



The Real Facebook Oversight Board

Facebook Quarterly Harms Report **1st Quarter 2022**

Following the conclusion of Facebook's first quarter in this financial 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 Q1 were:

-  Facebook's failure to treat the War in Ukraine as a true emergency, leading to disinformation and confusion.
-  The continued risk of Facebook being used to incite insurrections globally.
-  Whistleblower revelations detailing the abuse and poor working conditions in Facebook's Kenya content moderation center.
-  The so-called news feed algorithm's continued prioritisation of known disinformation superspreaders.

As Facebook tallies its Q1 dollars, Facebook shareholders have made a sizable investment in disinformation, destabilization, deceit and denial.



New Research: As Russia Attacks Ukraine, RT + Sputnik Stay Viral, Exposing Continued Non-English Language Harms

Facebook is failing in its efforts to keep Russian disinformation - and disinformation about the Russia-Ukraine War - of its platforms and out of the information ecosystem.

- New preliminary research from global civic organisation [Avaaz](#) shows that two major sources of disinformation, **Russia's RT and Sputnik media platforms are thriving, with non-English content** racking up engagement on Meta's platforms -
- In Poland, Avaaz research suggests a **troubling proliferation of anti-Ukrainian refugee narratives**, including low and high-profile actors on Facebook platforms promoting false claims that non-Ukrainians are the dominant refugees entering Poland; that crime has increased in certain parts of Eastern Europe because of non-Ukrainian refugees and that Ukrainian refugees are mostly from Africa and Asia and that these demographics of refugees are a terrorist threat.

- The Center for Countering Digital Hate also shared research showing that **Facebook failed to label 80% of articles on its platform promoting a fast-spreading conspiracy theory that the US is funding the use of bioweapons in Ukraine.** [The BBC has exposed](#) what it called "Putin's Superfans on a Mission" on Facebook.

In total, in spite of Facebook's promises to crack down on Russian disinformation about the war in Ukraine, research shows they continue to allow disproven narratives to reach millions.

"If I were any Eastern European leader right now, I'd be asking tough questions of Big Tech," said Fadi Quran, Campaign Director at Avaaz, "like why, with conflict raging on their doorsteps, the platforms don't seem to be taking the steps needed to effectively defend eastern europeans from information warfare? Have the platforms applied the "break-glass" measures applied during the US insurrection that limited the spread of disinformation and dangerous content?"



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Non-English Language Propaganda Slips By

RFOB has warned Facebook shareholders over the last 18 months about the challenges of non-English language disinformation, and failed content moderation that allows Facebook/Meta to seemingly halt disinformation from a media source in English, only to see it flourish in other languages.

New research from Avaaz shows that in spite of blocks on two of Russia's most notorious disinformation superspreaders in some nations and in English, RT and Sputnik are still thriving.

- Between July 2017 and April 2022, RT's Spanish and Arabic-language pages picked up over 6 times more followers than its English and Russian-language pages, and also racked up 6 times more interactions in Spanish and Arabic.
- During this 5-year period, Avaaz saw the same pattern with Sputnik, where the Spanish and Arabic-language pages accumulated over 3



times more followers than its main English-language page. In Sputnik's case, interactions were over 5 times higher on Spanish and Arabic pages than on its main English-language page.

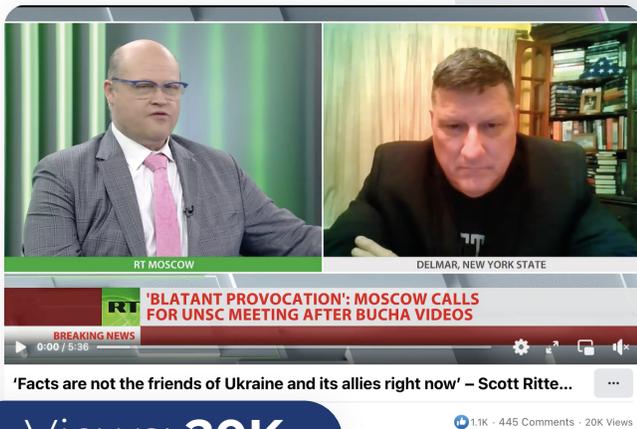
Avaaz measured the interactions and interaction rates on RT and Sputnik's Facebook pages globally in the 40-day period (January 19, 2022 to February 27, 2022) before restrictions were enforced for certain EU citizens using the platform and the 40-day period after those restrictions (February 28, 2022 to April 8, 2022).

