



The Real Facebook Oversight Board

Facebook Quarterly Harms Report **4th Quarter 2021**

Following the conclusion of Facebook's fourth quarter in this calendar year, the Real Facebook Oversight Board is publishing our Quarterly Harms Report. The report is a compilation of the harms that investors have facilitated through their ownership of shares – a documentation of the so-called externalities of Facebook's business, with a focus on human life, privacy, and democracy.

The harm highlights in Q4 were:

-  The continued risk of Facebook being used to incite insurrections globally;
-  Facebook's ongoing human rights failures in India and around the world;
-  The so-called news feed algorithm's continued prioritisation of known disinformation superspreaders.



Facebook insurrection enablement index

Just one year after the Insurrection at the US Capitol on January 6th, The Real Facebook Oversight Board has launched its Facebook Insurrection Enablement Index developed in consultation with

Avaaz. The aim of the index is to categorize and identify early warning signs that Facebook could be used to incite a violent insurrection in the run-up to any global democratic event. The Index comprises five categories (outlined below) measured on a 3-level sliding scale:

- **Red (high risk),**
- **Amber (medium risk)**
- **and Green (low risk).**

Index Categories



Context-specific, culturally competent human moderation in place

Facebook has continually shown its inability to moderate content in English, much less in languages other than English. This is due to insufficient human moderators that are both culturally familiar with a given context and fluent in the language. The inability to properly moderate content, with human eyes and cultural context, is a major enabling risk factor in the context of potential insurrection.

cross-check) that [allows for some Facebook users to be completely exempt from the company's own terms and conditions](#). This actively enables the spread of disinformation and misinformation by actors who may want to undermine a democratic election. Facebook must equally apply its terms and conditions ensuring there is no special treatment for anyone.



Prioritization of reputable media sources in the delivery of news content

American social media companies broadly, and Facebook specifically, have shown repeatedly that they prioritise engagement that drives ad revenue over the reputability of sources proclaiming to publish news. This has led to a deeply damaged information ecosystem. Following the 2020 US Presidential Election, [Facebook temporarily augmented their news delivery algorithm to prioritise reputability](#)

[and it worked](#). The algorithm was returned to its original configuration within a matter of days, leading once again to known disinformation superspreaders being the top performers of so-called "news" sources. Facebook demonstrated their desire to ignore the warnings of activist groups such as ours when it comes to ranking and prioritizing reputable media sources in the news feed. This warps the online information environment, particularly during democratic events and is thus a major risk factor for insurrection.



Equal application of terms and conditions for all users

If politicians and other political actors are allowed to violate the terms and conditions with political speech that is perhaps hateful or could incite violence, this is a risk factor for insurrection. We learned in the Facebook Files that the company operates a system called 'X-Check' (pronounced



Robust, rapid response fact-checking in place for claims made by candidates

In, and even out, of an active election cycle, if political actors and candidates are allowed to make claims that can be shown to be demonstrably false and go unchallenged or even evade fact-checkers in real-time, there is an increased risk of insurrection. This is evidenced by Donald



Trump’s [years-long attempt to undermine the integrity of the US election and its outcome. These actions provided the foundation for the January 6th Insurrection.](#)

It is important that false or misleading claims made on Facebook are not afforded and given great reach if they pose a threat of offline violence. [From the Rohingya genocide to ethnic violence in India, murder in Kenosha to the Capitol insurrection,](#) failure to contain the spread of harmful content online correlated to unnecessary death. There are a number of proposed mitigation measures that aim

to stop or slow the spread of content likely to cause harm at scale while preserving free expression. While people may be entitled to free speech, they are not inherently entitled to freedom of reach, particularly in a system like Facebook that prioritises profit over safety. The absence of such measures is a risk factor for insurrection.



Mitigation measures in place to limit the spread of content likely to pose significant offline harm at scale

Facebook Insurrection Enablement Index Scorecard: Brazil

Brazil’s 2022 Election: Setting The Scene
From our partner, Avaaz

Over the coming months we will be releasing index scores for several countries around the world facing elections in 2022, starting with Brazil.

