



The Real Facebook Oversight Board

Facebook Quarterly Harms Report **2nd Quarter 2023**

After the end of Facebook's second quarter in this financial year, the Real Facebook Oversight Board is publishing our Quarterly Harms Report. The report summarizes the harms that investors have facilitated through their ownership of shares in this company—a documentation of the so-called externalities of Facebook's business, with a focus on human life, privacy, and democracy.

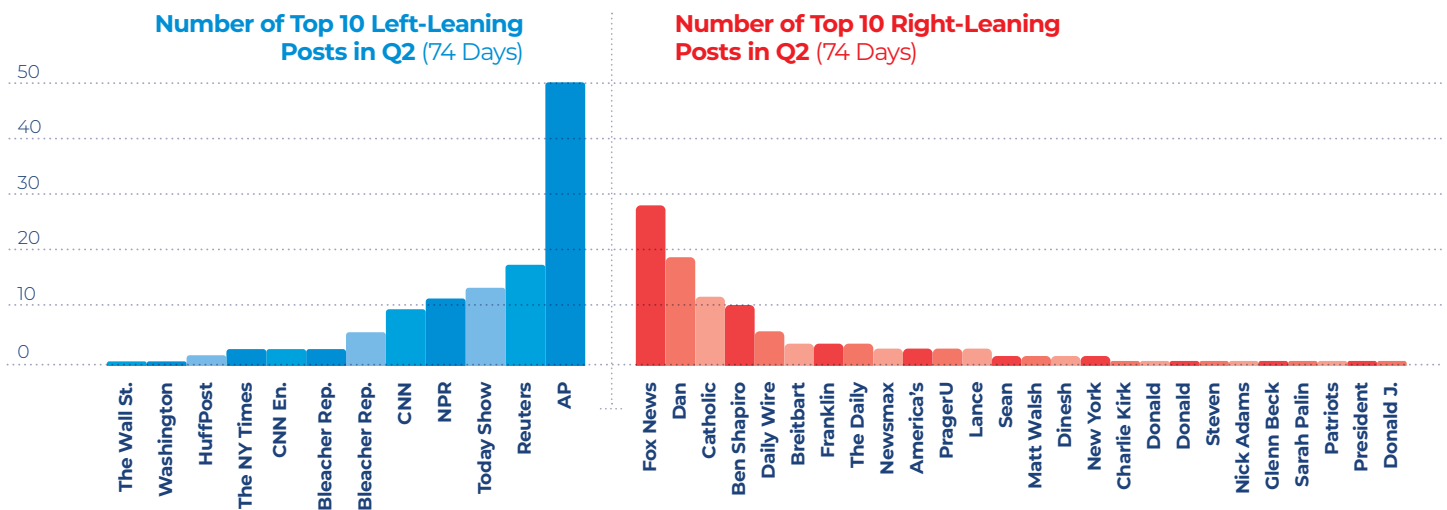
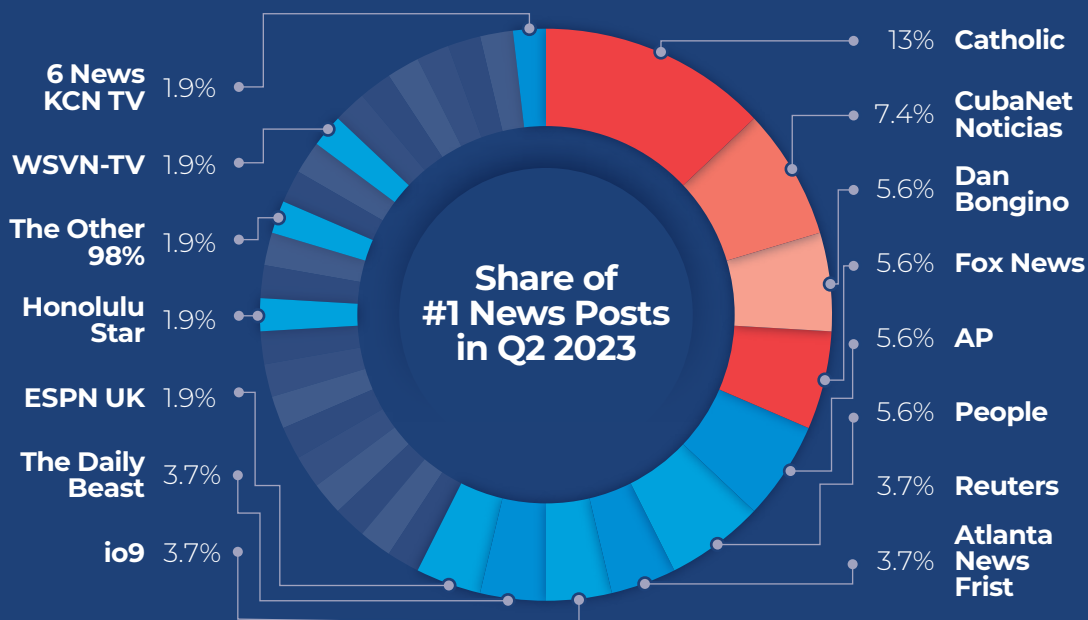
The harm highlights in Q2 were:

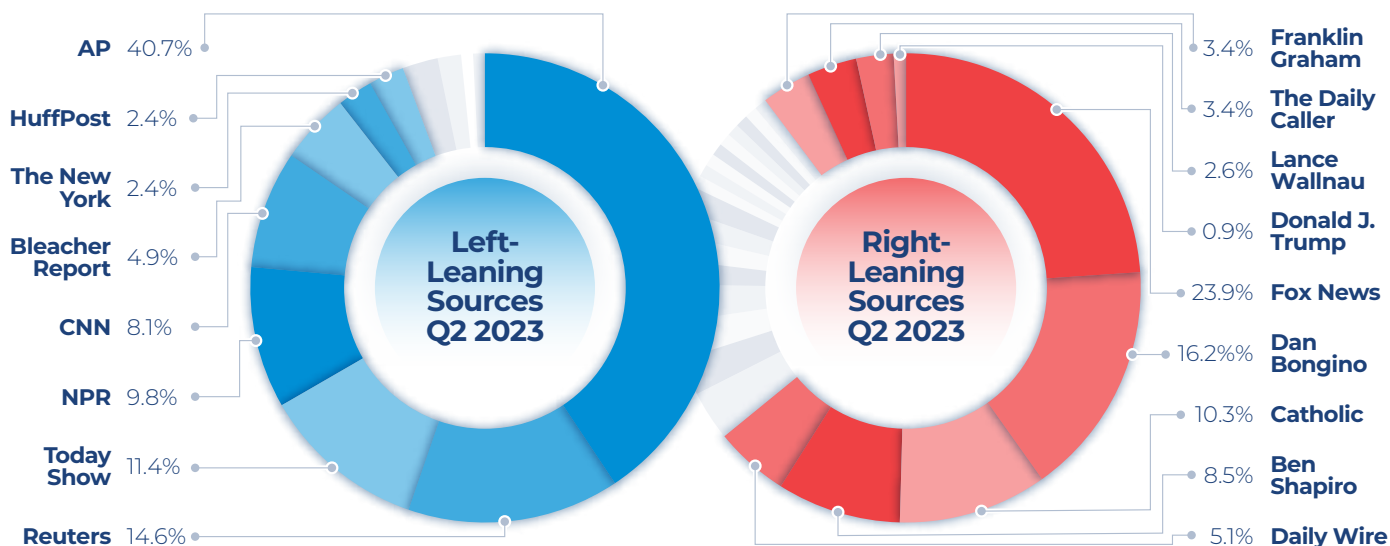
- Meta's continued role as a hub platforming known disinformers and hate speech.
- Pedophiles and traffickers running wild on Meta platforms.
- Meta's attack on journalism, restricting access to Meta's platforms for credible news outlets—an issue that led Meta to ban the Real Facebook Oversight Board from Instagram.
- Evisceration of the few remaining election safeguards in the run-up to the 2024 elections, including an alarming CNN report that Meta laid off critical staff responsible for countering election disinformation and troll or harassment campaigns.



As Facebook tallies its Q2 dollars, Meta shareholders have made a sizable investment in hate speech, election disinformation, pedophilia, and attacks on the free press and journalism. The quarter did see the launch of one antidote: [The Facebook Receipts](#), a new project of RFOB and the Citizens to make Meta's harms transparent and visible.

The Information Ecosystem on Facebook Is Still Riddled With Known Disinformers





In the 2nd Quarter, analysis of Kevin Roose's daily lists of the Top Ten most viewed posts (of those from public pages with links) shows that Facebook's algorithms continue to fuel and amplify the platforms of known disinformers.



conservative commentator

Dan Bongino

dominated **Facebook's Top Ten posts**, appearing more times than any other user, except news agencies like the AP and Fox News.

