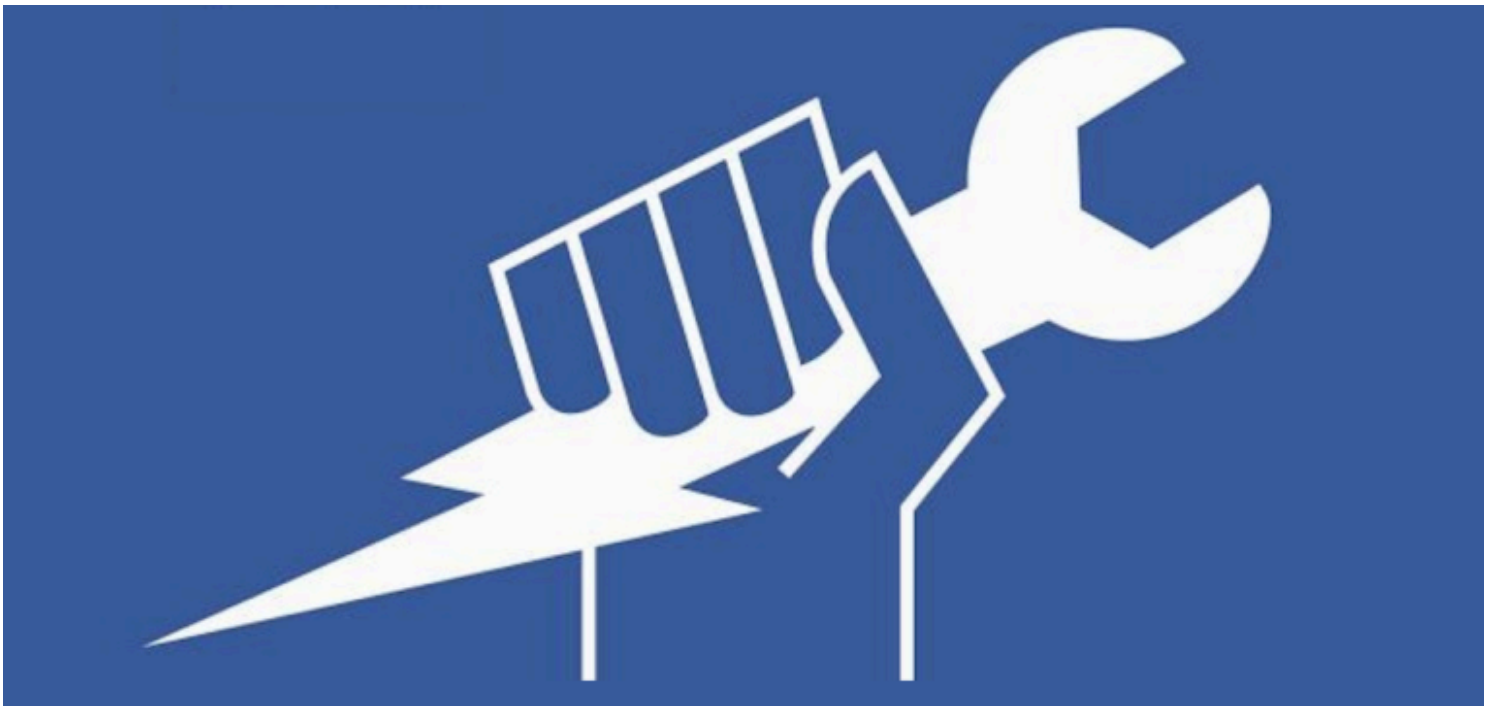
Advertisement



Advertisement

Facebook ends platform policy banning apps that copy its features

Josh Constine 3:09 PM PST · December 4, 2018

Facebook will now freely allow developers to build competitors to its features upon its own platform. Today Facebook announced it will drop Platform Policy section 4.1, which stipulates "Add something unique to the community. Don't replicate core functionality that Facebook already provides."

That policy felt pretty disingenuous given how aggressively Facebook has replicated everyone else's core functionality, from Snapchat to Twitter and beyond. Facebook had previously enforced the policy selectively to hurt competitors that had used its Find Friends or viral distribution features. Apps like Vine, Voxer, MessageMe, Phhhoto and more had been cut off from Facebook's platform for too closely replicating its video, messaging or GIF creation tools. Find Friends is a vital API that lets users find their Facebook friends within other apps.