- RT's pages saw a 38.70% decrease in interactions overall. Sputnik a 61.39% decrease.
- RT's pages only saw a 9.76% decrease in interaction rates. Sputnik saw a 27.19% drop in interaction rates.
- **Despite this reduction, the following pages saw increases both in their interactions**

and interaction rates within the time period analyzed:

- ◇ RT Online (59.91% increase in interactions and 62.09% increase in interaction rate [RT Online is an Arabic-language page])
- ◇ RT (16.10% increase in interactions and 19.14% increase in interaction rate [RT is an English-language page])
- ◇ Sputnik Brasil (13.79% increase in interactions and 28.38% increase in interaction rate)
- ◇ Sputnik Japan (6.05 increase in interactions and 1.88% increase in interaction rate)

In other words, dangerous and false Ukraine-related RT and Sputnik content is still spreading on Facebook. From Avaaz, here's some of the most egregious content -



Views: **20K**

Interactions: **1.5k**

Caption:

Russia has called for a UN Security Council meeting as shocking images emerged yesterday from the Ukrainian town of Bucha. Moscow has dismissed allegations as a provocation by Kiev. We discussed the disturbing events with Scott Ritter, a former US Marine Corps Intelligence Officer.

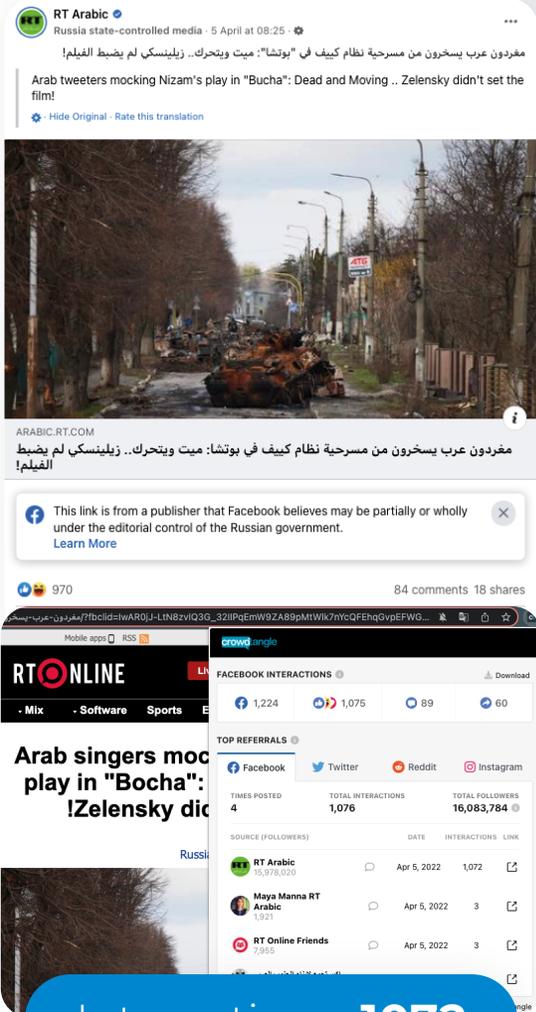


Views: **2.4K**

Interactions: **307**

Caption (Facebook translation from Spanish):

Sputnik spoke to Venezuelan political scientist William Serafino to analyse why the Russian initiative to conduct an investigation in Bucha.



Interactions: **1072**

Caption:

Arab tweeters mocking Nizam's play in "Bucha": Dead an Moving... Zelensky didn't set the film!

