Clear and Present Danger: Facebook’s Threats to the United States

This report is a compilation of recent research and reporting exposing Facebook’s continued failures to curb the spread of extremist content as well as election and health disinformation on its platform. These failures threaten our collective well-being, the state of our democracy, and public health in the midst of a devastating pandemic. Taken together, this research amounts to a damning indictment of Facebook and an urgent case for corrective action.

In particular, this report documents Facebook’s failures in three key areas of urgent concern to the American public:

- The spread of hate and incitements to violence
- The integrity of the 2020 presidential election
- Disinformation about the Covid pandemic and vaccines

Introduction

The 21st century has been marked by a clear decline in bipartisanship and civility in the political sphere, and a clear increase in intolerance, violent behavior, and conspiracy theories across our society. These trends have accompanied and—in significant part—been driven by hostile activity on social media platforms, Facebook chief among them.

Through its content recommendation algorithms, Facebook pushed its users to extreme content that excites and engages people far more than moderate, informed, or even-handed information. This makes the platform ripe for exploitation by malevolent actors, who exploit Facebook’s design features to promote violence, misinformation, and political extremism.

Lacking the will to shut down these actors, Facebook has allowed itself to become a tool for individuals and groups with a stake in harming our democracy and our society. This became brutally evident in 2020, as the platform hosted threats of violence and insurrection, deadly misinformation about Covid-19, and the manipulation of the democratic process.

America was founded on the principle of free speech and the open exchange of ideas. But, as Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, “the question in every case is whether … words used are used in such circumstances and are of such a nature as to create a clear and present danger that they will bring about … substantive evils.”

When the public square is poisoned with lies and hatred, free speech is the first casualty and all Americans, and our Union, are at risk. Facebook, now a prominent
corner of our public square and major facilitator and beneficiary of our public debate, claims to recognize this, and to be acting aggressively and effectively to clear its platform of this poison. Facebook has not done so, and its actions during this troubled year underscore its failure.
Violence and Hate

Numerous Tech Transparency Project (TTP) reports have found that Facebook’s efforts to purge its platform of groups and individuals spreading hate and advocating violence have been woefully inadequate. Facebook appears to be motivated more by profit and fear of bad publicity than by an actual desire to stop the use of Facebook as a fundraising, organizing, and misinformation tool of extremists.

- Facebook Engineer Ashok Chandwaney, in a resignation letter, condemned Facebook’s tolerance of hate in pursuit of profit, saying, “I can no longer stomach contributing to an organization that is profiting off hate in the US and globally.” The letter said “Facebook hasn’t found the business value to be had in aggressively pursuing the existing credible strategies to remove hate from the platform - despite pressure from civil society, our own employees, our own consultants, and our own customers via the boycott.”

- Facebook’s algorithm amplifies content that invokes an emotional response, rewarding sensational and divisive content and contributing to polarization. Despite various announced crackdowns on extremist content, Facebook’s algorithm continues to suggest militia, boogaloo, and white supremacy pages to users. Facebook claimed it would stop recommending political groups ahead of the election, but on November 1, the Tech Transparency Project was still seeing “Trump Army” groups served up as suggested content.

- An internal Facebook report that showed that 64% of people that joined extremist communities on Facebook did so as a result of Facebook recommending it to them.

Facebook fuels white supremacy

- One TTP study found that, of 221 white supremacist organizations designated as “hate groups” by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), 51%, or 113 groups, had a presence on Facebook. In addition to the hate groups designated by SPLC and ADL, TTP found white supremacist organizations that Facebook had explicitly banned in the past. One known as “Right Wing Death Squad” had at least three Pages on Facebook, all created prior to Facebook’s ban.

- A report by Institute for Strategic Dialogue and Politico found that the dominant disinformation narrative regarding Black Lives Matter sought to depict it as a predominantly violent protest movement. Often, this is done by pairing BLM with antifa, referring to the two groups interchangeably and describing demonstrators as “rioters,” “terrorists” and “thugs.”
A year after a gunman used Facebook to livestream a mass shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand, that left 51 people dead, TTP found that videos of the massacre could still be found on Facebook, highlighting the company’s inability, or unwillingness, to rid its platform of gruesomely violent and hateful content, even in cases that have attracted intense global scrutiny.

Facebook is a tool of the boogaloo/militia movement

Facebook’s efforts to ban violent right-wing extremists can best be characterized as too little, too late.

- In October, TTP found at least 53 Facebook militia pages and groups were still active on the platform. Some of them even have the word “militia” in their name, two months after Facebook announced a crackdown on “militarized social movements.” TTP also discovered that material on bomb-making and other violent activity continued to circulate across boogaloo groups on Facebook.

