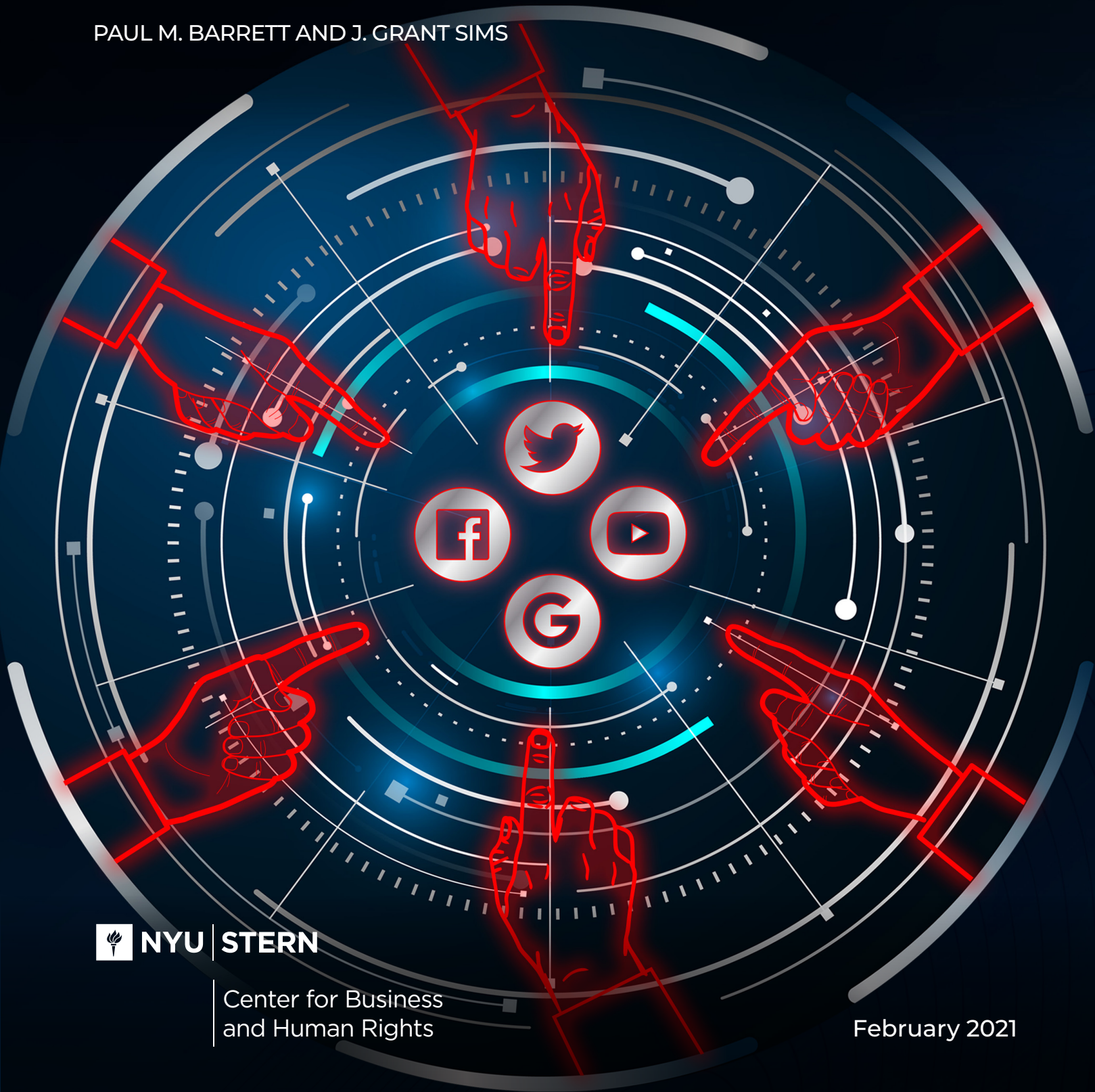


False Accusation:

The Unfounded Claim that Social Media Companies
Censor Conservatives

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Executive Summary

“
The claim of anti-conservative animus on the part of social media companies is itself a form of disinformation: a falsehood with no reliable evidence to support it.”

Conservatives commonly accuse the major social media companies of censoring the political right. In response to Twitter’s decision on January 8, 2021, to exclude him from the platform, then-President Donald Trump accused the company of “banning free speech” in coordination with “the Democrats and Radical Left.”

Two days earlier, Trump had included the ideological bias claim in an incendiary address to supporters, some of whom then participated in a riot inside the U.S. Capitol. “The radical left tries to blacklist you on social media,” Trump said in his speech. “They don’t let the message get out nearly as they should.”

This accusation—that social media platforms suppress conservatives—riles a Republican base that has long distrusted the mainstream media and is prone to seeing public events as being shaped by murky liberal plots. On a policy level, the bias claim serves as a basis for Republican attacks on Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, the federal law that protects platforms from liability associated with user posts and content moderation decisions.

But the claim of anti-conservative animus is itself a form of disinformation: a falsehood with no reliable evidence to support it. No trustworthy large-scale studies have determined that conservative content is being removed for ideological reasons or that searches are being manipulated to favor liberal interests.

Even anecdotal evidence of supposed bias tends to crumble under close examination. Take Trump’s exclusion from Twitter and Facebook. These actions, while unprecedented, were reasonable responses to Trump’s repeated violation of platform rules

against undermining election results and inciting violence. If anything, the platforms previously had given Trump a notably wide berth because of his position, seeking to appease him, despite his demagogic and routinely false claims.

Trump has been the leading purveyor of the bias accusation, but it will not recede with the end of his presidency. In his quest to remain politically relevant, Trump almost certainly will continue to press the case via far-right media channels and/or right-wing online platforms like Parler and Gab. After getting kicked off Twitter, Trump said he might set up a platform of his own. Other Republican politicians likewise will maintain the accusation, in no small part because it resonates so powerfully with so many GOP voters.

Part 1 of this report provides an introduction and thematic overview. Part 2 charts the rise and spread of the bias claim, analyzing its various manifestations. Part 3 assesses available data showing that conservatives enjoy a prominent place on major social media platforms—a situation unlikely to be true if conservatives were being systematically suppressed. Part 4 offers a series of recommendations to the platforms and the administration of President Joe Biden, as they each consider how to respond to the bias claim. We offer a thumbnail version of those recommendations on the following page.

Recommendations in Brief

For the social media industry:

- 1 Provide greater disclosure for content moderation actions.** The platforms should give an easily understood explanation every time they sanction a post or account, as well as a readily available means to appeal enforcement actions. Greater transparency—such as that which Twitter and Facebook offered when they took action against President Trump in January—would help to defuse claims of political bias, while clarifying the boundaries of acceptable user conduct.

- 2 Offer users a choice among content moderation algorithms.** Users would have greater agency if they were offered a menu of choices among algorithms. Under this system, each user would be given the option of retaining the existing moderation algorithm or choosing one that screens out harmful content more vigorously. The latter option also would provide enhanced engagement by human moderators operating under more restrictive policies. If users had the ability to select from among several systems, they would be empowered to choose an algorithm that reflects their values and preferences.

- 3 Undertake more vigorous, targeted human moderation of influential accounts.** To avoid high-profile moderation mistakes, the platforms should significantly increase the number of full-time employees working directly for them who would help to create a more rigorous human-led moderation channel for the most influential accounts. To supervise this and other important issues related to policing content, we recommend that the platforms each hire a senior executive—a content overseer—who reports directly to the CEO or COO.

- 4 Release more data for researchers.** More granular disclosure would allow academics and civil society researchers to identify enforcement patterns, such as whether content is being removed for ideological reasons. This greater transparency should include the nature of any content that is removed, the particular rule(s) a post violated, how the platform became aware of noncompliance (user report versus algorithmic moderation), and how any appeals were resolved.

For the Biden administration:

- 5 Pursue a constructive reform agenda for social media.** This will require the federal government to press Facebook, Google, and Twitter to improve content policies and their enforcement, even as the government pursues pending antitrust lawsuits against Facebook and Google. The industry, for its part, must strive with urgency to do a better job of protecting users and society at large from harmful content—progress that can't wait for the resolution of what might be years-long antitrust court battles.

- 6 Work with Congress to update Section 230.** The controversial law should be amended so that its liability shield is conditional, based on social media companies' acceptance of a range of new responsibilities related to policing content. One of the new platform obligations could be ensuring that algorithms involved in content ranking and recommendation not favor sensationalistic or unreliable material in pursuit of user engagement.

- 7 Create a new Digital Regulatory Agency.** The false claim of anti-conservative bias has contributed to widespread distrust of the platforms' willingness and ability to govern their sites. A new independent authority, charged with enforcing the responsibilities of a revised Section 230, could begin to rebuild that eroded trust. As an alternative, expanded jurisdiction and funding for social media oversight could be directed to an existing agency such as the Federal Trade Commission or Federal Communications Commission.