Excerpt from linked article:

"It seems that the miserable spectacle that took place in the Ukrainian town of Bucha and was attributed to the Russian army did not convince the Arab reader, who showed great awareness of what is happening today in terms fo falsification of facts and cowardly fabrication.

The lie that the Ukrainian authorities presented to the world by broadcasting videos allegedly shot in the city of Bucha, located in the Kiev province, showing corpses scattered in the street, was badly worded, as many Arab social media pioneers ridiculed what they saw.

Especially after the video showing one of the "dead" whose body is lying on the side of the road moving his hand before cars pass him, apparently to protect him from being run over, while tweeters said some of the bodies were laid down to create a more dramatic picture of what happened, and others indicated that President The Ukrainian is bad director because he could not control the game."



Fact check:

B B C

"A satellite image of Bucha in Ukraine appears to show bodies lying in the street nearly two weeks before the Russians left the town.

The image from 19 March, first reported by The New York Times and confirmed by the BBC, directly contradicts Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's claim

that footage of bodies in Bucha, that has emerged in recent days, was "staged" after the Russians withdrew.

The satellite image shows objects that appear to be bodies in the exact locations where they were subsequently found by Ukrainian forces when they regained control of the town north of Kyiv.

Along another section of the road, the image shows what appear to be more bodies on the ground."



Poland Flooded With Falsehoods About Ukrainian Refugees

Also alarming, and reminiscent of other content globally on Facebook platforms targeting and scapegoating refugees and vulnerable communities, Avaaz has found a dangerous rise in anti-refugee narratives on Facebook platforms, and on TikTok. From their initial research, it appears there is:

- A troubling cross-section of examples of low and high-profile actors, on both Facebook and TikTok, promoting anti-refugee narratives
- These narratives included that:
 - ◊ Non-Ukrainians are the dominant refugees entering Poland;
 - ◊ And that crime has increased in certain parts of Eastern Europe because of non-Ukrainian refugees.
- Other narratives promoted in the viral, detected videos included that Ukrainian refugees are mostly from Africa and Asia and that these demographics of refugees are a terrorist threat.
- Despite Facebook and TikTok’s promises to issue warning labels on fact-checked

disinformation content, few of the posts that promoted what is very likely false or misleading information had

The Russian government previously sought to weaponize [the refugee crisis in Europe in 2015-2016](#), using disinformation as a tool to polarize societies on these issues. Similar narratives are being revived.

These challenges could partly be addressed by the EU’s new Digital Services Act, passed on April 22nd. The DSA will require far more transparency, and could lead quickly to new procedures that would flag and limit hate speech and propaganda.

Quran told us: “Europe needs a strong DSA to defend European democracies from these digital threats. And that means a DSA where civil society organisations have access to anonymized platform data, so that they can continue to act as an early warning system, where and when platforms fail to do their jobs properly. We know some countries are concerned about bad actors exploiting this access, but robust vetting procedures could easily solve that.”

Sidebar: Even At War, Russia Still Uses Facebook To Meddle In French Election

As Facebook shareholders, you’ve been investing for years in destabilizing global elections - from Brexit to US 2016. **According to preliminary research from global civic organisation Avaaz, RT France - the French affiliate of RT - managed to exploit Facebook’s algorithm to achieve an outsized influence on COVID-related news shared on the platform.**

related content in a four-month period. The outlet’s interactions trailed just behind public broadcaster France Info. This is despite the fact that RT France has a smaller following than most of the other broadcast outlets analysed.

For RT France to become the second largest influencer on COVID on Facebook with a smaller following potentially suggests an intentional strategy to game the platform’s engagement-first algorithm to reach more users. The function of the platform’s algorithm is to prioritise engagement and maximise what it calls “meaningful interactions.” In other words, Facebook will prioritise posts in users’ News Feeds that have high rates of likes, shares and comments.