- Facebook for years allowed militia groups to run recruitment ads on the platform and profited from the activity. Some of the ads reached tens of thousands of users. As recently as October, Facebook hosted an ad encouraging militias to attend a “freedom march” in cities across the country just days before the election.
A review by TTP found **125 Facebook groups devoted to the “boogaloo,”** the term that far-right extremists use to describe a coming civil war. More than 60% of the groups were created between February and April 2020, as Covid-19 quarantines took hold in the U.S., and attracted tens of thousands of members over a 30-day period. In several private boogaloo Facebook groups that TTP was able to access, members discussed tactical strategies, combat medicine, and weapons, including how to develop explosives and the merits of using flame throwers.

In May, **three members of private “boogaloo” Facebook groups previously identified in April by TTP were arrested** on terrorism-related charges in what authorities say was an effort to spark a second civil war. The arrests were carried out as the men were allegedly preparing bottles with gasoline and rags on their way to a Las Vegas Black Lives Matter protest on May 30.

An **August study by the Tech Transparency Project** identified 110 Facebook boogaloo groups that had been created since June 30, when Facebook announced it was banning a “violent” boogaloo network. Many evaded Facebook’s crackdown simply by rebranding themselves. Some of the newer groups had amassed more than 1,000 members in less than two months.
Material on bomb-making and other violent activity was still circulating across those boogaloo groups on Facebook.

- The Institute for Strategic Dialogue found that in the two weeks before the presidential election, organized militia movements continued to have a presence on Facebook, largely through the use of closed Facebook groups. Many groups hosted content promoting the idea of a coming “civil war.” Comment threads in these groups hosted explicit calls to violence against target minority communities and political “enemies,” including Democratic voters, black citizens and left-wing protestors and activist groups.

- Members of “patriot” and pro-Trump Facebook pages have posted explicit threats to kill public officials and racial justice protesters. The threats to shoot prominent Democrats like Rep. Ilhan Omar remained active as of November 12, despite a TTP report in October that highlighted them.
• Even *after* the [plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Whitmer](https://example.com) was revealed, militia groups in Michigan continued to thrive on Facebook.

• Before they were taken down, more than 40 QAnon Facebook groups featured posts calling for the [execution of George Soros](https://example.com).

Extremist pro-gun websites stoked fears of [mass violence from the left after the election](https://example.com), asking “are you ready?”

![Facebook post with image of soldier with rifle and text: “YOU DON’T NEED 30 ROUNDS TO HUNT.” TRUE...BUT OUR FOREFATHERS DIDN’T WRITE THE 2ND AMENDMENT BECAUSE THE DEER WERE COMING.”](https://example.com)
The 2020 Election

Despite repeated, unsubstantiated claims of Facebook’s bias against Republicans and conservatives, the 2020 presidential election campaign and its aftermath revealed Facebook to be not only a highly effective resource for conservative candidates, but an endless channel of disinformation and lies designed to discourage turnout, promote the Trump campaign, and spread baseless allegations of electoral fraud to undermine the results.

Pre-election

Voter suppression was an explicit strategy of the Trump campaign and an ongoing theme in conservative social media. Efforts to discourage Democratic voter turnout, through baseless predictions of fraud or allegations that ballots would be mishandled, were a constant in the months leading up to the election. Despite Facebook’s promises to prevent a repeat of its failures in 2016, its efforts were inadequate:

- Two days before the election, Media Matters found that Facebook had allowed 80 ads with voting misinformation to run, despite Facebook’s new policy that it “won’t allow ads with content that seeks to delegitimize the outcome of an election.” Almost all of the ads were run by right-wing groups or individuals, and the ads collectively earned over two million impressions.

- Another study from earlier this year found that Facebook let the Trump campaign publish at least 529 ads with false claims of voter fraud.

- A small but influential cluster of accounts belonging to right-wing activists and media figures are responsible for promoting narratives claiming voter fraud is widespread in the US. The favored tactic in promoting this disinformation narrative involves highlighting local reports of alleged voter fraud and framing them as indicative of large-scale corruption in the national voting process. This is occurring despite FBI Director Christopher Wray’s comments that the agency has not seen “any kind of coordinated national voter fraud effort ... by mail or otherwise.” In the aftermath of the election, members of federal government’s Election Infrastructure Government Coordinating Council (GCC) Executive Committee and Election Infrastructure Sector Coordinating Council pronounced the election “the most secure election in American history.”
• Members of private QAnon Facebook groups and anti-mask Facebook groups used the platform to organize as poll watchers or election officials and encouraged other members to volunteer.

• Variations on misinformation already marked false by Facebook slipped through Facebook's detection system and were viewed millions of times ahead of the election, according to Avaaz. A week after alerting Facebook in October, only 7% of these posts were labelled or removed.

