages.

Facebook could choose to make those organizational features more prominent, and to be clearer about when it's curating posts. It could even let people flag posts about births, marriages, or major injuries as "life events" and offer a special feed for these updates, so it's easy to find them. Instead of trying to perfectly guess what users want, Facebook could spend more time asking. And in the process, it could stop rational concerns from turning into a full-fledged backlash against Facebook, by making the system less of a black box.

Facebook would relinquish some power and efficiency by relying more on user choices. But it would also avoid shouldering responsibilities that the platform can't and shouldn't handle. As Vainio says, Facebook can do a lot to supplement older methods of maintaining friendship. The best way to do that is to help users understand its decisions — instead of feeling like they're at the mercy of a mysterious algorithm.