Based on an analysis of the reach and influence of France’s most prominent broadcast news outlets on Facebook, Avaaz found that RT France racked up the second highest rate of interactions on COVID-





Avaaz’s analysis of RT France’s activity offers clues on how the outlet triggered the algorithm to enjoy more visibility on a flashpoint issue like COVID. Not only did RT exploit the pandemic and lead French broadcast outlets in flooding users’ News Feeds with COVID-related content, its highest-performing coverage focused primarily on stories that could sow distrust in vital efforts to fight the virus, and

fuel anti-government sentiment (as reflected in movements like the Freedom Convoy) ahead of the 2022 elections. These stories were often shared by far-right political actors and groups to downplay the seriousness of the pandemic and question the motives behind French government-backed COVID responses.



The Boston Globe



RFOB Members Speak Out: Ukraine War Requires A “Break Glass” Moment

If Facebook is failing in Ukraine, what can we do? And what should shareholders demand? [In an op-ed earlier this month in The Boston Globe](#), Nora Benavidez, senior counsel and director of digital justice and civil rights at Free Press and Kate Coyer, RFOB Member and is a fellow with the Democracy Institute’s Center for Media, Data and Society at Central European University, reminded us that Facebook knows how to fix some of these challenges - because they’ve done it before -

Facebook’s engagement algorithms are built to amplify and profit from content that generates strong responses from users. And in the days just after the 2020 US election, then-president Donald Trump was spreading the toxic lies of the “Stop the Steal” campaign to millions over social media.

In this instance, Facebook caved to external and internal pressure to do more to stop the proliferation of election disinformation on its many platforms. For five days after the election, Facebook’s News Feed and other features looked very different. They prioritized, or “upranked,” more-credible news sources in an effort to drown out hateful and untrue content. As we know from the testimony of whistleblower Frances Haugen, Facebook’s leadership implemented “break-glass” measures that are designed to slow the spread of the worst disinformation during important elections and times of crisis.



We know Facebook can't be trusted to protect free elections and democracies. As argued in The Globe, the Real Facebook Oversight Board is calling for -

Fix the algorithm, upranking credible and trusted news sources in the weeks leading up to and following an election.

Make an equal investment in non-English language content moderation, including Russian and 25 other languages.

Let academic researchers back in, allowing outside, independent scholars to monitor Facebook's content around the 2022 elections.

Benavidez and Coyer said it best -

These break-glass measures should continue even after Meta decides that a crisis has passed. We are in a global disinformation crisis. With Russian aggression escalating and 36

determinative national elections taking place in 2022, the urgency to act has never been stronger. The spread of disinformation never ends. Meta's efforts to safeguard its users shouldn't either.

RFOB Members, Partners Sound The Alarm On Worker Abuse And Content Farms In Kenya.

In the outskirts of Nairobi, Kenya, Sama, a company self-titled as an 'ethical AI' firm, employs over 200 people. Their job is to watch hundreds of hours of rape, violence, murder, suicide, and child sex abuse, ostensibly to moderate this content and ensure it does not remain on the platform of their contractor, Facebook. Facebook has often been criticized for outsourcing content moderation efforts to countries in the Global South. The company is able to pay workers less while subjecting them to poor working conditions and leave them without sufficient mental health support and benefits. This is no different— TIME and RFOB partners have elevated serious concerns with Sama, a company headquartered in California, but hired by Facebook in Kenya to moderate content for all of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Workers at Sama take home as little as \$1.50 per hour and work in an environment characterized by mental trauma, intimidation, and the alleged suppression of the right to unionize. Workers at Sama have attempted to both strike and form

"At Sama, it feels like speaking the truth or standing up for your rights is a crime," a second employee tells TIME. "They made sure by firing some people that this will not happen again. I feel like it's modern slavery, like neo-colonialism."

unions, both efforts were directly quashed by Facebook. Foxglove, an RFOB partner, has informed Sama that it is preparing to bring legal action for the alleged wrongful termination of Daniel Motaung, a worker who tried to form a union. "Firing workers for trying to organize is against the law," says Cori Crider, Foxglove's director. "Daniel did a brave thing by blowing the whistle here—as was his legal right."

