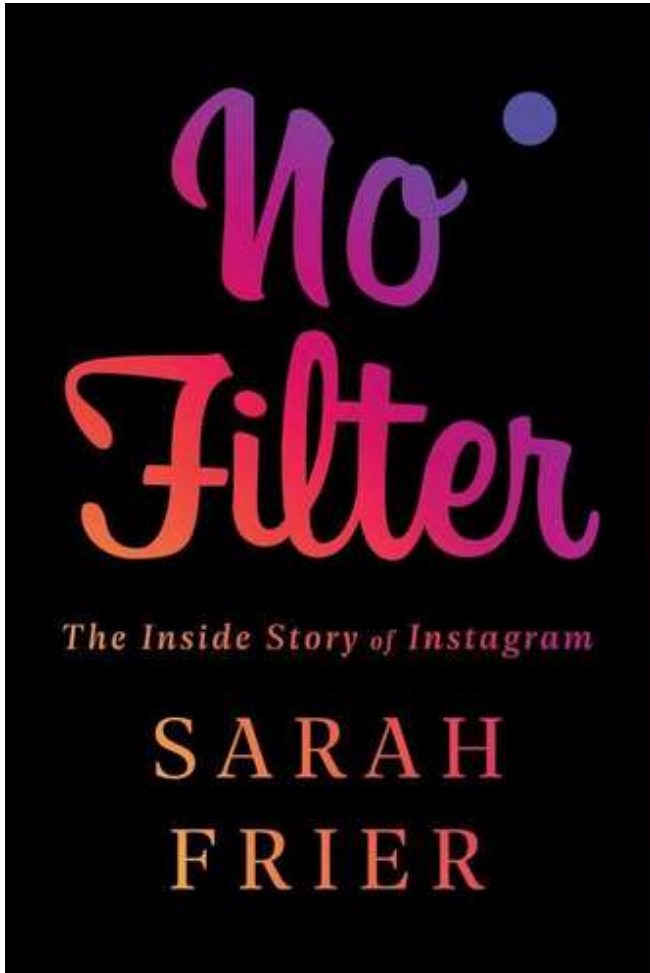


IN-DEPTH KNOWLEDGE

Author details Instagram's phenomenal growth

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No Filter: The Inside Story of Instagram by Sarah Frier. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020, 352 pages, \$28 (hardcover).



“After being acquired by Facebook, in a deal that shocked the industry, Instagram became the first-ever mobile app to achieve a \$1 billion valuation,” Sarah Frier explains near the beginning of “No Filter: The Inside Story of Instagram,” her investigation into the meteoric rise of a social media behemoth. “Instagram’s success was unlikely, as is that of all startups. When it launched in 2010, the app didn’t start out as a popularity contest, or as an avenue for personal branding. It caught on because it was a place to see into someone else’s life and how they experienced it through their phone’s camera.”

“As Instagram grew, its founders tried to preserve this sense of discovery,” she continues a little later. “They became aesthetic tastemakers for a generation, responsible for imbuing us with a reverence for visually arresting experiences that we can share with our friends and strangers for the reward of likes and followers. They invested heavily in an editorial strategy to show how they intended Instagram to be used: as a venue for different perspectives and creativity. They eschewed some of Facebook’s spammy tactics, like sending

excessive notifications and emails. They resisted adding tools that would have helped fuel the influencer economy. You can’t add a hyperlink in a post, for example, or share someone’s post the way you can on Facebook.”

OK. When many readers want to know more about a particular subject, they instinctively go to Google (or their preferred search engine) and get a condescended version of the insights they are looking for in a neatly prepackaged presentation. Call me old school if you want, but when I want to understand something, I typically make a pilgrimage to Barnes & Noble and rummage around for a book that will give me the more in-depth knowledge I crave.

“No Filter” consists of an introduction, 12 relatively-concise yet surprisingly-inclusive chapters and an epilogue (that I found especially interesting) dissecting the consequences of Instagram’s acquisition by Facebook. The entire treatise is an insider’s view of the behind-the-scenes architecture that few users are aware of or really even care about. I found Frier’s description of what happened when the app’s ownership changed hands to be both instructive and cautionary.

Initially introduced in 2010, Instagram quickly became a way of life for many of its users. Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, its co-founders, were able to marry art and technology in a unique and

totally original synthesis that hooked a large portion of the public on visual storytelling. The app literally changed the way we shop, eat, travel and communicate – and launched or significantly enhanced the careers of countless artisans, fashionistas, influencers and other celebrities. But as is always the case with any disruption to the existing order, there was a downside. Frier pulls the curtain back on the tumultuous relationship between Instagram and Mark Zuckerberg, who eventually came to see the app as a threat to Facebook’s dominance and continued growth.

Most readers are probably unaware of the volatility that often characterized the relationship between Instagram and Facebook. Eighteen months after its launch, Systrom and Krieger made the gut-wrenching decision to sell Instagram to Facebook for an unprecedented \$1 billion – but they stayed on to manage the platform. Shortly after the acquisition, Instagram had more than a billion users using the app on a regular basis. The tensions between Facebook and Instagram continued to mount due to philosophical and business direction differences, ultimately resulting in the departure of the Instagram founders in 2018. In many respects, “No Filter” is simply a reaffirmation of the intrinsic consistency of human nature. The mechanisms may have changed, but the underlying motives that have been endemic to our species since the dawn of time remain solidly entrenched in our psyche.

There are several lessons here that anyone interested in generating revenue from social media needs to study carefully. Consider the following from “The Other Fake News,” the 11th chapter and one of my personal favorites as it deals with the app’s impact on the 2016 presidential election. In retrospect, this was a pivotal time for the app, although those who were immersed in the moment seemed completely oblivious to the unintended consequences that have defined virtually every commercial venture on the Internet since its inception.

“After Instagram changed its feed using algorithmic ordering in June 2016, gradually anyone using the app for promotional purposes realized that they would need to completely revise their strategy,” Frier notes. “The new feed order – which prioritized users’ closest relationships instead of the newest posts – meant influencers and businesses could no longer grow their followings by simply posting often. It was as if every fledging Instagram-based business had the same job under a new, mysterious boss, with no insight as to why their performance was suffering. Some failed by applying the same strategies they had used in 2015.

“Others, via various memes and pleas to their followers, accused Instagram of robbing them of growth that was rightfully theirs,” the author continues. “They were desperate because while the accounts were digital, they were backing real-life jobs and businesses. One of the first prominent Instagram-born companies, Poler, an outdoor gear designer known for making sleeping bags people could walk around in (#campvibes #vanlife #blessed), eventually declared bankruptcy after failing to meet its projected growth targets.”

A technology writer for Bloomberg News, Frier is considered an expert on social media and its still-evolving relationship to society. Her specialty is the business side of the industry; her reporting on Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter and Instagram have earned her several accolades within the journalism community. She is a frequent contributor to Bloomberg Businessweek and Bloomberg TV; this is her first book.

“No Filter” constitutes one of the first serious attempts to explain Instagram’s phenomenal growth and its overwhelming cultural impact. The primer is based on interviews with current and former employees and executives, as well as celebrities and influencers. Honestly, I found this one exceptionally riveting on a number of levels. Frier’s writing style is equal parts technology, biography, enterprise, culture and story-telling – and she succeeds on all five fronts. Highly recommended.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.