1. Introduction

“
Trump’s being
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On January 8, 2021, two days after a mob of Donald Trump supporters ransacked the U.S. Capitol, Twitter [permanently banned](#) the sitting president. Twitter said it acted because, even after the deadly riot, Trump continued to tweet in a manner “highly likely to encourage and inspire people to replicate the criminal acts that took place at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.”¹

Facing the last days of his presidency without his preferred megaphone, Trump turned to the official White House Twitter account, @POTUS, to vent his anger: “Twitter has gone further and further in banning free speech,” he said, “and tonight, Twitter employees have coordinated with the Democrats and Radical Left in removing my account from their platform, to silence me—and YOU, the 75,000,000 great patriots who voted for me.”²

Twitter soon deleted Trump’s @POTUS tweets, as well, but not before he’d had a chance to declare once more what has become a conservative article of faith. For years, Trump and many others on the political right have accused the major social media companies of censoring conservatives. Trump included the claim in his [incendiary address](#) to supporters before the riot at the Capitol. “The radical left tries to blacklist you on social media,” he told the restive crowd. “They don’t let the message get out nearly as they should.” On Twitter, he added, “If you’re a conservative, if you’re a Republican, if you have a big voice, I guess they call it a shadow ban.”³

In fact, before he was shut down, Trump had more than 88 million followers on Twitter, seven times as many as he did just before his election in 2016. On Facebook, which indefinitely suspended Trump and referred the question of his status to its content Oversight Board, he had 35 million followers. Going back to before his first run for the White House, the platforms had allowed Trump to spread conspiracy theories, threaten political opponents, applaud armed protesters, and undermine basic democratic institutions like voting. If anything, the platforms had given him a wide berth because of his position, despite his demagogic and routinely false claims.

The Twitter and Facebook actions against Trump—especially when combined with similar punishment by Facebook subsidiary Instagram and a host of smaller platforms—mark a turning point for social media. They raise important questions about free speech, the power of a handful of billionaire Silicon Valley executives, and, more narrowly, Trump’s political future without access to Twitter.

But Trump's being exiled from the most popular social media channels should not be misconstrued as confirmation of the claim he and others on the right have long made about platform bias. The Trump bans, while unprecedented, were based on reasonable determinations that he violated platform rules against sabotaging election results and inciting violence.

The false contention that conservatives are throttled online goes far beyond Trump and the attack on the Capitol. It is heard from Fox News hosts, lawmakers and witnesses at congressional hearings, and right-wing online pundits.

Consider just a handful of examples from last year:

- Rep. [Jim Jordan](#) (R., Ohio), July 2020, during a hearing of the House Judiciary antitrust subcommittee: "I will just cut to the chase. Big Tech is out to get conservatives. That's not a suspicion. That's not a hunch. That's a fact."⁴

- Conservative internet commentator [Ben Shapiro](#), October 2020, on Twitter: "What we are watching—the militarization of social media on behalf of Democrats, and the overt suppression of material damaging to Democrats to the cheers of the press—is one of the single most dangerous political moments I have ever seen."⁵

- Fox News host [Tucker Carlson](#), November 2020, three weeks after the presidential election: Social media companies "rigged the election in front of all of us, and nobody did anything about it."⁶

This drumbeat of accusation has had consequences. It helps explain why Republican voters don't trust the social media companies when it comes to politics. According to a [HuffPost/YouGov poll](#) published in October 2020, 72% of Republicans think social media platforms have a liberal bias. In contrast, a majority of Democrats think the platforms are either neutral (39%) or biased in favor of conservatives (16%), with another 10% seeing a liberal bias.⁷

[A Pew Research Center poll](#) released in August 2020 zeroed in on the question of censorship. It found that 90% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents say it's at least somewhat likely that social media companies intentionally censor political viewpoints they find objectionable. The comparable figure on the Democratic side is lower but still substantial at 59%.⁸

The trouble with this belief—that tech companies are censoring political viewpoints they find objectionable—is that there is no reliable evidence to support it. There are no credible studies showing that Twitter removes tweets for ideological reasons or that Google manipulates search results to impede conservative candidates (see sidebar on Google on page 12).

"The Republicans continue to push this false narrative that tech is anti-conservative," says Hany Farid, a computer scientist at the University of California, Berkeley. "There is no data to support this. The data that is there is in the other direction and says conservatives dominate social media."⁹

The Trump Ban

Even anecdotal evidence tends to crumble on close examination. Take the crackdown on President Trump in January 2021.

Twitter explained its action on a company blog with an unusual degree of specificity. As backdrop, it observed that "plans for future armed protests have already begun proliferating on and off-Twitter, including a proposed secondary attack on the U.S. Capitol and state capitol buildings on January 17, 2021." In that ominous context, Twitter noted that Trump's supporters parse his statements for what they perceive as signals from their leader. Defiant Trump tweets after the U.S. Capitol riot—in which he referred to his supporters as "American Patriots" who "will not be disrespected or treated unfairly in any way, shape or form!!!"—

were being interpreted in various online forums as supporting the U.S. Capitol attackers and continued resistance to the 2020 election result, the company said.¹⁰ Trump had become a serious threat to public safety, and one Twitter no longer wished to amplify.

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg offered a [similar justification](#) for his company's indefinite suspension of Trump. The then-president's "decision to use his platform to condone rather than condemn the actions of his supporters at the U.S. Capitol building has rightly disturbed people in the U.S. and around the world," Zuckerberg wrote. Facebook removed these statements "because we judged that their effect—and likely their intent—would be to provoke further violence," he added. The company took the further step of suspending Trump out of concern that he intended "to use his remaining time in office to undermine the peaceful and lawful transition of power to his elected successor, Joe Biden," Zuckerberg added.¹¹

These responses to Trump's social media behavior constitute reasonable attempts to forestall additional violence and avoid real risks to the workings of American democracy. They are not examples of ideologically motivated censorship. Further reinforcing this conclusion were the [multiple occasions](#) in 2020 when Trump used Twitter to applaud armed protesters opposing pandemic-related lockdown orders in Michigan, Virginia, and other states.¹²

By many measures, conservative voices—including that of the ex-president, until he was banished from Twitter and Facebook—often are dominant in online political debates. Compare user engagement with Trump's Facebook page versus Joe Biden's page during the peak of last year's presidential campaign, from September 3, 2020, to Election Day. The total number of likes, comments, and shares was 307 million. Trump elicited 87% of the

total; Biden, only 13%. These numbers, derived from [CrowdTangle](#), an analytics tool owned by Facebook, don't suggest a Republican candidate being stifled.¹³

Political Disinformation

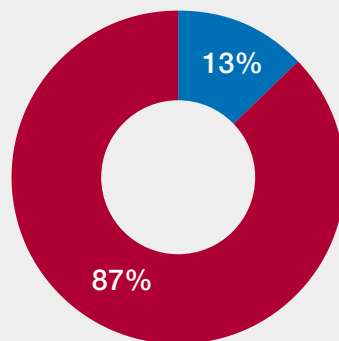
The false bias narrative is an example of political disinformation, meaning an untrue assertion that is spread to deceive. In this instance, the deception whips up part of the conservative base, much of which already bitterly distrusts the mainstream media. To call the bias claim disinformation does not, of course, rule out that millions of everyday people sincerely believe it.

Trump has been the leading purveyor of disinformation about platform bias, but the claim will not recede with the end of his presidency or presence on Twitter or Facebook. As he jockeys to remain politically relevant, he's likely to keep the claim in heavy circulation. In one of his last utterances on Twitter, he said, via the @POTUS account, "We have been negotiating with various other sites, and will have a big announcement soon, while we also look at the possibilities of building out our own platform in the near future."¹⁴ Right-wing sites like Parler and Gab, as well as Trump-friendly media outlets such as Fox News, One America News Network, and Newsmax could provide other potential avenues for him to keep the message about online political favoritism in circulation.

Trump and other Republicans will perpetuate the bias allegation, in part, because it appeals to the same conspiratorial mindset that has fostered the QAnon movement and that animated at least some of the rioters at the U.S. Capitol. It's also a handy fundraising tool. In 2017, then-Representative [Marsha Blackburn](#) (R., Tenn.) boasted in a Twitter ad that she had "fought Planned Parenthood" and "stopped the sale of baby body parts." In fact, there is no credible evidence that Planned Parenthood sold baby body parts.

Trump Dominated Biden in Facebook Engagement.

Interactions (likes, shares, and comments) with posts by candidates' pages.
September 3 through November 3, 2020.



**Total interactions:
307 million**

■ Biden
■ Trump

Source: CrowdTangle

Twitter allowed Blackburn to tweet the message from her regular account but banned her from promoting it as an ad. "I'm being censored for telling the truth," Blackburn told potential donors in an email fundraising appeal. "Silicon Valley elites are trying to impose their values on us." Blackburn was elected to the Senate in November 2018 and has been a proponent of the bias claim.¹⁵

Congressional Republicans also deploy the accusation in support of their effort to revoke [Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act](#). That's the key federal provision that protects platforms from liability associated with user posts and content moderation decisions. Republicans argue that the platforms hide behind Section 230 to quash conservative views. In the chaotic final weeks of his White House term, Trump demanded that Congress repeal the law as a condition of his signing a major defense-spending bill. That gambit didn't work, but Republican lawmakers have vowed to try again in 2021. Following the Trump Twitter ban, Senator Lindsey Graham (R., S.C.) tweeted: "It is now time for Congress to repeal Section 230 and put Big Tech on the same legal footing as every other company in America."¹⁶

Another reason the bias claim matters is that it distorts the larger debate about social media. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other platforms deserve skepticism for their role in the spread of disinformation, hate speech, and other harmful content. Their intrusions on user privacy and tendency to smother start-up competition likewise merit tougher oversight, some of which they're now getting in the form of federal and state antitrust lawsuits filed against Google and Facebook. But the misleading Republican suppression argument only distracts from reality-based critiques of the platforms.