The mental trauma that these workers are subjected to is of great concern, especially considering that Facebook provides no support to these workers. TIME reports at least two Sama content moderators who resigned after receiving diagnoses for mental illnesses such as PTSD, anxiety, and depression. RFOB partner, the Signals Network, has provided psychological and legal support for the whistleblowers who made these revelations possible.



Earlier this month, RFOB members Phumzile Damme and UK MP Damien Collins, with US Rep Sean Casten called out the crisis in an op-ed for The Independent: [Child abuse, violence, assault: Doesn't Facebook care about its content moderators?](#)

In the op-ed, authors made five demands:

- Lawmakers must strengthen transparency by including mandated public audits of social media's supply chains of content moderators in legislation
- Facebook must absorb the costs of what it takes to keep its platform safe by limiting exposure to traumatizing content, paying living wages, respecting labor rights, and providing mental support.

- Facebook must release audits of its sub-contractors.
- Lawmakers must protect whistleblowers to ensure more information such as this comes to light
- Facebook employees must voice their support for these outsourced content moderators

The RFOB will hold an event 10 May at noon EST with TIME's Billy Perrigo moderating, featuring the whistleblower from his piece along with the Signals Network, Foxglove and Phumzile Damme discussing the content moderation crisis.

Welcome New Members

The Real Facebook Oversight Board was thrilled to welcome six new members in Q1, putting Facebook and Facebook's own oversight board on notice that our global reach is growing.

We are honored and excited to add these six extraordinary experts on technology policy, disinformation, online extremism, racial justice and free speech to the Board. This is a truly global cohort that reflects the harms posed by Facebook to the global community. Each member brings critical expertise and insight at this urgent moment for reform and oversight of runaway social media content.

Our new members are -

- **Rana Ayyub** [[@RanaAyyub](#)] is an investigative journalist, Global Opinions contributor at @washingtonpost, writer on @SubstackInc and currently fighting for an open and free press in India. Ayyub was recently [highlighted in a full-page ad](#) in The Washington Post defending her against judicial harassment.
- **Dr. Bharath Ganesh** [[@bganesh11](#)] is an Assistant Professor of Media Studies at the University of Groningen. His research focuses on the intersections between platforms and racism, hate speech, and extremism.

- **Evan Balgord** [[@ebalgord](#)] is the Executive Director of the Canadian Anti-Hate Network, an antifascist nonprofit dedicated to countering, monitoring, and exposing the far-right. He was formerly an investigative journalist and a VP of the @CAJ.
- **Dr. Kate Coyer** [[@kcoyer](#)] is a fellow and teacher in Budapest with the Center for Media, Data and Society at Central European University and a former Berkman Klein Center fellow. Kate's research primarily examines media, technology, and social change.
- **Steven Renderos** [[@stevenrenderos](#)] is the Executive Director of MediaJustice, a national racial justice hub fighting for a future in which all people of color are connected, represented, and free.
- **Phumzile Van Damme** [[@zilevandamme](#)] is a Misinformation Specialist and Consultant. She is a member of the International Grand Committee on Disinformation and a former MP in South Africa, where she served as Shadow Minister of Communications and Online Technology.



EU Puts The Brakes On Big Tech

In the European Union, [the European Parliament recently passed the Digital Services Act with an overwhelming majority](#). The act is considered one of the most aggressive legislative bills in the world to address the many issues plaguing technology platforms. The Real Facebook Oversight Board has spoken out vigorously supporting the DSA.

[Last week, the DSA became law -](#)

The Digital Services Act is intended to address social media's societal harms by requiring companies to more aggressively police their platforms for illicit content or risk billions of dollars in fines. Tech companies would be compelled to set up new policies and procedures to remove flagged hate speech, terrorist propaganda and other

material defined as illegal by countries within the European Union.

The law aims to end an era of self-regulation in which tech companies set their own policies about what content could stay up or be taken down. It stands out from other regulatory attempts by addressing online speech, an area that is largely off limits in the United States because of First Amendment protections. Meta would face yearly audits for "systemic risks" linked to their businesses.