• Despite Facebook's decision to apply "strong warning labels" to fact-checked content and reduce its distribution, the Avaaz investigation found that 42% of the fact-checked misinformation content remained on the platform without a label, including content alleging that Joe Biden is a pedophile.

• In the countdown to Election Day, Facebook allowed prominent conservative agitators and allies of President Trump to repeatedly violate Facebook's own guidelines regarding the sharing of misinformation. At times, accounts have been protected against more severe enforcement because of concern about the perception of anti-conservative bias.

• Facebook failed to label and publicly index all election ads despite promises to do so. Two weeks before the election, an analysis of political ads on Facebook by NYU's Ad Observatory revealed many election ads did not carry required disclosures identifying who paid for them. These ads also failed to appear in
Facebook’s public Ad Library. In response to the project’s public disclosure of these issues, Facebook sent a letter demanding the Ad Observatory cease operations and delete all its information.

Manipulation and Disinformation Continued After Election Day

Donald Trump, his family and supporters have turned to Facebook over and over again to spread lies and disinformation to undermine the election results and to encourage supporters to reject the peaceful transfer of power to President-elect Biden. As a result, according to a Politico/Morning Consult poll, 7 in 10 Republicans say the election was "not free and fair."

- Virtually every posting on President Trump’s Facebook page since the election contains false or misleading information about the election results, ballot counting and fraud, and have been flagged—but not removed—by Facebook.

- In the first week after the election, Donald Trump was responsible for the three most-shared false or misleading posts on Facebook. Similarly, three of the top 10 news stories on Facebook were links to Breitbart News reports shared by the president. A fourth is to the right-wing site, Newsmax, calling Pennsylvania’s election a "constitutional travesty."

- An analysis of post-election conversations in social media, broadcast, traditional and online media by the intelligence platform Zignal Labs reported more than 4.6 million mentions of voter fraud in the week after Election Day.

- The spread of false voter fraud claims and conspiracy theories in the days after the election accompanied a 45% jump in Facebook’s own internal ‘probable violence and incitement’ metric, which is based on Facebook activity that can foster unrest.

- Trump supporters have been using Facebook to organize demonstrations including an attack on Detroit’s TCF Center, which was being used as an absentee ballot processing location, and the “Stop the Steal” Rally in Washington, D.C.

- Disinformation that went viral included claims of dead people voting and ballots being burned; a false map of Michigan that purported to show an unexplained surge of 138,000 ballots for Biden (a claim tweeted by President Trump); and rumors that Sharpie pens could invalidate Arizona ballots.

- Eric Trump has become a “superspreader” of misinformation to his 4.5 million social media followers, sharing the baseless Sharpie rumors; claims that Trump
votes were being burned; and rumors about manipulation of voter turnout statistics in Wisconsin.

- Facebook banned the group “Stop the Steal” for “worrying calls for violence,” but not until it had reached 360,00 members. In the wake of the ban, groups using similar names and similar language have begun appearing on Facebook. By the following Friday, two more "Stop the Steal" Groups took its place, amassing tens of thousands of members. They occupied the top two spots on a list of Groups with the most interactions on Facebook that day.
The Pandemic

With the arrival of Covid-19 in the United States, Facebook proved a fertile environment for misinformation and conspiracy theories, uniting right-wing extremists, anti-vaxxers and conspiracy theorists in a widespread effort to undermine the U.S. response to a pandemic that has killed 250,000 Americans.

- Global health misinformation-spreading networks spanning at least five countries generated an estimated 3.8 billion views on Facebook in the last year. Content from the top 10 websites spreading health misinformation had almost four times as many estimated views on Facebook as equivalent content from the websites of 10 leading health institutions, such as the World Health Organization.
• In late October, a NewsGuard report catalogued 34 Facebook pages that were “super-spreaders” of misinformation about the development of a Covid-19 vaccine, with a total of 14,139,288 likes.

• Right-wing news and information sites The Daily Wire and The Western Journal, with 40 affiliated Facebook pages between them, spread right-wing spin about coronavirus to the news feeds of the millions of accounts that like their pages.

• The three most prominent U.S. anti-vaccination organizations—National Vaccine Information Center, Children’s Health Defense, and Informed Consent Action Network—are using Facebook and other major social media platforms to lay the groundwork for widespread coronavirus vaccine rejection.

• Anti-mask misinformation continues to proliferate on Facebook, as a June Media Matters study found. A September study found that Facebook was allowing a campaign to ditch face masks en masse to spread.
• According to Digital Trends, the Covid conspiracy video Plandemic had more than 1.8 million views and 150,000 shares on Facebook. It was also viewed millions of times on YouTube before being removed for violating Covid-19 misinformation policies.