TECHNOLOGY

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What Is Facebook 'Home'? .

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The new software is more than a Facebook app—think of it as a skin built around the Android platform. Home replaces the smartphone's typical cover screen and instead populates Facebook content, such as photos, messages and status updates. Home still provides access to apps on the phone, but the experience is centered around Facebook.

How is Home different from the standard Android interface?

It boils down to two main features: "Cover Feed and "Chat Heads."

Cover Feed is the screen that appears when a user turns on the phone. Rather than simply showing a clock and a background photo, the Cover Feed displays photos and their captions from Facebook friends. Messages and status updates float on top. Users can swipe through the photos, double tap to "like" them or add comments.

Chat Heads is what Facebook calls its messaging interface. When a user receives an inbound message from someone—whether a text message of a Facebook message—the sender's Facebook profile photo appears on the screen in a small circle. Users can tap the photo to chat with that person, even when browsing the Web or in another app. More than one "chat head" can appear on the screen. The idea is to provide a simpler messaging experience without having to switch back and forth between apps.

Home also comes with a launch menu populated with a users' favorite apps and basic Android apps. Key Facebook tools, such as photos, status updates and check-ins, are also embedded at the top of the launcher as buttons.

Is this the "Facebook Phone?"

Yes and no. Facebook Home is essentially a retooling of the entire smartphone experience on Android devices. In that sense, this is Facebook's version of a "phone"—but at the same time, Facebook hasn't built actual hardware.

Android is, at its core, designed to be tinkered with and heavily modified. For example, developers can completely replace the digital keyboard on the phone.

Here is how Corey Ondrejka, Facebook's vice president of engineering, described it at Thursday's event: "Android was built from the ground up to be open…Software running on Android can profoundly change the user experience, add new features, and bring new things to users."

How do I get Facebook Home?

Home will be available for download on April 12 in the Google Play store. However, it will initially only be available for certain Android phones: the HTC One X, HTC One X+ and forthcoming HTC One, as well as Samsung Electronics Co.'s 005930.SE -0.07% Galaxy S III, Galaxy Note II and the forthcoming Galaxy S 4.

HTC is also launching a new phone, the HTC First, which comes optimized with Home. The phone will sell for $99.99 at AT&T Inc. T -0.53% stores starting April 12.

Facebook said Home will eventually support more Android devices, including tablets. A slide at Thursday's event showed additional handset makers and partners including Sony Corp., 6758.TO +0.45%Qualcomm Inc., QCOM -1.05% Huawei Technologies Inc. and Lenovo Group Ltd. 0992.HK -3.67%

—Matthew Lynley

and Evelyn M. Rusli