The challenge now is how aggressively the law will be regulated and upheld. No corporation in the world needs external, independent oversight more than Facebook - we will continue to push for the DSA to be upheld as aggressively as possible.

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, critical trends highlighted by the RFOB last quarter persists, illustrating an inability for Facebook to control its platform.

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) continue to have a tight grip

on the most viral political content. Just their posts alone accounted for 33.7% of #1 posts this quarter in addition to making up 28.6% of top 10 posts. This holds steady from trends observed in Q4 of 2021, where they accounted for 40.5% of #1 posts this quarter, while they also accounted for 31.4% of all Top 10 posts this quarter. Clearly, Facebook has no interest in preventing the disinformation they spread from proliferating on their platform.

[Dan Bongino](#)

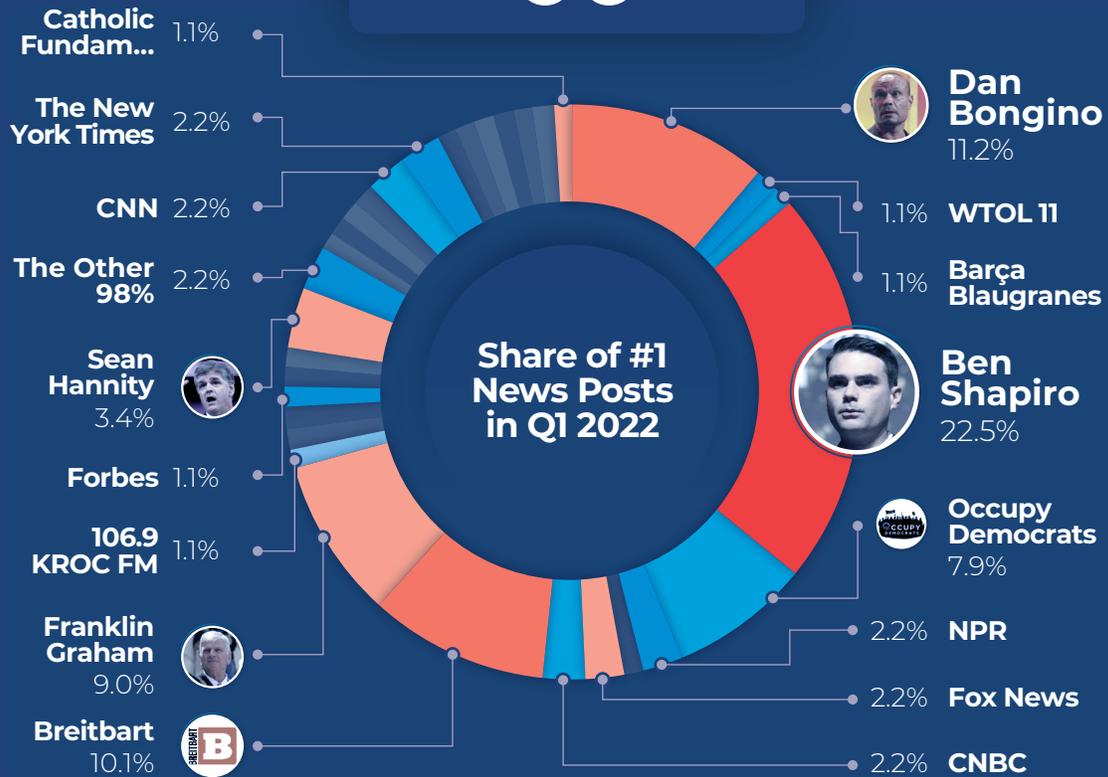
Fox News pundit & former Republican congressional candidate



[Ben Shapiro](#)

Editor of conservative website [Daily Wire](#)





In cross-quarter comparison, the overall share of Top 10 posts that belong to disinformers decreased slightly from 49% to 43% this quarter, indicating that the circulation of disinformation is holding steady, despite repeated criticism and political pressure levied against Facebook.

Additionally, the share of #1 posts belonging to known right-wing disinformers held steady going from 62% to 60%, indicating the stable presence of disinformation on the platform. 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

