

Facebook Kills ‘Trending’ Topics, Tests Breaking News Label | The New York Times

By The Associated Press

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Facebook is shutting down its ill-fated “trending” news section after four years, a company executive told The Associated Press.

The company claims the tool is outdated and wasn’t popular. But the trending section also proved problematic in ways that would presage Facebook’s later problems with fake news, political balance and the limitations of artificial intelligence in managing the messy human world.

When Facebook launched “trending” in 2014 as a list of headlines to the side of the main news feed, it was a straightforward move to steal users from Twitter by giving them a quick look at the most popular news of the moment. It fit nicely into CEO Mark Zuckerberg’s pledge just a year earlier to make Facebook its users’ “personal newspaper.”

But that was then. “Fake news” wasn’t yet a popular term, and no foreign country had been accused of trying to influence the U.S. elections through social media, as Russia later would be. Trending news that year included the death of Robin Williams, Ebola and the World Cup.

Facebook is now testing new features, including a “breaking news” label that publishers can add to stories to distinguish them from other chatter. Facebook also wants to make local news more prominent.