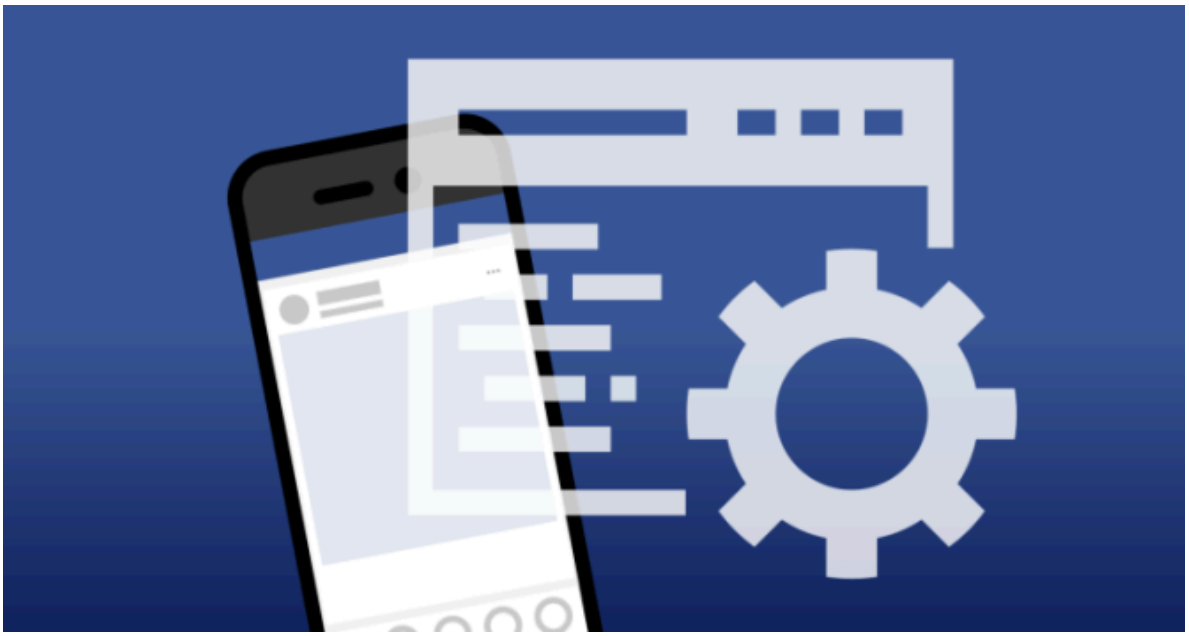
Advertisement

The move will significantly reduce the risk of building on the Facebook platform. It could also cast it in a better light in the eyes of regulators.

Advertisement

point. And by creating a more fair and open platform where developers can build without fear of straying too close to Facebook's history or road map, it could reinvigorate its developer ecosystem.

[Update 12/5/2018 1pm pacific: It's now clear that Facebook changed this policy in hopes of getting ahead of damaging PR caused by the UK Parliament releasing internal emails about Facebook's plans to cut off competitors in the past. In one email, when asked by a Facebook engineer if they should cut off Vine's access to Facebook data, Zuckerberg replies "Yup, go for it." Facebook has now formally announced the policy change allowing competing apps to be built in its platform.]



A Facebook spokesperson provided this statement to TechCrunch:

We built our developer platform years ago to pave the way for innovation in social apps and services. At that time we made the decision to restrict apps built on top of our platform that replicated our core functionality. These kind of restrictions are common across the tech industry with different platforms having their own variant including YouTube, Twitter, Snap and Apple. We regularly review our policies to ensure they are both protecting people's data and enabling useful services to be built on our platform for the benefit of the Facebook community. As part of our ongoing review we have decided that we will remove this out of date policy so that our platform remains as open as possible. We think this is the right

Advertisement

Tech and VC heavyweights join the Disrupt 2025 agenda

Netflix, ElevenLabs, Wayve, Sequoia Capital — just a few of the heavy hitters joining the Disrupt 2025 agenda. They're here to deliver the insights that fuel startup growth and sharpen your edge. Don't miss the 20th anniversary of TechCrunch Disrupt, and a chance to learn from the top voices in tech — grab your ticket now and save up to $675 before prices rise.