The Brazilian Presidential election is scheduled to take place on October 2nd, 2022. Brazil’s current President, Jair Bolsonaro, often referred to as the [“Tropical Trump”](#), has adopted [Trump’s anti-democracy play book](#) in the run-up to the upcoming vote.

President Bolsonaro has headlined anti-democratic protests, [making false claims](#) that previous elections were rigged. Similar to Trump’s attack on mail-in ballots, Bolsonaro is attacking the electronic voting system, demanding an “auditable printed vote” in the upcoming elections. Analysts agree that this disinformation is meant to discredit said elections.

Centrally, Bolsonaro and his allies are utilizing Facebook and other social media platforms to spread these dangerous falsehoods.

As previous research has shown, Trump and his allies shared [disinformation discrediting the election months before the insurrection](#), building a strong echo chamber and radicalizing extremists. Instead of acting early on this content and the

groups and pages amplifying it, Facebook waited until it was too late, and took drastic measures at the very last moment. Earlier research estimates that, had Facebook acted earlier it could have prevented up to 10 Billion estimated views on the Pages and Groups that repeatedly shared misinformation.

Facebook is again delaying action, and the consequences could be even more dire than the insurrection in the US. Brazil is a young democracy, and has weaker institutional checks and balances when compared to the United States. Moreover, with efforts underway to radicalize Brazilian security forces, the chances of violent clashes run high. Moreover, vulnerable communities in Brazil, such as the indigenous communities across the Amazon, face significant threats as this rhetoric escalates.

Avaaz’s preliminary research has shown that this dangerous disinformation content continues to spread on Facebook, shared by a number of pages and groups, without significant action:

AVAAZ’s research estimates that, had Facebook acted earlier it could have prevented up to

10 Billion  estimated views

on the Pages and Groups that repeatedly shared misinformation.



1. Direct speeches of Bolsonaro claiming, [without evidence](#), that in the 2014 and 2018 elections, the electronic ballots were rigged. Bolsonaro's speech to the nation was shared [multiple times on Facebook](#) - see 38'14"
2. Bolsonaro gave false declarations at the UN speech - see the video, still available directly on his Facebook Page from [September 2021](#) where he:
 - ◇ Falsely claimed that millions of Brazilians took the streets in support of the government, the biggest political manifestation in history
 - ◇ Said that Brazil has 83% of electric power coming from renewable sources, despite

official data from 2021 setting that number at 48.4%

- ◇ Suggested the government supports covid vaccination [when he himself had actually made several statements opposing it](#) (his Covid vaccination status is unclear as he declared 100% secrecy over it)
3. Bolsonaro either caused or took part in 84 agglomeration episodes (a large accumulation of people in a small space) during the pandemic, according to [O Globo newspaper](#). The image shows him with supporters from Campo Alegre de Lourdes, a city in Bahia, in June 2020. Photo by the official presidency photographer, Alan Santos
 4. Bolsonaro said Covid vaccine increases the risk of getting AIDS [Fact Checking by UNAIDS \(EN here\)](#)
 5. Bolsonaro [lied](#) about Petrobras [Brazil's state oil company] being obligated by law to raise fuel prices.



Just the Tip of the Iceberg

Credible fact-checking agency [Aos Fatos prepared this interactive tool](#) with all the false or misleading declarations of Bolsonaro, going back to day one of his presidency. All claims have been fact-checked.

The Aos Fatos report highlights the false information that has been most repeated:

- A. Claims that Bolsonaro has presided over three years with no corruption cases;
- B. Claims that the Supreme Court limited his decision-making power over how to lead the crisis response to the pandemic;
- C. The use of hydroxychloroquine as an efficient treatment to COVID.