This quarter, Bongino had a Top Ten spot for 1/4th of the time, or



- They were joined by even more disinformers like Breitbart, Newsmax, PragerU, and America's Last Line Of Defense, who actively encourage the spread of conspiracy theories, misleading journalism, or false, clickbait headlines.

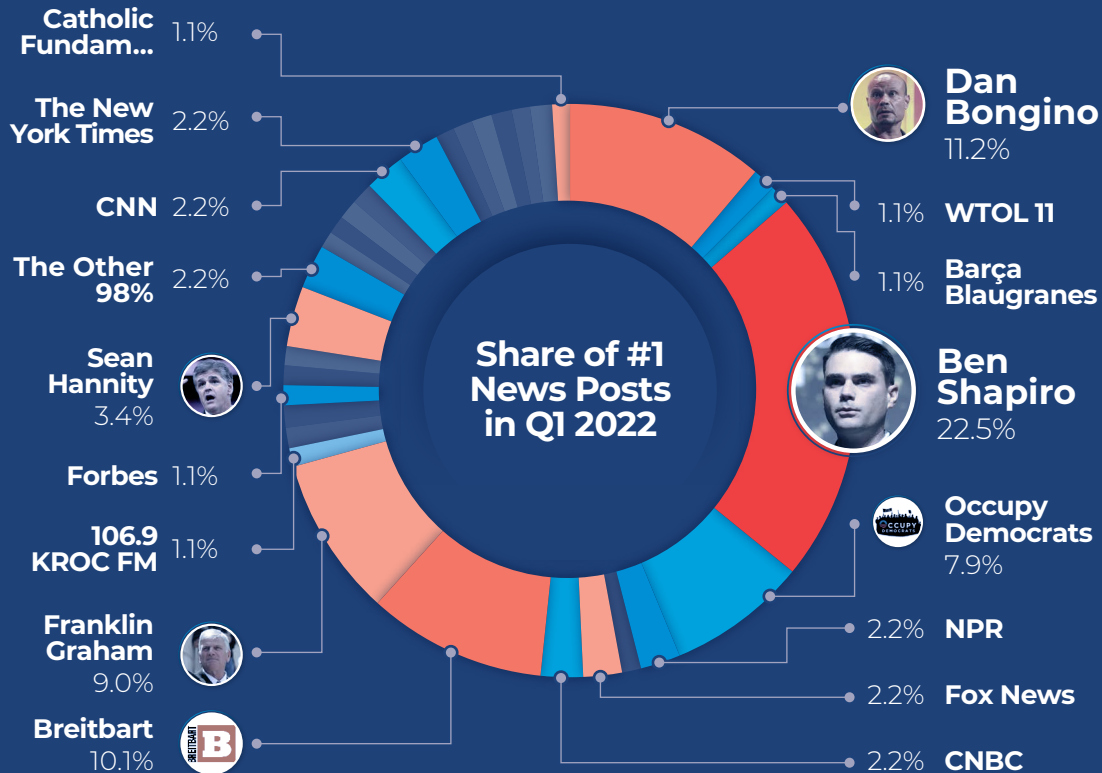


Collectively, these accounts appeared in the Top Ten posts more than





With nearly three billion active users monthly, Facebook tops all charts as the foremost social media platform. Yet, from quarter to quarter, we find that individuals who intentionally mislead, misinform, and misrepresent are still being amplified. The company's historical and ongoing lack of transparency and accountability perpetuates a dangerous environment of disinformation, which has real-world implications.