San Francisco | October 27-29, 2025

REGISTER NOW

The change comes after Facebook locked down parts of its platform in April for privacy and security reasons in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Diplomatically, Facebook said it didn't expect the change to impact its standing with regulators but it's open to answering their questions.

Facebook shouldn't block you from finding friends on competitors

Advertisement

Earlier in April, I wrote a report on how Facebook used Policy 4.1 to attack competitors it saw gaining traction. The article, "Facebook shouldn't block you from finding friends on competitors," advocated for Facebook to make its social graph more portable and interoperable so users could

Advertisement

The policy change will apply retroactively. Old apps that lost Find Friends or other functionality will be able to submit their app for review and, once approved, will regain access.

Friend lists still can't be exported in a truly interoperable way. But at least now Facebook has enacted the spirit of that call to action. Developers won't be in danger of losing access to that Find Friends Facebook API for treading in its path.

Below is an excerpt from our previous reporting on how Facebook has previously enforced Platform Policy 4.1 that before today's change was used to hamper competitors:

Voxer was one of the hottest messaging apps of 2012, climbing the charts and raising a $30 million round with its walkie-talkie-style functionality. In early January 2013, Facebook copied Voxer by adding voice messaging into Messenger. Two weeks later, Facebook cut off Voxer's Find Friends access. Voxer CEO Tom Katis told me at the time that Facebook stated his app with tens of millions of users was a "competitive social network" and wasn't sharing content back to Facebook. Katis told us he thought that was hypocritical. By June, Voxer had pivoted toward business communications, tumbling down the app charts and leaving Facebook Messenger to thrive.

MessageMe had a well-built chat app that was growing quickly after launching in 2013, posing a threat to Facebook Messenger. Shortly before reaching 1 million users, Facebook cut off MessageMe's Find Friends access. The app ended up selling for a paltry double-digit millions price tag to Yahoo before disintegrating.

Phhhoto and its fate show how Facebook's data protectionism encompasses Instagram. Phhhoto's app that let you shoot animated GIFs was growing popular. But soon after it hit 1 million users, it got cut off from Instagram's social graph in April 2015. Six months later, Instagram launched Boomerang, a blatant clone of Phhhoto. Within two years, Phhhoto shut down its app, blaming Facebook and Instagram. "We watched [Instagram CEO Kevin] Systrom and his product team quietly using PHHHOTO almost a year before Boomerang was released. So it

Advertisement

Vine had a real shot at being the future of short-form video. The day the Twitter-owned app launched, though, Facebook shut off Vine's Find Friends access. Vine let you share back to Facebook, and its six-second loops you shot in the app were a far cry from Facebook's heavyweight video file uploader. Still, Facebook cut it off, and by late 2016, Twitter announced it was shutting down Vine.

Topics: developers Facebook facebook platform Facebook Policy Media & Entertainment Policy



Josh Constine
Venture Partner

Josh Constine is a Venture Partner at ~$3 billion AUM early-stage VC fund SignalFire where he invests in pre-seed startups with a focus on consumer. He teaches startup pitch writing and fundraising strategy...

View Bio >

Advertisement

TC DISRUPT

Advertisement

Disrupt 2025. Amplify your reach, spark real connections, and lead the innovation charge. Secure your exhibit space before your competitor does.

Book Your Table

Most Popular

- Google is testing a vibe-coding app called Opal
- Amazon introduces a more affordable color screen Kindle
- Preston Thorpe is a software engineer at a San Francisco startup — he's also serving his 11th year in prison
- A new AI coding challenge just published its first results — and they aren't pretty
- OpenAI agreed to pay Oracle $30B a year for data center services
- 21-year-old MIT dropouts raise $32M at $300M valuation led by Insight
- Tesla opens retro-futuristic diner as Elon Musk hints at more locations

Loading the next article

Advertisement

TechCrunch

Staff

Contact Us

Advertise

Crunchboard Jobs

Site Map

Terms of Service

Privacy Policy

RSS Terms of Use

Figma

Anduril

Sharepoint

Grok

Astronomer CEO

Tech Layoffs

ChatGPT

© 2025 TechCrunch Media LLC.

Advertisement