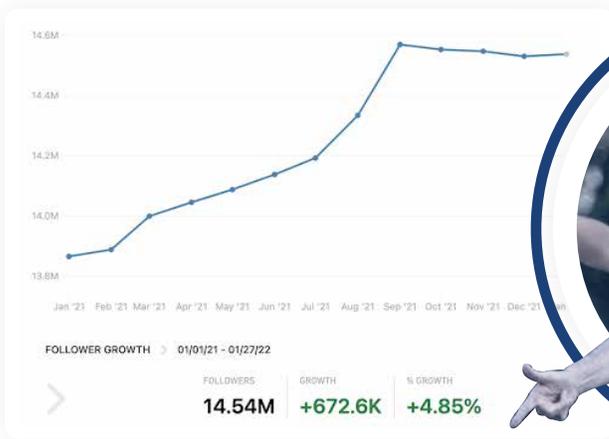
Aos Fatos updates its tool every time a false or misleading claim is debunked. So far, they have debunked 4,774 pieces of disinformation related to Bolsonaro.





Yet despite Bolsonaro’s tsunami of disinformation, Facebook has yet to take action at scale to protect its Brazilian users and the integrity of the upcoming elections. Bolsonaro uses Facebook extensively to give public speeches to the Brazilian population and they are heavily watched.

As Bolsonaro accelerated his attack on Brazilian democracy over the last year, his follower numbers grew by 672.6K members, reaching a total of 14.54 Million on the platform, based on statistics gathered from Facebook’s Crowdtangle platform:



Worryingly, over the last year, Bolsonaro’s official Facebook page garnered over 251.45 Million engagements (likes, comments and/or shares). This number completely eclipses the reach of Brazil’s credible media sources, O Globo, Folha de S.Paulo and TV Globo, who have garnered 27.81 Million, 6.67 Million, and 51.92 Million views.

Multiple human rights organizations, respected news outlets, and civil society organisations have sounded the alarm on how Bolsonaro threatens democracy. These include Human Rights Watch, Folha de S.Paulo (Brazil’s largest newspaper), their podcast, Café da Manhã, Exame (Brazil’s largest economic news magazine) and the BBC.

Yet despite these red flags, researchers have not identified any significant steps taken by Facebook to ensure its platform is not weaponised to create another insurrection despite having ample time and a real-world example in the form of the US Capitol Insurrection.

Based on the above, the following scores have been assigned to Facebook in Brazil vis-a-vis the Facebook Insurrection Enablement Index:

Context-specific culturally competent human moderation in place

Lack of Transparency: Facebook has not announced any expansion of its moderators in Brazil ahead of the elections. As of yet, it is unclear whether the platform plans to train up culturally competent human moderators ahead of the election. Time is running out, and unless Facebook expands its moderation team and skill sets by April, the democratic process in Brazil could be jeopardized by the platform.

Equal application of terms and conditions for all users

Facebook took action to remove a post by Bolsonaro falsely linking COVID shots to AIDS, showing that the platform is willing to act against the sitting President. However, the platform has yet to take action at scale on posts and videos with disinformation about the electoral process. Moreover, the platform has not limited the reach of Bolsonaro’s Facebook page, despite a supposed policy that the platform has of downgrading pages that repeatedly share disinformation, suggesting Bolsonaro is not being held to the same standards as other users.

Prioritization of reputable media sources in the delivery of news content

As the data above indicates, Jair Bolsonaro’s page massively outpaces leading Brazilian news outlets in reach. Preliminary analysis conducted by Avaaz indicates that groups and pages connected to Bolsonaro also continue to share disinformation that is gaining significant reach while using new hybrid tactics to avoid fact-checking and other forms of moderation.



Robust, rapid response fact-checking in place for claims made by candidates

Fact checkers in Brazil are doing an excellent job— given their current resources— to debunk disinformation. However, Facebook has yet to apply effective solutions to the widespread sharing of disinformation, such as retroactively correcting the record when users see false content. Worryingly, WhatsApp, owned by Meta/Facebook continues to be used as a weapon of mass disinformation, and Meta/Facebook has yet to introduce strong counter measures. Lastly, Facebook has not made any substantial statements about fact-checking candidates on issues pertaining to election integrity - a policy that proved counterproductive with Trump, who utilized the exemption, along with his allies, to amplify misinformation to tens of millions. Facebook did make an announcement that it would [provide generic informational labels](#) on election related posts, but as evident from the experience in the US, these steps are far from enough. The company continues to demonstrate that it has not learned its lesson from the US experience.