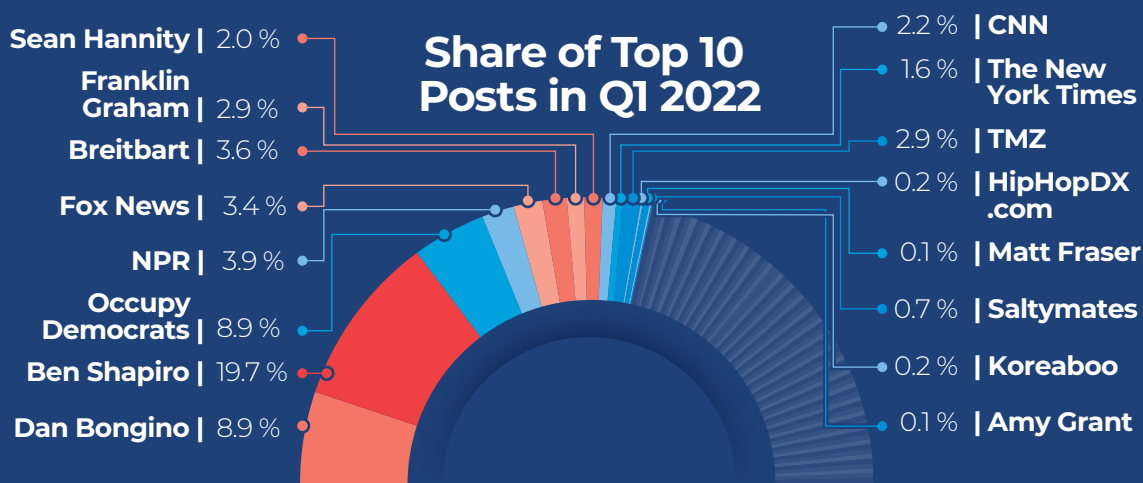


In cross-quarter comparison, the overall share of Top Ten posts by disinformers decreased only slightly this quarter, from 49% to 43%, showing that the circulation of disinformation is unabated, despite repeated criticism and political pressure

on Facebook. The share of #1 posts from known right-wing disinformers held steady, varying from 62% to 60%, which indicates that disinformation remains a stable presence on the platform. These trends are deeply concerning.

The Real Facebook Oversight Board repeats its demand that Facebook:

**Uprank quality news sources by
reprioritizing reputability in
the news algorithm**



Meta Platformed Pedophiles and Human Traffickers in Q2, Tried to Evade Responsibility

Investigations led by the [Wall Street Journal in June 2023](#) revealed that Instagram has not just permitted the proliferation of underaged-sex content on its platform, but its algorithms actively excel at promoting it. If users search for explicit hashtags like #pedowhore, #preteensex, #pedobait, or #minornotsafeforwork, they unlock a bustling black market of child-sex content. Using the search filters, users can then go on to request and purchase custom videos and pictures from pedophiles' accounts of children performing sexual acts, harming themselves, or being sexually abused.

But it isn't just an exclusive set of hashtags that lead to the illicit material. Investigators from Stanford University discovered that viewing even one account linked with pedophilia set off an avalanche of "suggested for you" recommendations from users looking to sell and buy similar content. So Instagram's algorithms aren't just successful at promoting niche, polarizing, and explicit posts. They also triumph at building a digital superhighway of child-sex content, connecting pedophiles and traffickers.

In 2022, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, a non-profit organization in the United States, reported that it received more than 5 million child pornography reports on Instagram

alone. Meta, to its credit, claims that it proactively works to remove such users and their illegal content from the platform—and that it took down 490,000 accounts in January 2023 for child safety. However, Stanford University researchers and former employees argue that the automated system that Instagram uses to screen for child exploitation fails to detect new images and also fails to spot attempts to sell them. As a result, moderators are forced to play catch-up to a continually expanding sea of illegal content. Moreover, Instagram relies on users to identify accounts that break community guidelines, but hundreds of user reports are left ignored or unanswered.

Fortunately, Instagram's failures haven't gone unscrutinized. In March 2023, some investors filed a lawsuit in the Delaware Chancery Court accusing the platform of turning a blind eye to the child sexual exploitation present on the platform. Characteristically, Facebook has rejected the reasoning behind the lawsuit, responding only that, because its guidelines explicitly prohibit human exploitation, it is therefore not complicit in efforts to promote or facilitate trafficking. Despite this claim, the Tech Transparency Project, a non-profit aimed at holding Big Tech accountable, found 366 cases of child exploitation facilitated by Facebook. [Some examples include:](#)



- “A Kentucky man accused of sending thousands of messages to multiple children through Facebook;
- a Rhode Island man who allegedly posed as a teenage girl to lure boys into live streaming sexual activity on Facebook Messenger;
- and a convicted Missouri sex offender who allegedly used Facebook Messenger to communicate with a 13-year-old girl.”

Moreover, 91% of these cases were not reported to the authorities by Facebook itself, although they originated on the platform. An [internal Facebook report from January 2020](#) confessed that the “platform enables all three stages of the human exploitation lifecycle (recruitment, facilitation,

exploitation).” Instagram’s claim to be beyond reproach collapses when confronted with the real-world consequences of the platform’s continued inaction and apathy.

Confronted with its malfeasance, the company has stated that it will start to explore policy recommendations by creating a “child-safety task force.” However, Mark Zuckerberg’s “Year of Efficiency,” in which he has laid off more than 11,000 employees, has gutted content moderation teams and makes any change doubtful. Although Instagram has successfully removed some accounts exploiting child-sex content, the company’s still weak enforcement measures, reluctance to accept any real oversight, and its algorithms, which actively favor harmful content, have prevented any lasting solutions.