Disinformation about bias contributes to the delegitimization of the platforms at a time when they're actually experimenting with more aggressive forms of fact-checking and content moderation—not just in the case of Donald Trump, but also in connection with falsehoods about Covid-19 vaccines and conspiracy theories like QAnon. It's not clear how far these experiments will go or what kind of impact they'll have on users or society at large. But what's needed now is sober analysis of the platforms' actual behavior, not unverified allegations of political intolerance.

2. Breaking Down the Bias Claim

“
Republicans have promoted the idea that because most social media employees and executives are politically liberal, the platforms themselves must be hostile to conservatives.”

The effort purporting to show that the major social media companies suppress conservative views started in earnest in 2016. Republicans at that time began to promote the idea that because most of these firms' employees and executives are politically liberal, the platforms themselves must be hostile to conservatives. Or, as Donald Trump put it in a tweet in May 2020: “The Radical Left is in total command & control of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Google.”¹⁷ This section explains the evolution of the bias claim and intersperses evidence that undercuts it.

2016 Silicon Valley Politics

Central to the origin story of the bias claim is a now-defunct Facebook feature called Trending Topics—a curated list of articles popular at any given moment on the site. The web publication [Gizmodo](#) reported in May 2016, just as the presidential campaign was heating up, that according to two anonymous former Facebook contract employees, the Trending Topics team had routinely removed articles from right-wing sources. Other former employees denied this account.¹⁸

In response to a conservative outcry, the company did several things. Founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg invited a group of right-leaning commentators like Glenn Beck and Tucker Carlson to a conciliatory meeting at his Menlo Park, Calif., office. Separately, the company did an [internal investigation](#), determining that, while it couldn't rule out the possibility of “isolated improper actions or unintentional bias,” there hadn't been any concerted effort to curb conservative

viewpoints. Facebook nevertheless fired the Trending Topics staff and eventually shut down the feature altogether.¹⁹

A Republican Senate inquiry into the incident fizzled out, but Trending Topics has remained an emblem of how Facebook, and, by extension, all of Silicon Valley, are in the grip of progressives hostile to the right. “Bias and censorship in Big Tech come as no surprise given the left-leaning corporate cultures of technology companies and Silicon Valley overall,” asserts an [October 2020 report](#) issued by Republicans on the House Judiciary Committee, which cites the [Gizmodo](#) piece.²⁰

One can debate whether the Trending Topics episode was overblown. But it's beyond dispute that Silicon Valley tech employees are overwhelmingly liberal. Political donations tell the story. At Facebook, 92% of individual, political action committee, and “soft money” contributions to federal candidates and parties in the 2020 election cycle went to Democrats. At Google, the comparable figure was 96%; at Twitter, 97%.²¹

The question, though, is whether personal preference for Democrats leads to bias against conservative content and personalities.

Appeasement, Not Hostility

Challenged on this point at a [November 2020 Senate Judiciary Committee session](#), both Zuckerberg and his counterpart at Twitter, Jack Dorsey, denied the bias accusation. But they acknowledged the dominant political cultures of their companies. “We need to be careful and intentional internally to make sure that bias doesn’t seep into decisions that we make,” Zuckerberg testified.²²

There’s a further observation to be made here. In the absence of the long-departed Trending Topics team, routine content moderation decisions—the day-to-day calls on what stays on the site and what gets removed—generally aren’t made by Silicon Valley employees. These decisions are made by content moderators based largely outside of the U.S. and employed by third-party contractors. Because they don’t like to talk publicly about outsourcing, U.S. social media executives typically don’t discuss how much content moderation occurs in places like the Philippines and India. But it seems unlikely that contract employees in Manila or Hyderabad would censor content based on its ideological significance in the U.S.

What does take place in Silicon Valley is the making of content policy and high-level decisions, such as whether to remove a notorious post or “de-platform” its author—someone like Donald Trump. In this regard, there is ample evidence that the leaders of the social media platforms are acutely aware of conservative criticism—and are determined to placate, rather than antagonize, the political right.

Several illustrations from Facebook:

■ In early 2016, a number of [Facebook employees pushed](#) for the removal of then-presidential candidate Trump’s anti-Muslim posts, including his call for “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States.”

These employees contended that the posts violated the company’s prohibition of “hate speech.” Zuckerberg reportedly intervened, agreeing that the statements amounted to hate speech but concluding that the implications of removing a candidate’s comments on a newsworthy topic were too drastic. Trump’s anti-Muslim diatribes remained on the site.²³

■ In the weeks after the 2016 presidential election, Facebook launched an internal hunt for pages that had spread false news during the campaign. Most of the dozens of pages in question showed a rightward tilt. In response to this push to take down offending pages on the grounds that they had riled the electorate with disinformation, one of the company’s senior executives, [Joel Kaplan](#), reportedly warned that an across-the-board removal would have a disproportionate effect on conservatives. A relatively rare Republican at Facebook and a former White House deputy chief of staff in the George W. Bush administration, Kaplan runs the company’s Washington office. He had partial success in the internal fake news debate. A few of the worst pages were

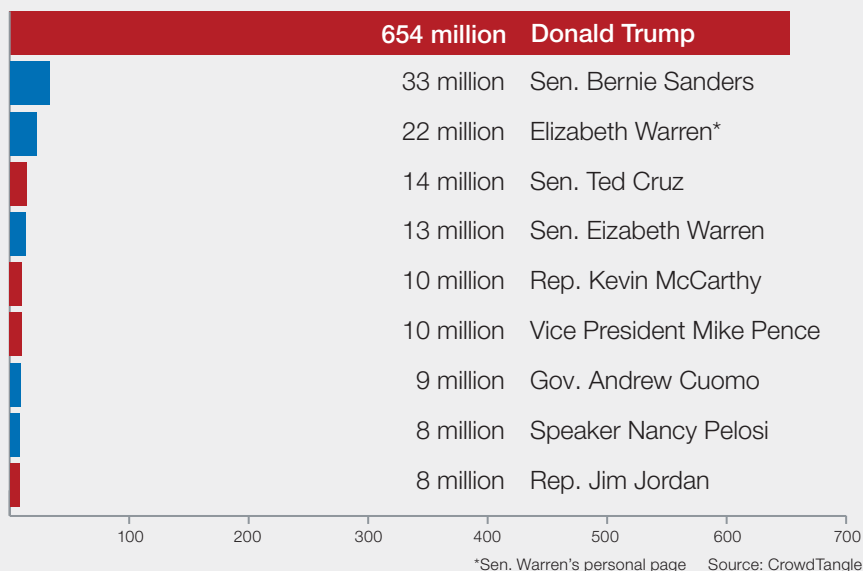
taken down, but most of the rest were allowed to remain so as not to anger Republicans.²⁴

■ Kaplan played a similar role in late 2017 and 2018, when Facebook revamped the algorithm for its scrolling News Feed feature. Seeking to limit misinformation, the company changed the algorithm to emphasize posts by friends and family, as opposed to publishers. Kaplan reportedly pointed out that the adjustment would hinder conservative publishers more than others. When data analysis confirmed that he was correct, the new algorithm was adjusted to diminish the disproportionate impact on conservative outlets. Once again, Facebook accommodated the right.²⁵

Portrayed by some liberal critics as a right-wing bogeyman,²⁶ Kaplan is defended by current and former colleagues who say he was merely forecasting how conservatives would react to proposed company actions and pushing for clear policy bases for those actions. Certainly, empirical research confirms the plausibility of one of Kaplan’s concerns: that initiatives to comb out false content disproportionately hurt conservatives.

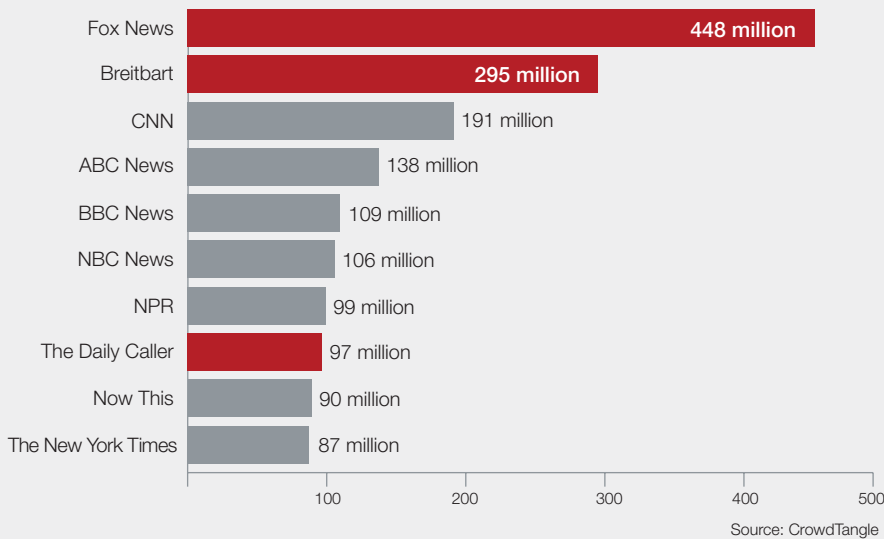
Trump Led the Pack Among U.S. Elected Officials.

Facebook interactions (likes, shares, and comments) with posts by politicians’ pages. January 1 through November 3, 2020.



Fox News, Breitbart Outdistanced Mainstream Media.

Facebook interactions (likes, shares, and comments) with posts by media organizations. January 1 through November 3, 2020.



That's because the right spreads more content that violates platform rules than the left. In light of this discrepancy, it stands to reason that right-leaning content would face labeling, demotion, or removal more frequently than left-leaning content.

