

THE SICK PERVERSIONS THAT PAY FOR MARK ZUCKERBERG'S MANSIONS AND ISLANDS

Story by Heather Kelly

Kelly Takasu never wanted to see AI-generated videos of older women breastfeeding half-panda, half-human babies.

The 36-year-old mom in Los Angeles uses Instagram for helpful parenting advice and cooking videos. But after she sought out breastfeeding content, the app got the wrong idea about her.

“I noticed one day I had a Reels suggestion: An older woman who had a bunch of babies around her. I must have looked at it for too long,” said Takasu.

Instagram, which is owned by Meta, moved on to show Takasu a video of an older couple on a bed surrounded by about 20 infants, then elderly women nursing, and eventually women of various ages nursing and giving birth to animal-human hybrid babies. She ended up taking a break from the app just to avoid seeing the AI posts.

As other social media sites have followed TikTok's lead and shifted to opaque algorithmic-based feeds, users are getting increasing flashes of disturbing or strange, unwanted content. It's not just AI oddities, but real violence, sex and rage-baiting politics — content that has proved to be engaging, but has mostly thrived out of sight of people who don't seek it. The increasing breakthroughs have become a jarring peek into another side of these social media apps used by tweens, teens and adults.

Violent posts, specifically — including shock or gore videos — are part of the DNA of the internet and have been around for decades on dedicated sites, deep in online forums or on more mainstream locations such as Reddit and YouTube. They have a fan base, but the shock value makes them engaging even for people who don't seek them out.

Earlier this month, Instagram users around the world, including minors on teen accounts with parental settings turned on, saw an unwanted surge in violent, sexual and extreme content in their Reels feeds over the course of a day.

“He saw assassinations — almost like terrorism. He saw a woman give birth, he saw just dead bodies, that kind of stuff,” said Courtney, the parent of 17-year-old a high-schooler in Virginia who got the content in his feed. “I feel like it was an attack of some sort on their minds, they’re still very impressionable.”

Courtney, who spoke on the condition that her last name not be used to protect the privacy of her son, had waited until recently to even let him have Instagram over concerns about inappropriate content.

Other Instagram users also reported seeing videos of surgeries, people appearing to die in accidents, shootings and nudity. Many of the videos are still up on the social media app, some on popular accounts with thousands of followers. The content often occupies a gray area online and is not extreme enough to be removed under Meta’s community standards.

“We fixed an error that caused some users to temporarily see content in their Instagram Reels feeds that should not have been recommended. We apologize for the mistake,” Meta spokesperson Erin Logan said in a statement.

Meta made a number of deliberate changes recently that affect what people see on their Instagram and Facebook feeds. It recently ended its fact-checking program, and it loosened rules around negative speech about issues such as immigration and transgender rights. It also started allowing more political posts back on its apps.

Instagram specifically has long wanted to be a go-to space for minors to follow friends, influencers and meme accounts, but without fully severing their experience from the vast collection of videos it hosts.

In September, the app added stricter default settings for new users under 18, including turning on what it said was its strongest restrictions for violent and sexual content. That setting makes it more difficult for teens to come across inappropriate content, though the account owner can change the setting themselves to be less strict.

For Courtney’s son’s account, those settings were turned all the way on, she said.

This isn't the first time Instagram has come under fire for controversial content. In 2021, whistleblower Frances Haugen alleged that internal research showed Meta knew its content was harmful to teenagers, specifically contributing to body-image issues.

Taylor Little, a 22-year-old from Colorado Springs, is a plaintiff in a large lawsuit against Meta that alleges the company knowingly harmed minors. Little was 12 years old when they first joined Instagram by pretending to be 16, and was drawn into a world of content about self-harm and disordered eating and suicidal ideation. The content started as suggested posts and on the Explore page.

“It got to the point where that was all I was seeing,” said Little. “I developed an eating disorder very quickly, was self-harming every day.”

Little is still recovering and has removed all social media apps from their smartphone.

“We know what keeps people engaged is scandalous, toxic, hateful and salacious content,” said Sandra Wachter, professor of technology and regulation at the University of Oxford. “Good news doesn't sell, or at least not as well, and so recommendation systems learn these user preferences and will increasingly serve this problematic content.”

Under its current rules, Meta says it bans most videos showing extremely graphic or violent content such as videos of burning or charred people, live streams of people being put to death by the justice system or dismembered bodies or exposed organs outside medical contexts.

Dark and strange content is slipping through social media's cracks

Those rules leave room for other shocking videos or controversial videos like graphic footage of medical procedures or content that could encourage eating disorders. Instead of removing them, Instagram hides some — but not all — behind its Sensitive Content warning screen. It alerts users that the content could be graphic or violent, or that “some people may find it upsetting.” Videos behind this screen are hidden for minor accounts.

It's not just violence and sex, but outright weirdness slipping into feeds. Artificial intelligence tools have made it possible to quickly and cheaply generate shock content. The goal is to create images and videos so strange that people feel compelled to stop and look and even comment, though younger users may be more likely to know these are fake.

YouTube is still the most popular social media site for teenagers, according to Pew Research, followed by TikTok and Instagram. Many of these types of videos can be found on YouTube, without needing to log in, and are likewise allowed on the platform. However, they were not easy to find on TikTok, which has stronger filters in place for violence and sexual content for all users.

Adults are increasingly put off by the content, too.

Michael Bock, a 31-year-old business owner in Oregon, usually sees content about bikes and dogs on his Instagram feed. He was one of the users who was fed violent content last week. When he opened the app, he first saw street fights, but as he scrolled the videos, they got even more "horrific." Someone shot by police, a person getting hit by a car and flying into the air.

"I don't think I can in good conscience contribute to a platform that I firmly believe is harming users," said Bock, who uses Instagram for his business.

These platforms largely put the onus on individuals to avoid content they don't want to see, and darker feeds are often blamed on the person pausing too long on things they shouldn't. On Meta apps, people can try "snoozing" suggested posts for a month or only going to the feeds of accounts they follow. In January, Instagram released a long-promised "reset" button for U.S. users to help anyone rest the algorithm when they see posts that are off topic or even disturbing. TikTok has a similar feature.

Takasu used Instagram's new reset button and isn't seeing the animal births anymore. She says she's being more cautious about what she looks at to avoid her feed going off the rails again. Even if that means looking at fewer posts overall.

"I definitely use it less," said Takasu.

The Digital Dilemma©The Digital Dilemma (image credits: unsplash)

In today's fast-paced digital world, social media has become more than just a pastime. It has woven itself into the fabric of our daily lives.

While it offers numerous advantages, there's a growing concern over its potential to become addictive. The question arises: Is the blame to be placed on the tech companies that design these platforms or on the users who engage with them?

This debate isn't just about pointing fingers; it's about understanding the dynamics of our interactions with technology. With mental health concerns on the rise, particularly among the youth, it's crucial to delve deep into this issue.

The answer might not be as clear-cut as it seems.