Mitigation measures in place to limit the spread of content likely to pose significant offline harm at scale

In an analysis of pages and groups that repeatedly share disinformation in Brazil, Avaaz found evidence that a small number of these pages appear to be throttled, although only access to Facebook’s internal systems can confirm this. While this may be read as a signal that Facebook has continued to apply its policy on sanctioning repeat misinformers, it falls well short of what is necessary. Facebook has at its disposal a number of other “[break glass](#)” policies that were implemented during the US election which partly protected against the escalation of violent incitement and other forms of harmful content. These measures were largely applied after the election when significant harm had already been done. In Brazil, despite increasing calls to violence, Avaaz found no evidence that such mitigation efforts have been put in place.

Civil Society Increases Pressure on Facebook to Release Human Rights Impact Assessment of India

On 19 January, over 20 organizations, joined by whistleblowers Frances Haugen and Sophie Zhang, former Facebook Vice President Brian Boland, Teesta Setalvad, from Citizens for Justice and Peace and Dr. Zafarul-Islam Khan, former Chairman of Delhi Minorities Commission [called on Facebook](#):

LIVE

FACEBOOK’S HUMAN RIGHTS PROBLEM IN INDIA

INDIA CIVIL WATCH INTERNATIONAL & THE REAL FACEBOOK OVERSIGHT BOARD



TEESTA SETALVAD
Citizens for Justice & Peace



BRIAN BOLAND
Ex Vice President Facebook



DR ZAFARUL KHAN
Ex Chairman Delhi Minorities Commission



SOPHIE ZHANG
Facebook Whistleblower



FRANCES HAUGEN
Facebook Whistleblower

RELEASE INDIA HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Release the long-delayed India Human Rights Impact Assessment (HRIA), and addressed grave concerns about the company’s human rights record in India.

This [event](#), hosted in conjunction with [India Civil Watch International](#), is part of our ongoing effort to draw further attention to Facebook’s harmful impact on countries around the world, with wide coverage of the story, including in [Reuters](#), [The Washington Post](#), [The Guardian](#), [Economic Times](#), [Yahoo News](#), [The Hindu](#), and [Al Jazeera](#).



JANUARY 19, 12 PM EST 10:30 PM IST
bit.ly/releasehria

The Real Facebook Oversight Board



RFOB Member Maria Ressa Wins Nobel Peace Prize

Real Facebook Oversight Board Member Maria Ressa was awarded the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize alongside Dmitry Muratov for their commitment to exposing abuses of power and the stealthy creep of authoritarianism around the world. Ressa, the cofounder and CEO of Filipino news site Rappler has [faced legal action](#) from the Filipino government in response to her journalism, but persists in the face of such retaliation.

In her Nobel lecture, Ressa highlighted the many harms that American social media companies perpetuate. Ressa referred to the ‘toxic sludge’ coursing through the media ecosystem that she rightfully attributed to American internet companies “that make money by spreading hate and triggering the worst in us.” Ressa named Facebook as the world’s largest distributor of news, while calling attention to how American internet



“Without facts, you can’t have truth. Without truth, you can’t have trust. Without trust, we have no shared reality, no democracy, and it becomes impossible to deal with our world’s existential problems: climate, coronavirus, the battle for truth.”

- Maria Ressa

companies are biased against facts due to how their systems reward “lies laced with anger and hate.” Ressa touched on the destructive power of surveillance capitalism, an idea developed by fellow RFOB member Shoshana Zuboff, to argue that our behavior is being commodified with disastrous consequences on display in countries like Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

Ressa’s proposed solution begins with a testament to the importance of fact in journalism.