Consider some of the studies finding that the right generates more online falsehoods than the left:

- Using U.S. samples collected during a 90-day period in late 2017 and early 2018, the [Oxford Internet Institute](#) divided Twitter users into 10 groups, ranging from Trump supporters to progressives. Trump supporters, the researchers found, circulated more “junk news” than all of the other groups combined. Using different groupings for their Facebook analysis, the Oxford team found that “extreme hard-right pages” circulated more junk news than all the other audiences put together. The researchers defined “junk news” as deliberately deceptive information purporting to be real news.²⁷

- Researchers affiliated with the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University observed a similar imbalance in the production

of false content: “No fact emerges more clearly from our analysis of how four million political stories were linked, tweeted, and shared over a three-year period [2015 - 2017] than that there is no symmetry in the architecture and dynamics of communication within the right-wing media ecosystem and outside of it,” the Harvard team wrote in a 2018 book called [Network Propaganda](#). They underscored “the central role of the radicalized right in creating the current crisis of disinformation and misinformation.”²⁸

- Scholars from Harvard, Northeastern University, and the University of Buffalo published [congruent findings](#) in 2019. In a study of more than 16,000 Twitter accounts active during the 2016 election season, they determined that fewer than 5% of people on the left or in the center ever shared “fake news.” But 11% of people on the right and 21% of people on the extreme right shared fake news. These scholars defined “fake news” as the output of entities that lack editorial norms and processes for ensuring accuracy.²⁹

Finally, on this point, *BuzzFeed News* reported in December 2020 on Facebook’s [“hate bait dashboard,”](#) an internal

feature that tracks the U.S. groups and pages attracting the largest number of hateful user comments. *BuzzFeed* obtained a list of the top 10 hate bait sources over a recent 14-day period. Although admittedly just one snapshot in time, not a conclusive determination by Facebook, the list was made up entirely of right-leaning organizations, led by *Breitbart*, Fox News, and *The Daily Caller*.³⁰

2017

‘Always Anti-Trump’

Since his initial campaign for the presidency, Donald Trump has sought to galvanize his political base by attacking the traditional media as “fake news” and “the enemy of the people.” Gradually, he began including “Big Tech” in his indictment. “Facebook was always anti-Trump,” he tweeted in September 2017.³¹ A little more than a year later, he declared—again on Twitter—that “Twitter has removed many people from my account and, more importantly, they have seemingly done something that makes it much harder to join.” His Twitter account had once seemed like “a Rocket Ship,” he added, but “now it is a Blimp! Total Bias?”³²

Trump’s contention that Facebook and Twitter had targeted him for unfavorable treatment doesn’t survive scrutiny. For years, the two platforms helped him circumvent the mainstream media and maintain control over his message and base. At the same time, the mainstream outlets amplified that message by covering his tweets and posts as news events.

Contrary to being an enemy, social media played a central role in Trump’s 2016 victory. Brad Parscale, his former digital campaign chief, told *Wired* just after the election: “Facebook and Twitter were the reason we won this thing. Twitter for Mr. Trump, and Facebook for fundraising.” Targeted ads on Facebook helped generate the bulk of the \$250 million the first Trump campaign raised online.³³

Facebook, in particular, aided the 2016 Trump campaign by helping to sharpen the targeting of tens of thousands of variants of online ads. The company even dispatched ad-sales employees to “embed” at Trump campaign offices, where they helped with the placement of political messages for highly specific groups of voters. Google and Twitter provided similar services to the Trump campaign. Facebook offered to embed employees with the Clinton campaign, but the Democratic candidate declined. In 2020, the platforms didn’t embed employees in presidential campaigns.³⁴

The assertion that Twitter has intentionally undercut Trump by removing some of his followers isn’t true. Since 2017, Twitter periodically has purged its servers of millions of automated “bots” and other suspicious accounts. This housekeeping, from time to time, has mildly dented Trump’s follower count, just as it has affected the followings of other popular Twitter users, including former President Barack Obama and pop star Katy Perry.³⁵

2018 Shadow Banning

“Twitter ‘SHADOW BANNING’ prominent Republicans. Not good,” Trump tweeted in July 2018. “We will look into this discriminatory and illegal practice at once!”³⁶ Trump has used the term “shadow banning” to mean different things at different times. His tweet in 2018 referred to the central assertion of an article in *Vice* published the day before—namely, that Twitter had manipulated its search algorithm to limit the visibility of certain Republican officials.³⁷ In this context, shadow banning refers to what happens when a Twitter user begins to type a name into the platform’s search box. As letters are typed, Twitter ordinarily “auto-suggests” potential search results. The shadow banning claim arose when auto-suggestions didn’t appear for certain people, requiring searchers to enter full names to find their tweets.

Republicans reacted angrily to the shadow banning claim. “The notion that social media companies would suppress

certain political points of view should concern every American,” said Ronna McDaniel, the chairwoman of the Republican National Committee, who was one of the prominent GOP figures allegedly shadow banned.³⁸ Others included Republican Representatives Matt Gaetz of Florida and Jim Jordan of Ohio. In October 2020, Republicans on the House Judiciary Committee called the shadow banning allegations “perhaps the most prominent example of Twitter’s mistreatment of certain views and speakers.”³⁹

But there’s no evidence that Twitter intentionally shadow banned Republicans or anyone else. Rather, [Twitter said](#) it experienced a technical glitch which caused some 600,000 accounts—including those of some Democratic politicians—not to be auto-suggested when people searched for them.

The problem grew out of Twitter’s efforts beginning more than a year earlier to remove or down-rank low-quality and harassing accounts. What apparently happened was that large numbers of these disfavored accounts had interacted with the Republican politicians’ accounts. This caused Twitter’s search system not to auto-suggest the Republicans, the company said. The malfunction, which never had to do with bias against politicians of either party, was fixed within 24 hours.⁴⁰ But the claims of partisanship related to the episode have continued to echo years later.

2019 ‘Dangerous Individuals’

In May 2019, [conservatives erupted](#) when Facebook announced it had banned seven controversial figures for violating its rules against “dangerous individuals and organizations.” Among them were Alex Jones of InfoWars, the purveyor of numerous right-wing conspiracy theories, and Milo Yiannopoulos, an alt-right commentator who previously had been banned by Twitter for leading a racist campaign against African-American actor Leslie Jones.⁴¹ In a tweet, then-President Trump decried the bans: “I am continuing to monitor

“
By 2019, what may have seemed like spontaneous attacks on ‘Big Tech’ had crystallized into a coordinated Republican disinformation drive.
”

the censorship of AMERICAN CITIZENS on social media platforms.”⁴²

Facebook had ample grounds, based on its published community standards, for banning the group of seven. The platform’s prohibition of “dangerous individuals” includes people who engage in hateful speech or conduct. [Alex Jones](#) had described the 2012 Sandy Hook elementary school massacre as a hoax designed to promote gun control, and he referred to 9/11 as an inside job.⁴³ According to the Anti-Defamation League, [Yiannopoulos’](#) public statements reveal someone who is “misogynistic, racist, xenophobic, [and] transphobic.”⁴⁴ Illustrating that it wasn’t aiming exclusively at far-right zealots, Facebook also banished Nation of Islam leader [Louis Farrakhan](#), who has warned his followers about “the Satanic Jews” and compared Jews to termites.⁴⁵

A few months later, Trump hosted a [Social Media Summit](#) at the White House devoted to airing right-wing grievances. “The truth is that the social media giants would love to shut us down,” Senator Josh Hawley (R., Mo.), told the audience of conservative digital pundits and provocateurs. Hawley referred to Section 230, the liability-shield law: “If they want to keep their special deal, here’s the bargain: They have to quit discriminating against conservatives.”⁴⁶ In January 2021, Hawley helped lead the abortive attempt to overturn Joe Biden’s presidential victory.

Going to Court

Dozens of conservatives have turned their censorship allegations into lawsuits against social media platforms. These legal actions have failed to present substantial evidence of ideological favoritism—and they have all been dismissed.

In June 2020, a state judge in Virginia rejected a suit filed against Twitter by Representative Devin Nunes (R., Calif.). The suit concerned posts by two parody accounts, one pretending to be the congressman's mother; the other, his cow. Echoing many of his Republican colleagues, Nunes alleged, in part, that Twitter and other social media companies discriminate against conservatives. The judge ruled that a federal liability shield called Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act precluded the suit.¹

This litigation is part of a larger set of some three dozen cases in which social media users claim to have been harmed by an action against their account or their content. Every case has failed at a pretrial stage, according to Eric Goldman, a law professor at Santa Clara University who tracks internet litigation.

While the suits put forward scant evidence of bias, they tend to get dismissed for other reasons. One ground for dismissal is Section 230, which protects platforms from liability for most content posted by users. The other main basis for dismissal arises in response to claims that platforms violate the First Amendment when they limit users' speech. Courts generally have ruled that the First Amendment applies only to government actors, not to private sector corporations.

Roughly another dozen suits have alleged that a platform illegally removed or restricted third-party content by, for example, demonetizing it or placing it behind a restricted-viewing filter. These cases also have failed.

In February 2020, Google convinced a federal appeals court based in San Francisco to reject claims that YouTube illegally censors conservative content. The suit had been filed by Prager University, a right-leaning non-profit run by radio talk show host Dennis Prager. The plaintiff contended that YouTube's political hostility prompted it to restrict access to dozens of videos on such topics as abortion and Islam and to block advertising adjacent to the videos. But the court ruled that YouTube is a private forum not covered by the First Amendment and therefore may decide how content is displayed on its site. Google has consistently maintained that YouTube's decisions are not tainted by ideological animus.²

¹ The New York Times (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/25/us/politics/devin-nunes-cow-tweets.html>).

