

Facebook is a Menace of Unknown Scale and Proportion.

In late September this year, numerous Black-centered student organizations received an anti-Black racist email sent by an unknown sender. In a letter to the UMass campus community, Vice Chancellor Nefertiti Walker also shared information about other reported acts of hate and violence directed towards Black students that occurred around the same time. In addition to the work that the UMass community must do to confront racism and other forms of hate, events from around the world in the past few years have made clear the structural issues that we must address as a society.

Racism, sexism, homophobia, and misinformation have thrived online since the emergence of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. These websites allow us to connect with friends and family, discover new communities, and share what is going on in our lives. However, these same tools also amplify harmful content to reach more people than ever before and create spaces for individuals with hateful beliefs to congregate.

Although most social media users could probably name a relative or high school classmate who posts or reshapes hateful content online, we have no idea how prevalent this kind of content is. What we do know is this: social media companies are withholding information about their platforms and actively hampering efforts to study them. We would know how many views, clicks, and the engagement that hateful content gets online if platforms simply told us. We would know the extent of the problem if companies released data on the frequency of hateful content relative to their entire platforms. With these data, we could keep these platforms, which play an increasingly outsized role in our day-to-day lives, accountable and safe.

Facebook releases some data about their platforms, but historically, they [have had data go missing](#) or [excluded half of the users in the United States](#), so some efforts to keep the platform accountable have taken data collection into their own hands. The NYU Ad Observatory project is studying political advertising on Facebook, specifically who is paying for the ads and who the targets of the ads are. The data for the project comes from volunteers that install a browser plug-in to collect information about the advertisements that they see on Facebook. With the collected data, the Ad Observatory project found multiple advertisements days before the 2020 election without disclosures about the buyer of the advertisement. Their data also revealed that pages with misinformation got six times more engagement than pages with correct information.

In August 2021, a year into the project, the company disabled the Facebook accounts of the NYU researchers working on the Ad Observatory project, blocked their access to the website, and effectively halted their data collection operation. Facebook claimed that the project's collection of voluntarily contributed, personally unidentifiable data about advertisement targeting violated the privacy of Facebook users (with users referring to the advertisers that purchased the advertisements). The research community and multiple U.S. senators have called for Facebook to be more transparent and allow one of the few academic research projects on the world's largest social media platform to continue to hold the company accountable.

CrowdTangle is one of the company's own attempts at accountability that has had mixed results. The tool makes data on post engagement available to researchers, which quickly revealed that the most engaging posts in the United States were consistently from right-wing pages like Ben Shapiro, Breitbart, and Dan Bongino. Executives at Facebook, worried about CrowdTangle data revealing the platform's preference for sensationalist right-wing content, discredited the data by claiming that conclusions from post engagement data were misleading, and that post views would be the correct dataset from which to make conclusions. Rather than releasing post view data to researchers through CrowdTangle, Facebook decided that they would compile a report on the Facebook posts with the most views in the first three months of 2020 and disband the team working on CrowdTangle.

What did this report reveal? The most viewed link on Facebook during that period was to an article that claimed a Florida doctor died because of a coronavirus vaccine. Other results in the report were, unsurprisingly, already known through analysis of CrowdTangle's engagement data. However, for Facebook, this data was too damning to release, so they kept the report from the public until they were forced to publish it when it was leaked to the press.

Frustratingly, Facebook recognizes the dangers of their platforms, as shown by the leak of the "Facebook Files" in September 2021, yet they continue to put effort into restricting and reducing accountability. The company's leaked internal research supports what is already known about their products: that Facebook spreads misinformation and makes people angrier and more polarized. Frances Haugen, the whistleblower and former Facebook product manager responsible for the leaks, testified to various congressional committees in October on the contents of the internal documents and her experience working at Facebook. It is possible that her efforts will catalyze the legislative process, but until there are laws in place to regulate social media platforms, keeping these platforms accountable will depend on researchers, users, and citizens.

Ongoing accountability efforts include the [Citizen Browser Project](#) from The Markup, which is collecting data on the content that their 1,200 volunteers see Facebook and YouTube; Jason Baumgartner's [Pushshift](#), which is the only complete searchable archive of Reddit; and [Media Cloud](#), which enables researchers to study language use in traditional media and public Facebook posts. All three of these tools, as well as others not listed here, have given people the data needed to call out social media platforms and hold them accountable to their promises.

It is said that sunlight is the best disinfectant. Only by shining a light can we thwart hateful and racist activities here at UMass, and everywhere else for that matter.