She said, “We need information ecosystems that live and die by facts. We do this by shifting social priorities to rebuild journalism for the 21st century while regulating and outlawing the surveillance economics that profit from hate and lies.” She called for protections to independent journalists often without the protections afforded by American media conglomerates, for legislation to strip American internet companies of their power, and for the intentional construction of a world based in the shared values of truth and democracy.

Rohingya refugees sue Facebook for role in genocide

Rohingya refugees from Myanmar [are suing Facebook](#) for inaction in response to hate-speech on the platform to the tune of \$150 billion. Facebook has [previously acknowledged](#) its role in the genocide against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, with executives conceding that the platform contributed to [“foment\[ing\] division and incit\[ing\] offline violence”](#). The class action suit was brought by a Rohingya woman in the United States on behalf of more than 10,000 refugees. It alleges that the platform was unable to moderate and remove provocative and inflammatory content that violated their own terms of service against the incitement of

violence. The suit draws attention to the repeated inability for Facebook to moderate content, but especially content that is not in English.

[Rohingya youth have filed a complaint against Facebook](#) with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in Ireland. The central tenor of the claim states that Facebook knew their systems were being used to incite violence against Rohingya Muslims and yet did nothing despite being privy to this information.





UK and EU get serious on regulation

In the United Kingdom, The Joint Committee on the Online Safety Bill, chaired by RFOB Member Damian Collins MP, has [published a draft of recommendations](#) to improve the bill which seek to pivot from focusing on regulating content to regulating design and algorithm-driven systems, a critical and important reframing. Approaching the harms of social media from a content perspective and attempting to clamp down by removing or banning certain content is near impossible at scale. The Joint Committee has recognized this reality and recommended a shift in the bill to focus instead on design solutions that prioritise safety or engagement.

The bill would require more human moderators, slow down the pace of content spread, limit the sharing of content without users having read the content, and ensure platforms had plans around election times and

other periods of heightened importance. The bill also prioritizes protecting freedom of expression, a critical tool for journalists to break through the sea of disinformation on the platform. [The RFOB has continually demanded](#) that Facebook reprioritize reputable journalism in its news feed ranking algorithm, reflecting the truth that mediating disinformation must come from algorithmic changes.

In the European Union, [the European Parliament passed the Digital Services Act with an overwhelming majority](#). While the bill still needs to navigate through the trilogue process of Parliament, the Commission and the Council agreeing on final language, there are promising signs, particularly around European Parliament's intent to [ban online advertising based on sensitive personal information](#).



The reputable information ecosystem on Facebook is still riddled with known disinformers

62% of #1 News Posts and 49 % of Top 10 News Posts are from known disinformers

In this quarter's analysis of Kevin Roose's Top 10 data aggregation, several trends emerged. Primarily, the raw numbers suggest that Ben Shapiro and Dan Bongino (the latter was [banned by Youtube](#) after posting Covid misinformation and subsequently attempting to skirt his

temporary suspension) are increasing their grip on political content within the USA. Just their content alone accounted for 40.5% of #1 posts this quarter, while they also accounted for 31.4% of all Top 10 posts this quarter.

[Dan Bongino](#)

Fox News pundit & former Republican congressional candidate



[Ben Shapiro](#)

Editor of conservative website [Daily Wire](#)





Boondock Saints
1.3%



Breitbart
2.5%



Rush Limbaugh
1.3%



Fox News
2.5%



Franklin Graham
11.4%



NPR
6.3%



Ben Shapiro
21.5%



Dan Bongino
19.0%



Allkpop
3.8%



TMZ
2.5%



CNN
3.8%



Occupy Democrats
2.5%



In cross-quarter comparison, the overall share of Top 10 posts that belong to disinformers grew to 49% from 43% last quarter, indicating an increase in the circulation of disinformation. Additionally, the share of #1 posts belonging to known right-wing disinformers grew from

40% to 62%, indicating an increase in virality of content from people and institutions known for spreading disinformation. These trends are deeply concerning, especially as the United States enters a midterm election year.

The Real Facebook Oversight Board repeats its demand that Facebook:

Uprank quality news sources by reprioritizing reputability in the news algorithm