² Reuters (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-google-lawsuit-censorship/google-defeats-conservative-nonprofits-youtube-censorship-appeal-idUSKCN20K33L>).

Coordinated Campaign

Trump's Social Media Summit illustrated how, by 2019, what may have seemed like spontaneous attacks on "Big Tech" had crystallized into a [coordinated Republican disinformation drive](#). This strategy, tied to Trump's reelection preparations, grew, in part, out of internal GOP polling showing that an increasing number of Americans distrust the major platforms. "People feel they're being manipulated, whether it's by what they're being shown in their feeds or actions the companies have taken against conservatives," an unnamed Republican operative told *Axios*.⁴⁷ Another reason more and more Republicans believed the bias disinformation was that Trump and other GOP leaders told them so often it was true.

Facebook tried to respond to persistent claims of bias by releasing the results of an independent "audit" in August 2019. The company had recruited a former senator, conservative Jon Kyl (R., Ariz.), to lead the investigation. With the help of attorneys from the law firm Covington & Burling, Kyl interviewed more than 130 individuals and organizations. His [report noted](#) that many conservatives perceived the company's content policies and practices as being skewed against them. Kyl himself concluded that "Facebook's policies and their application have the potential to restrict free expression," adding that "there is still significant work to be done to satisfy the concerns we heard from conservatives." But he didn't point to any evidence of actual bias.⁴⁸ "They found nothing," Renée DiResta of the Stanford Internet Observatory says in an interview.

Mark Zuckerberg, meanwhile, was personally reassuring prominent conservative figures that Facebook meant them no harm. Over several months in 2019, he reportedly had a series of informal talks and off-the-record dinners with the likes of Fox News host Tucker Carlson; syndicated radio personality Hugh Hewitt; and Ben Shapiro, co-founder of the conservative website *The Daily Wire*. In September 2019, Zuckerberg held meetings in Washington with then-President Trump and his son-in-law and senior adviser, Jared Kushner. The following month, the

CEO and his wife, Priscilla Chan, attended a private dinner with Trump at the White House.⁴⁹ In reaction to media coverage of his encounters with conservatives, Zuckerberg responded on Facebook: “I have dinners with lots of people across the spectrum on lots of different issues all the time.”⁵⁰

2020 Fact-Checking

Traumatic public events and a contentious presidential campaign combined to bring the bias claim into high relief in 2020. Twitter responded to the turmoil by more aggressively fact-checking and labeling certain dubious tweets, including some posted by then-President Trump. This provided a new target for conservatives claiming partisan suppression.

In May, Twitter appended fact-check labels to two Trump tweets asserting, without evidence, that casting ballots by mail leads to vote fraud. The president responded two days later by issuing an [executive order](#) aimed at punishing the social media industry by rolling back Section 230. From the Oval Office, he lashed out at tech companies, which he said possessed “unchecked powers to censor, restrict, edit, shape, hide [and], alter virtually any form of communication.”⁵¹

A day after that, Trump reacted to unrest in Minneapolis following the police killing of George Floyd, an unarmed African-American. Trump tweeted that the U.S. military was ready to “assume control” and that “[when the looting starts, the shooting starts.](#)” Twitter quickly put the president’s dispatch behind a message stating that the tweet violated its rules, and the company blocked other users from retweeting, liking, or replying to it. Trump posted the same message on Facebook, where it remained, unlabeled.⁵²

Facebook’s response to Trump’s looting/shooting post pointed once more to the company’s eagerness to mollify conservatives, not confront them. As recounted by *Axios* and *The Washington Post*, Facebook [deferentially asked](#) the White House to delete

or modify the incendiary looting/shooting post. Zuckerberg even spoke by phone to Trump about the situation. After some haggling, Trump posted again to say that the looting/shooting comment was meant merely as a safety warning to the public. With that qualification, the Facebook post would stay up.⁵³

Several months later, as the Trump-versus-Biden contest neared its bitter conclusion, Twitter and Facebook both took action against posts of a questionable [story about the Biden family](#) published by the *New York Post*. The article, apparently based on stolen emails, suggested that in 2015, Hunter Biden arranged for a meeting between his father, then-Vice President Joe Biden, and an executive with a Ukrainian energy company. The Biden camp denied that any such meeting occurred. Facebook reduced distribution of the *Post* story; Twitter blocked it from being shared at all.

Republicans responded with fury. “Never before have we seen active censorship of a major press publication with serious allegations of corruption of one of the two candidates for president,” Senator Ted Cruz (R., Texas) told reporters.⁵⁴

The *Post*/Biden imbroglio, in retrospect, seems like a case of reasonable decisions wrapped in mystifying processes. Facebook generally tries to stop posts from spreading if there are “signals” of falsehood. But as in the *Post*/Biden case, the company doesn’t disclose what those signals are, leaving onlookers to speculate. For its part, Twitter froze the *Post*/Biden story based on a rule against sharing hacked material. But under fire from conservatives, Twitter backed down, saying that from now on, it would ban hacked material only if it is directly shared by hackers or their accomplices. Then, Twitter switched its justification to say that the *Post*’s inclusion of certain personal information was the reason the Biden piece was blocked. Consistency, clearer rules, and greater transparency would have gone a long way toward defusing criticism of these platform actions.⁵⁵

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In other instances, Facebook relaxed its rules on misinformation to allow conservative news outlets and personalities to avoid “strikes,” as in baseball strikes, which can lead to restrictions on the distribution of posts and/or advertising revenue. Beneficiaries of this rule-bending reportedly included pages run by *Breitbart*, pro-Trump internet personalities known as Diamond and Silk, and the right-leaning nonprofit outlet Prager University. Citing leaked company documents, [NBC News reported](#) in August 2020 that over the previous six months, Facebook employees and executives deleted strikes imposed against conservative pages in hopes of avoiding further backlash from the right.⁵⁶

2021 ‘Be There, Will Be Wild!’

In the social media world, the U.S. Capitol riot will be remembered primarily as the event that precipitated Donald Trump’s ouster from Twitter and Facebook. That’s fair enough, but it shouldn’t obscure the fact that in the build-up to the insurrection, social media provided Trump and his supporters with the crucial means to organize a large-scale invasion of Congress. In this sense, Facebook and Twitter did not censor an extreme conservative cause, but facilitated it.

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In connection with the Capitol riot, Facebook and Twitter did not censor an extreme conservative cause, but facilitated it.

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In the weeks leading up to the riot, Trump tweeted at least six times to exhort his faithful to come to Washington on the day Congress was scheduled to ceremonially count the electoral votes confirming Joe Biden's victory. "Big protest in D.C. on January 6th," he tweeted on December 19. "Be there, will be wild!"

His supporters responded, many of them anticipating violence and discussing the need for weapons. Accounts on Twitter posted conspiracy theories about leftists plotting to kill Trump supporters at the protest and suggested that demonstrators arm themselves for "Independence Day."⁵⁷

On the Facebook group Red-State Secession, which had about 8,000 followers, participants openly discussed plans for January 6 over a period of weeks. On the day before the protest and riot, a member said: "If you are not prepared to use force to defend civilization, then be prepared to accept barbarism." Comments responding to that post showed photos of firearms people said they were bringing to Washington. Other comments referred to occupying the Capitol and forcing Congress to overturn the 2020 election. Facebook removed Red-State Secession on the morning of January 6, by which time protesters were gathering to hear Trump speak.⁵⁸

Attacking Google

Just after the November 2020 election, three Republican senators sent a letter to Sundar Pichai, CEO of Google, accusing the company of surreptitiously using its search engine to help Joe Biden defeat Donald Trump. In a statement accompanying the letter, Senator Ted Cruz of Texas said: "Google must provide answers as to why and how it manipulated users to influence this election."

The researcher whose findings propelled the letter—and who for years has fueled Republican claims that Google uses search results and other means to favor liberal candidates over conservatives—is Robert Epstein. He's a Harvard-trained PhD psychologist and former editor-in-chief of *Psychology Today* magazine who has advanced his views in testimony before Congress, dozens of articles, and multiple appearances on Fox News. A crucial figure supporting the conservative bias claim, he broadens the accusation to include not just social networks but also Google's dominant search engine.

Based on a series of experiments, which in aggregate have involved thousands of subjects, Epstein estimates that Google has "shifted" millions of voters to supporting Democratic candidates in 2016, 2018, and 2020. In an interview, he says that the "rock bottom" number of votes Google affected in last year's presidential race was six million. What's more, he adds, "it's obvious that they're doing this deliberately."

Epstein, 67, speaks urgently about the need to raise money to "monitor" Google. "By exposing their manipulations, we can get them to back off," he says on his website StopBigTechNow.com. The site, which offers links to his interviews with conservative media luminaries like Tucker Carlson, Mark Levin, and Glenn Beck, solicits donations to the American Institute for Behavioral Research and Technology, the nonprofit in Vista, Calif., to which he's attached.

Google flatly denies Epstein's claims. "Any allegations that Google deliberately designed search algorithms or intervened with the intent of swaying voters is categorically false," Mark Isakowitz, the company's vice president for public policy and government relations in the U.S. and Canada, wrote in a November 12, 2020, response to Senator Cruz and his Republican colleagues. "We approach our work without political bias, full stop."

'Not Comfortable'

Epstein says that personally, he holds liberal political views and votes for Democrats. "I have been pushed into this little corner that is conservative America," he says. "I am not comfortable at all."

