

# Instagram Direct, Twitter DMs, and the Social/Communications Map

7-9 minutes

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Instagram today announced Instagram Direct. From the [Instagram blog](#):1

From a photo of your daily coffee to a sunrise shared from the top of a mountain hike, every Instagram moment contains something you find special —something you broadcast to your followers when you tap “share.”

There are, however, moments in our lives that we want to share, but that will be the most relevant only to a smaller group of people—an inside joke between friends captured on the go, a special family moment or even just one more photo of your new puppy. Instagram Direct helps you share these moments.

Two days ago, Twitter launched elevated and enhanced direct messages. From the [Twitter blog](#):

For the first time, you can share and view photos via direct message (DM) on your mobile phone. We’ve also introduced a new tab in the navigation bar that makes it easy to access DMs — they’re just one tap away from wherever you are on Twitter. You can also view photos in DMs on twitter.com.

You don’t need a framework to realize these are very similar products, and likely similar motivations. But frameworks do help to understand exactly why Facebook/Instagram and Twitter are moving in this direction, and so I’ve updated the [Social/Communications Map](#) in light of this announcement:

## The Social/Communications Map

First, a couple of updates to the map itself:

- I added a blue line extending from Facebook’s original location in Permanent/Symmetric to account for their shift over the years to a more Asymmetric model, at least in some respects. They really do play in both spaces; both, however, are public and permanent
- Each service has various letters that describe the functions of that service
  - T = asynchronous text messaging
  - P = photos
  - V = video
  - C = chat specifically, but it really stands for real-time communications of all types

The order matters: whatever is first was the primary means of communication for each service when it became large; others were added over time<sup>2</sup>

So, what just happened?

Both Twitter and Facebook/Instagram are making a mad dash for the (Private) Symmetric/Ephemeral space, currently owned by the “Big 5” messaging apps (WhatsApp, LINE, WeChat, Kakao, and Kik) and Snapchat.<sup>3</sup> A few observations flow from this framework:

### **The most precious commodity is user time**

When Facebook allegedly offered \$3 billion for Snapchat, there was the usual griping about Snapchat’s lack of revenue. As I [noted at the time](#), this completely misses the point. Revenue follows user attention, not the other way around; unlike money, there is a finite amount of minutes in the day, and a finite amount of users. To put it another way, attention is a zero sum game; every minute spent in Snapchat or LINE or WhatsApp is a minute *not* spent in Twitter or Facebook or Instagram.

### **Users care about people they know**

There is a lot to like about interest-based relationships that form the foundation of services like Twitter and Instagram. As I wrote a few months ago when [analyzing Twitter’s IPO](#):

Whereas Google is valuable because it knows what I want, when I want to get it, Facebook knows who I am, and who I know. Ideally, they also know who and what I like, but it’s a much weaker signal. Twitter, on the other hand, knows exactly what I like and what I’m interested in. It’s obvious both from what I tweet about, but especially based on who I follow.

If an advertiser wants to reach someone like me – and they certainly do, given my spending habits – Twitter is by far the best way to find me. Were Twitter able to consistently capture this signal and deliver effective ad units that caught their user’s attention, they could command some of the highest average revenues per user on the Internet.

The problem, though, is that the majority of users are clearly much more interested in *who* they know. That is why Facebook has always been an order of magnitude larger than Twitter, and it’s why user time is increasingly being spent on private messaging apps.

I sometimes feel that it’s on this point specifically that we geeks fall down in our analysis of social networks in particular. Many of us are so far removed in our interests and lifestyle from the places and people we grew up with that we under-appreciate the value “normals” place on their relationships with those they see in their day-to-day lives. At its core private messaging is communication with people we know, and in that light, the allure is easy to understand.

### **Messaging apps hit the sweet spot of mobile**

Private messaging apps are, in many ways, the full realization of the potential of mobile computing. The reason why the mobile opportunity is so much larger than the desktop one is not that it’s *better* or *easier*; rather, it’s *physical*. A phone is always with you: on the bus, in between class, on the can. The “addressable market of time” is exponentially bigger than that available on PC, and it’s this that dictates the opportunity.

When you combine this addressable market of time with the aforementioned desire to connect with people you know, you have a massive market for private messaging. That is why these apps are devouring user time, and why Twitter and Facebook/Instagram feel threatened.

### **Facebook is locked out of this market**

Once Snapchat rebuffed Facebook's offer, a competing product was only a matter of time. It's telling, though, that this was an Instagram announcement, not a Facebook one. As Facebook learned with its disastrous Poke product,<sup>4</sup> Facebook is locked into the permanent space of the Social/Communications Map. Users assume that what happens on Facebook will follow them forever, and that's rather limiting when it comes to ephemeral messaging.

Instagram, on the other hand, already sits in the more ephemeral space,<sup>5</sup> even though it's public. Facebook is clearly betting it will be easier for Instagram to sell privacy than it will be for Facebook to sell ephemerality.

### **I'm more bullish on Twitter DM's than I am on Instagram Direct**

Both Twitter and Instagram face the same challenge in moving into this space: both have been built on interest graphs, which by definition is more about broadcasting and less about conversation. Twitter though, given its text background and the fact that DM's are not a new product, has seeded many a relationship that naturally extends to messaging.

Instagram, on the other hand, is about images, literal projections from a user, and what text exists (i.e. comments) is about said projection, not the user. It seems highly likely that any relationships that exists in Instagram are duplicated elsewhere, whether that be in a private messaging app (for people the user knows) or on Twitter (for people in the user's interest graph). I don't really see a foundation for private messaging, nor an upside that is meaningfully differentiated from what already exists.

Both, though, face an uphill slog against the private messaging incumbents.

1. Which, strangely enough, [does not have a favicon](#). Seems sloppy [[↩](#)]
2. Facebook started with text, but it was photos that really caused the service to explode [[↩](#)]
3. Skype is there, but they're so far behind on mobile it's not even worth paying attention [[↩](#)]
4. Disastrous because the main outcome of Poke was to raise Snapchat awareness [[↩](#)]
5. I'm talking about perception, not reality [[↩](#)]