A brush with Google in 2012 piqued his interest in the company. The incident involved Google warning would-be visitors away from an Epstein website (not StopBigTechNow.com), saying it had been compromised by hackers. Epstein maintained he hadn't been hacked. *The New York Times* covered the spat and quoted him as asking, "How did Google come to have so much power?"¹

Epstein's research has many permutations. In one, he rearranges the order of search results shown to groups of voters. One group sees an ordering that favors candidate A; the other group, candidate B. The reordered results can shift voting preferences by 20% or more, Epstein says. He calls this the Search Engine Manipulation Effect (SEME). Looking at the 2020 presidential race,

he assumed that 30 million voters were uncommitted in the run-up to the election and susceptible to being influenced by SEME. He applied the 20% rate to the 30 million figure to arrive at his “rock bottom” estimate of six million votes “switched” to Biden. (Biden won the popular vote by seven million.)

The basic question Epstein asks—how might internet searching affect voting—is potentially important. But his extrapolation to hard numbers of purposefully changed votes seems highly questionable. Francesca Tripodi, a social media scholar at the University of North Carolina who has reviewed Epstein’s work, says in an interview that he lacks evidence of either Google’s intent to manipulate elections or that the company has distorted search results toward that end. In a November 2020 article in *Slate*, she writes that “his hypothesis that Google influenced U.S. elections has never been rigorously tested or reviewed by political or information scientists.”²

In fact, there is other research that clashes with Epstein’s findings. A study released in 2019 by researchers at Stanford University concluded that Google’s search algorithm is not biased along political lines and instead emphasizes authoritative sources.³ In a separate inquiry published the same year, *The Economist* came to a similar conclusion. The magazine compared news sites’ actual proportion of search results in Google’s News tab with a predictive model of that proportion based on factors Google says its search rankings rely on—namely, a site’s reach, output, and accuracy. “If Google favored liberals, left-wing sites would appear more often than our model predicted, and right-wing ones less,” *The Economist* said. “We saw no such trend.”⁴

Epstein counters that his “work is meticulous. My standards are very high.” He points out that in 2015, he co-authored an article on SEME for the peer-reviewed *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. That piece, however, didn’t make any allegations against Google or point to any actual vote manipulation.⁵

Asked how he knows Google intentionally changes votes, Epstein responds, “Look at all the leaks.” By that he means various disclosures, some from unhappy former Google employees. In one video obtained by the right-wing outlet *Breitbart*, company co-founder Sergey Brin is seen at an all-hands meeting bemoaning Donald Trump’s 2016 victory.⁶ In another, Susan Wojcicki, the CEO of YouTube, which is owned by Google, says the video service is “pushing down the fake news” and boosting “authoritative news.”⁷

It requires quite a leap of fact and logic, though, to get from these statements to a corporate conspiracy to control elections.

The letter Senate Republicans sent to Google in early November referred to another Epstein finding: In fall 2020, he says that he discovered that, for a time, only liberal subjects were receiving get-out-the-vote messages on Google’s home page.

The company says that it didn’t discriminate in sending the pro-voting messages. According to Isakowitz, the Google vice president: “In the days prior to the election, our home page reminded all users in all states how to find authoritative information on where to vote and how to vote. Any claim that this information targeted people based on their political ideology is absolutely untrue.”

1 The New York Times (<https://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/05/one-mans-fight-with-google-over-a-security-warning/?searchResultPosition=1>).

2 Slate (<https://slate.com/technology/2020/11/big-tech-conservative-bias-trump-election-voter-suppression.html>).

3 Proceedings of the Association for Computing Machinery on Human-Computer Interaction via Stanford University (<https://news.stanford.edu/press-releases/2019/11/26/search-media-biased/>).

4 The Economist (<https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2019/06/08/google-rewards-reputable-reporting-not-left-wing-politics>).

5 Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (<https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/112/33/E4512.full.pdf?with-ds=yes>).

6 Breitbart (<https://www.breitbart.com/tech/2018/09/12/leaked-video-google-leaderships-dismayed-reaction-to-trump-election/>).

7 Vimeo (<https://vimeo.com/354354050>).

3. Assessing Available Data

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the Facebook page
of conservative
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”

There are no empirical studies that definitively assess the claim of anti-conservative bias. But there are a variety of analyses and rankings that indicate that conservatives enjoy a prominent place on major social media platforms. This section evaluates data that bear on the question of bias.

Rankings by Engagement

Data from a variety of sources provide a window into what Facebook posts get the most engagement, meaning likes, shares, comments, and other reactions. If engagement is a rough proxy for popularity, then the right wing is holding its own, according to data from [CrowdTangle](#), the Facebook analytics tool.

On most days, right-leaning U.S. Facebook pages dominate the list of sources producing the most-engaged-with posts containing links. In particular, during the run-up to the 2020 election and its aftermath, the page of conservative commentator Dan Bongino outperformed those of most major news organizations. The pages of Donald Trump and pro-Trump evangelist Franklin Graham consistently showed up in the top 10, as did Fox News. CNN, National Public Radio, and *The New York Times* sometimes made the list, but Joe Biden rarely did.⁵⁹

Using CrowdTangle, one can also generate engagement rankings for “U.S. general media.” Here, three of the top 10 spots were held by right-leaning pages during the period from January 1, 2020, through Election Day in November. Fox News was the runaway leader, with 448 million total interactions.

In second place was *Breitbart*, with 294 million. In seventh place was *The Daily Caller*, also a right-leaning outlet, with 97 million. The 839 million interactions generated by these three conservative pages was more than the 821 million total produced by the seven mainstream media pages in the top 10—those of CNN, ABC News, BBC News, NBC News, NPR, Now This, and *The New York Times*.

A third cut at CrowdTangle’s engagement numbers permits a comparison of how much interaction U.S. elected officials generated from New Year’s Day 2020 through Election Day. The split between Republicans and Democrats was 5-5 among the top 10 politicians and 12-13, favoring Democrats, among the top 25. The highest-scoring Republicans were Donald Trump, with a titanic 654 million interactions; Senator Ted Cruz, with 14 million; and House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy of California, with 10 million. Senators Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, with 35 million, and Bernie Sanders of Vermont, with 33 million, were the highest-ranking Democrats. Biden wasn’t included because he didn’t hold elective office at the time.

A look at Facebook engagement data arrayed by [NewsWhip](#), an independent analytics firm, tells much the same story. NewsWhip calculates the most popular publications by determining their likes, shares, comments and other reactions to link posts shared not only publicly—which is CrowdTangle’s method—but privately, as well. From January 1, 2020, through Election Day, right-leaning publications occupied three of the top 10 spots: Fox News finished third, with 751 million interactions; *The Daily Wire*, fifth, with 647 million; and the *New York Post*, tenth, with 376 million. The British *Daily Mail* came in first, with 851 million interactions, followed by CNN, with 788 million.⁶⁰

[Media Matters for America](#), a liberal nonprofit watch dog group, has done a series of studies in recent years concluding that, depending on the metric, right-leaning Facebook pages outperform left-leaning pages or perform similarly. In an analysis of 1,200 pages that posted frequently about U.S. politics from January 1 to August 25, 2020, Media Matters found that right-leaning pages earned more interactions than left-leaning. When accounting for the fact that left-leaning pages had fewer posts and page likes, researchers determined that right- and left-leaning pages had similar *rates* of interaction.⁶¹

Taken together, these various measures based on engagement suggest that, if the platforms are trying to suppress conservative views, they’re not doing a very good job.

‘Manipulators’ and ‘False Content’ Purveyors

Several other analyses shed additional skeptical light on the bias claim.

In October 2020, the Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative of the German Marshall Fund of the United States [released a study](#) showing that engagement on Facebook with deceptive media outlets rose by 242% during the third quarter of 2020, compared to

the same pre-election period in 2016. To reach this conclusion, the study’s authors assembled two lists. The first featured what they called “manipulators,” which had been determined by NewsGuard, a news site rating firm, to have failed to gather and present information responsibly. All of the top-five manipulators, in terms of their engagement levels on Facebook, were right-leaning: Fox News, *The Daily Wire*, *Breitbart*, *The Blaze*, and *Western Journal*. The second list featured members of an even less trustworthy group—sites that, according to NewsGuard, repeatedly published provably false content. These, too, were all right-leaning.⁶²

The relevance to this report of the Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative findings is two-fold: First, when the researchers identified what they considered the most popular manipulators and false content purveyors on Facebook, all of the top performers were right-leaning. This doesn’t smack of anti-conservative censorship. Second, the findings reinforce those of other studies concluding that the political right generates more online falsehoods than the left. This helps explain why some conservatives believe their content is

suppressed on partisan grounds when, in fact, it’s being singled out because it violates neutral platform rules.

In a [separate study](#) released in October 2020, *Politico*, working with the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), a London-based nonpartisan think tank, concluded that “right-wing social media influencers, conservative media outlets, and other GOP supporters” dominated social media discussions of two of 2020’s most volatile issues: the Black Lives Matter movement and alleged election fraud. Researchers scrutinized more than two million social media posts across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and the message boards Reddit and 4chan. They found that users shared the most-viral right-wing social media content about Black Lives Matter more than 10 times as often as the most popular liberal posts on the topic. On election fraud, people shared right-leaning claims roughly twice as often as they did liberals’ or traditional media outlets’ discussion of the issue.⁶³

Like the findings of the Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative, the *Politico*/ISD results contradict the bias claim. Far from being censored online, voices on the right are widely disseminated.

Left and Right are Roughly Balanced on YouTube.

Year ended December 7, 2020.

Video views

Partisan Left

19 billion

Partisan Right

16 billion

Video hours watched

Partisan Left

1.3 billion hours

Partisan Right

1.4 billion hours

Source: Transparency Tube

YouTube Partisans

YouTube has been more tight-lipped than Facebook or Twitter, so less is known about the video-sharing site. But from the modest amount of data available, one can safely conclude that conservative views are not systematically excluded from YouTube.

A new research project called [Transparency Tube](#) has categorized and indexed more than 8,000 of the largest English-language YouTube channels addressing politics and culture. It has divided the channels into a variety of groups, including “partisan right” and “partisan left.” For 2020, Transparency Tube found that partisan left channels, such as MSNBC and Vox, had 19 billion views, while those on the partisan right, such as Fox News and *The Daily Wire*, had 16 billion. But when one changes the metric to hours watched, the right topped the left, 1.4 billion to 1.3 billion.⁶⁴

In early 2019, YouTube made algorithmic changes in response to criticism that its recommendation engine was steering users toward right-wing conspiracy channels. The changes reduced recommendations to channels spreading baseless theories about “deep state” coups and who was really behind 9/11. But the adjustments tended to shift recommendations not to centrist or liberal-leaning channels but to Fox News, according to [Mark Ledwich](#), a software engineer who is part of the Transparency Tube team. He estimates that over the course of 2019, Fox News saw its monthly YouTube views more than triple. This episode provides one more indication that conservative voices, in the aggregate, have not been systematically blocked.⁶⁵

Getting Banned by Twitter

What about people other than Donald Trump? Conservatives frequently point to Twitter’s practice of suspending or permanently banning account holders as evidence of bias against the right. But the facts don’t support this claim.

Conservatives do get suspended or banned for violating Twitter’s rules against such things as harassment, hateful conduct, or, as in Trump’s case, glorifying violence. But liberals are excluded in this fashion, as well. Pinning down precise proportions is impossible because Twitter doesn’t release sufficient data.

In the first half of 2020, the most recent period for which Twitter has released enforcement statistics, the company suspended approximately 926,700 accounts, a 6% increase over the preceding six-month reporting period. Much of this growth was driven by a 68% increase in suspensions related to child sexual exploitation. By contrast, the number of suspensions tied to abuse/harassment and hateful conduct fell 34% and 35%, respectively.¹

But without a full accounting from Twitter, perceptions of the company’s enforcement actions turn on what account suspensions and bans the press reports. We aren’t suggesting that Twitter should collect or disseminate information about users’ ideology. Instead, the platform should release data such as the nature of each account or piece of content it takes down, the rule(s) that have been violated, and how any appeals were resolved.

Much of Twitter’s recent enforcement action has targeted people who promote the QAnon conspiracy theory. This year and last, the company has removed some 77,000 QAnon accounts, saying they “have the potential to lead to offline harm.” Many QAnon adherents are Trump supporters, and some participated in the January 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol. But like Facebook and other platforms, Twitter is trying to oust QAnon because it encourages violence and claims that Democratic politicians and Hollywood celebrities belong to a satanic cabal of murderous pedophiles.²

More broadly, Twitter has suspended or banned individuals and groups of highly disparate political persuasions. In 2018, the platform excluded some 80 accounts belonging to activists affiliated with the left-leaning Occupy movement. According to some of these activists, Twitter revoked the accounts without giving a reason.³ In February 2020, Twitter banned 70 accounts affiliated with Mike Bloomberg’s short-lived campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, reportedly for violating the platform’s policy against platform manipulation and spam.⁴

On the right, Twitter doesn’t target conservatives or Republicans as such, but people who violate its rules by calling for violence, harassing others, or advocating hateful ideologies. Among the right-leaning users who have faced enforcement action are white nationalists like Richard Spencer,

Jared Taylor, and David Duke, as well as white nationalist organizations such as the American Nazi Party, the neo-Nazi Traditionalist Worker Party, and *American Renaissance* magazine.⁵

Twitter has tried to limit the spread of dangerous misinformation about the coronavirus pandemic. In July 2020, it handed Trump's eldest son, Donald Trump, Jr., a 12-hour suspension for posting a video that misleadingly suggested that the anti-malaria drug hydroxychloroquine prevents users from contracting Covid-19.⁶ A couple months later, Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (R., Ga.), then a candidate, was similarly penalized for tweeting that mask-wearing harms children.⁷

In the run-up to the presidential election, Twitter permanently banned former Trump adviser Steve Bannon for stating that, "as a warning to federal bureaucrats," he'd put the heads of Dr. Anthony Fauci and FBI Director Christopher Wray "on pikes" in front of the White House.⁸

Twitter sometimes makes mistakes. In October 2020, the company suspended the account of Mark Morgan, then-acting commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection, for violating the company's hate speech policy by tweeting that "every mile [of the border wall] helps us stop gang members, murderers, sexual predators, and drugs from entering our country." Twitter reviewed its decision and reinstated Morgan, but it didn't offer an explanation.⁹

Twitter's disclosure of a complete enforcement database would go a long way toward allowing outsiders to assess the company's actions. In the absence of such data, the available evidence does not support the claim that Twitter systematically disfavors conservative users and ideas.

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Twitter doesn't target conservatives or Republicans as such, but people who violate its rules by calling for violence, harassing others, or advocating hateful ideologies.

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¹ Twitter (<https://transparency.twitter.com/>).

² Twitter (https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2021/protecting--the-conversation-following-the-riots-in-washington--.html).

³ Wired (<https://www.wired.co.uk/article/twitter-political-account-ban-us-mid-term-elections>).

⁴ The Verge (<https://www.theverge.com/2020/2/22/21148516/twitter-suspends-mike-bloomberg-face-book-google-platform-manipulation>). A Bloomberg campaign spokesperson said at the time that the content in question "was not intended to mislead anyone."

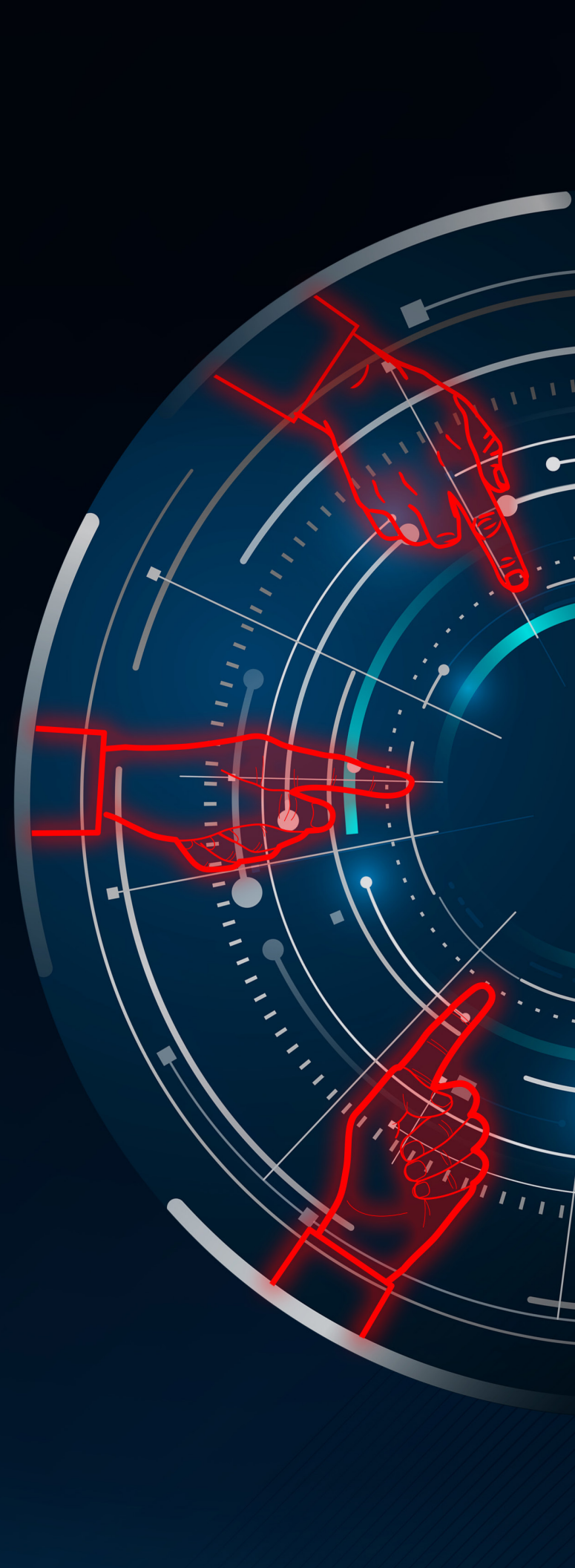
⁵ Politico (<https://www.politico.com/blogs/on-media/2016/11/twitter-suspends-alt-right-accounts-231479>); Vox (<https://www.vox.com/2017/12/18/16790864/twitter-bans-nazis-hate-groups>). Reacting to being sanctioned, Richard Spencer said: "Twitter is trying to airbrush the alt-right out of existence." The Daily Caller (<https://dailycaller.com/2016/11/15/twitter-initiates-mass-purge-of-alt-right-accounts-following-trump-victory/>). Jared Taylor, the founder and editor of *American Renaissance*, said: "It's unconscionable that [Twitter] should reserve the right to terminate an account for any reason or no reason at all." CNET (<https://www.cnet.com/news/white-nationalist-jared-taylor-american-renaissance-sues-twitter-for-account-suspension/>). David Duke didn't respond to a request for comment. The American Nazi Party, now known as New Order, couldn't be reached for comment. The Traditionalist Worker Party disbanded in 2018.

⁶ Politico (<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/28/twitter-donald-trump-jr-coronavirus-384070>). A spokesman for Donald Trump Jr. criticized Twitter's move as "further proof that big tech is intent on killing free expression online."

⁷ CBS Georgia (https://www.cbs46.com/news/twitter-suspends-ga-congressional-candidate-over-controversial-mask-opinion/article_1289b66e-f251-11ea-9a5c-8b580072adfa.html). "If porn is on Twitter, why are conservative opinions like mine being censored and banned?" Marjorie Taylor Greene said.

⁸ Business Insider (<https://www.businessinsider.com/steve-bannon-banned-twitter-fauci-and-wrays-heads-on-pikes-2020-11>). Steve Bannon said his comments were "obviously a metaphor."

⁹ CNN (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/29/politics/cbp-twitter-locked-account-border-wall/index.html>). Mark Morgan said: "Censorship should outrage every American."



“

Renée DiResta of the Stanford Internet Observatory evocatively describes the bias allegation as ‘a mass-aggravement narrative, deployed as a cudgel by politicians who use it cynically to rally their base.’

”

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Weeks before the January 6, 2021, U.S. Capitol riot, Republicans had declared that the conservative censorship claim would drive their tech agenda. “At the top of the list for the Republicans is holding Big Tech accountable and addressing Section 230, because it’s unacceptable, it’s un-American, what happened during the election, where they were censoring political speech in the name of misinformation,” said Representative Cathy McMorris Rodgers of Washington state, the ranking GOP member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee.⁶⁶

Rather than prompting reflection and reconsideration, the violence at the Capitol and Donald Trump’s banishment from Twitter and Facebook seemed to heighten many Republicans’ determination to portray Silicon Valley as the archenemy of the political right. Within days of the riot, some GOP strategists were already planning to use Trump’s punishment as a 2022 campaign issue. They predicted it would [shift attention](#) away from the former president’s role in fomenting the Capitol attack and help unify a fractured Republican Party. “I’ll be leading with it on a lot of my messaging, at least in my races, for the next few months,” John Thomas, a Republican strategist who works on House campaigns across the country, told *Politico*. “It shifts the news story—the narrative of the moment—and it refocuses it on a larger, more existential threat for the future of the country.”⁶⁷

Republicans are almost certain to focus on a related sub-narrative concerning the Silicon Valley crackdown on Parler, an increasingly popular Twitter-like social media site. Bankrolled in part by Rebekah Mercer, a financial backer of *Breitbart* and other hard-right initiatives, Parler markets itself as a free-speech haven for conservatives who don’t want intrusive content moderation or fact-checking. Trump supporters have flocked to the site, making it one of the most popular free apps for iPhones in early January. Parler’s minimal rules contributed to it becoming a hub for

organizing the January 6 Capitol invasion, including open discussions of violence, weapons, and civil war.⁶⁸

But Parler faced consequences for its role feeding lawlessness. Days after the Twitter and Facebook actions against Trump, Apple and Google removed Parler from their app stores, saying it hadn’t sufficiently policed user posts that threatened violence and crime. For similar reasons, Amazon said it would no longer provide Parler with web-hosting services. Parler said it would seek new business partners, but its future is unclear. CEO John Matze [accused the tech giants](#) of trying to “completely remove free speech from the internet.”⁶⁹ But in the wake of the Capitol riot, it isn’t difficult to see why companies like Apple, Google, and Amazon would rethink their commercial relationships with Parler.

Even after the Trump ban and Parler’s travails, most conservatives aren’t likely to retreat exclusively to their own corner of the social media world and cease paying attention to Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Conservatives are drawn to the established platforms for the same reason liberals are: That’s where you can reach the largest audiences and enjoy the benefits of the network effect. And as much as they condemn supposed social media favoritism, conservatives appear to relish wielding the bias-claim cudgel, even though it’s based on distortions and falsehoods.

1 Provide greater disclosure for content moderation actions.

The platforms should give an easily understood explanation every time they sanction a post or account, as well as a readily available means to appeal enforcement actions. Greater transparency—such as that which Twitter and Facebook offered when they took action against former President Trump in January—would help to defuse claims of political bias, while clarifying the boundaries of acceptable user conduct.

Typically, platforms don't provide much justification for why a given post or account is sanctioned. What's more, obscure rules sometimes produce perplexing results. Left in the dark, some users and onlookers assume the worst, including ideological censorship. In 2020, conservatives protested when Twitter flagged Trump for glorifying violence but let stand without comment tweets by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, threatening Israel with annihilation. Under outside pressure, Twitter eventually explained that Khamenei's menacing declarations fell under an exception permitting world leaders to engage in "saber rattling."⁷⁰ This episode didn't show anti-conservative animus, but it did point to a need for Twitter to rethink its rules for world leaders and how it publicly explains application of those and other rules.

2 Offer users a choice among content moderation algorithms.

To enhance user agency, platforms should offer a menu of choices among algorithms. Under this system, each user would be given the option of retaining the existing moderation algorithm or choosing one that screens out harmful content more vigorously. The latter option also would provide enhanced engagement by human moderators operating under more restrictive policies. If users had the ability to select from among several systems, they would be empowered to choose an algorithm that more closely reflects their values and preferences. There would be another potential benefit, as well: By revealing at least some of the ways that currently secret algorithms work, this approach could give users a partial peek inside the "black box" of social media, alleviating concerns about hidden platform prejudices.

3 Undertake more vigorous, targeted human moderation of influential accounts.

To avoid high-profile mistakes, the platforms should significantly increase the number of full-time employees working directly for them who would help to create a more rigorous human-led moderation channel for the most influential accounts. This and other initiatives related to policing content require greater dedicated supervision. We recommend that the platforms each hire a senior executive—a content overseer—who reports directly to the CEO or COO.⁷¹

The platforms already have experience enforcing policies against narrowly defined groups. In the run-up to Election Day 2020, for example, Twitter announced that its civic integrity labeling policy would apply only to U.S. political candidates, U.S.-based accounts with more than 100,000 followers, and tweets that have "significant engagement."⁷² Twitter and other platforms should institute a similar policy on a permanent basis to ensure that all influential accounts, however defined, are treated even-handedly and consistently.

4 Release more data for researchers.

The question of whether social media companies harbor an anti-conservative bias can't be answered conclusively because the data available to academic and civil society researchers aren't sufficiently detailed. Existing periodic enforcement disclosures by Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are helpful but not granular enough to allow for thorough analysis by outsiders. In addition to the gross totals they now provide—for instance, of the number of hate speech take-downs for a given period—the platforms should release specific post-by-post information. This should include the nature of the content in question, the particular rule(s) a post violated, how the platform became aware of noncompliance (user report versus algorithmic moderation), and how any appeals were resolved. Such disclosure ought to be possible without revealing personalized, private data or valuable corporate trade secrets. It would allow researchers to identify important enforcement patterns, such as the potential existence of ideologically driven censorship.

5 Pursue a constructive reform agenda for social media.

The Biden administration should replace the partisan antagonism of the past four years between the White House and the social media industry with a meaningful agenda for improving the platforms. This change won't be easy to execute. It will require that the federal government seek to cooperate with these companies to refine content policies and their enforcement, even as it continues to pursue pending antitrust lawsuits against Facebook and Google. The social media industry, for its part, must strive with urgency to do a better job of protecting users and society at large from harmful content—progress that can't wait for the resolution of what might be years-long antitrust battles in the courts. While the Justice Department and Federal Trade Commission press their legal claims, the president—perhaps by empowering a special commission—needs to foster engagement with the private sector on content-related issues.

6 Work with Congress to update Section 230.

Enacted in 1996, the law has helped online platforms thrive by protecting them from a broad swath of potential liability. It has been especially valuable to smaller platforms with modest legal budgets. But a lot has changed since the mid-1990s, not least the proliferation of disinformation, hate speech, and other kinds of detrimental content.

One way of responding to this unfortunate trend would be to amend Section 230 so that its liability shield provides leverage to persuade platforms to accept a range of new responsibilities related to policing content. Social media companies that reject these responsibilities would forfeit Section 230's protection and open themselves to costly litigation. We have described this “quid pro quo” approach in more detail in an earlier report. Here, suffice it to say that one of the new platform obligations could be ensuring that algorithms involved in content ranking and recommendation not favor sensationalistic or unreliable material in pursuit of user engagement. Such obligations could be enforced by a new Digital Regulatory Agency or by judges in the course of litigation.⁷³

7 Create a new Digital Regulatory Agency.

The false claim of anti-conservative bias has contributed to widespread distrust in the platforms' willingness and ability to govern their sites. A new independent body, charged with enforcing the responsibilities of a revised Section 230, could begin to rebuild that trust. As an alternative, expanded jurisdiction and funding for social media oversight could be given to an existing agency, such as the Federal Trade Commission or Federal Communications Commission. Whatever its structure, the new regulatory body wouldn't have the authority to intervene in content decisions—a limitation necessitated by the First Amendment.

To study this idea and make recommendations, President Biden should consider expanding the task force on online harassment that he promised to convene during last year's campaign. The Biden team has outlined plans for a commission that would focus on online violence against women.⁷⁴ The administration could broaden the mandate of the task force to include other forms of harmful content, as well as the possibility of creating a new digital agency.

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