As 2024 Elections Approach, Protections on Facebook Fade

Meta’s track record with politics is notorious, both in the US and elsewhere. In recent years, it has maintained the PR stance that it works towards election integrity on its platforms. However, between the 2020 US election and the 2022 midterms, the number of election integrity staff decreased and has now declined to a fifth of its former size. Efforts to combat election interference were also heavily whitewashed and focused on US elections, neglecting the many other crucial elections that took place globally.

As the 2024 elections approach, Facebook continues to regress on its promise of protecting elections worldwide. In 2024, over 70 countries will go to the polls. Yet Meta, according to a [recent report from CNN](#), has “made cuts to its teams that tackle disinformation and coordinated troll and harassment campaigns on its platforms,” as “several members of the team that countered mis- and disinformation in the 2022 US midterms were laid off last fall and this spring.”

Late in Q2, Meta reinstated the Instagram account of conspiracy theorist, Democratic Presidential candidate, and potential election spoiler Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who was removed from the platform in 2021 for posting misinformation about COVID. That content, [Meta said at the time](#), violated its COVID misinformation rules. The content from Kennedy remains the same—but he has been exempted from the ban due to Meta’s attitude to extreme political candidates, allowing them to spread lies unfettered.

As [Axios has reported](#), all the big tech platforms are rolling back protections ahead of a year with multiple, major global elections—in an era of runaway AI and deepfakes.

“The problem isn’t that election misinformation exists, but rather that social media as a product amplifies misinformation-at-scale, which makes it everyone’s problem now,” said Joan Donovan, a misinformation expert and author of the book “Meme Wars,” in an interview with Axios.

RFOB and our members are committed to fighting these cuts, and to protecting democracy in 2024.



The Facebook Receipts

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Facebook Receipts and SEC Suit Part of RFOB Efforts to Hold Meta Accountable

This past Spring, [RFOB launched The Facebook Receipts](#), an open-source research tool that tracks Facebook court hearings, harms, money, and FOIA filings.

The Facebook Receipts is the only comprehensive collection of documents and data that seeks to expose Meta's influence regime. Announcing the project, Zamaan Qureshi, Policy Director for RFOB and creator of The Facebook Receipts, said RFOB is "shining a light on the darkest corners of Meta's activities in DC and worldwide, as a way to keep urgently needed reform for the tech space on track and free from Meta's influence."

The project identifies nearly 70 appearances across six jurisdictions that Facebook has made before various legislative committees, including eight where CEO Mark Zuckerberg has appeared. It also notes the 14 instances when Facebook failed to provide responses to questions for the record posed by several committees of the United States Senate and House of Representatives.

Also included in The Facebook Receipts is a detailed listing of lobbyists, political campaign contributions, and lobbying firms associated with

Facebook. In 2021, Facebook spent more than \$20 million on lobbying, according to the Washington Post.

The Facebook Receipts also tracks the use of exceptions that government agencies have relied upon in refusing to disclose their communications with Facebook under the Freedom of Information Act. The most frequently cited exceptions relate to trade secrets, disclosures prohibited by another federal law, and personal privacy.

Freedom of information is an essential tool for understanding Meta's influence over governments, and it was used by [RFOB's Qureshi to obtain a 2019 transcript](#) of Mark Zuckerberg's deposition by the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC).

This revealed that Zuckerberg was personally interested in Cambridge Analytica earlier than he had acknowledged, which calls into question his truthfulness in his sworn 2019 Congressional testimony.

The transcript is still heavily redacted, however, so Qureshi has [filed a lawsuit](#) in a federal district court to compel the SEC to release information that has been incorrectly withheld from disclosure. The agency insists the redactions are needed to protect sensitive information, but, as the complaint notes, a number of the redactions clearly withhold information that has been publicly reported in the news media or been the subject of publicly available congressional testimony.

"We know already from a partial transcript that Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook appeared to mislead Congress and the public in one of the most shocking data breaches in history—one with dire consequences for Facebook users and for democracy," Qureshi said when the lawsuit was announced on June 13. "We need to know the truth, and a full accounting of how Mark Zuckerberg has tried to shield Facebook from accountability."

"The SEC's withholding of information from the transcript of Zuckerberg's SEC deposition testimony violates FOIA," said Wendy Liu, lead counsel for Qureshi and a lawyer at Public Citizen Litigation Group. Liu said that the SEC had recognized not once, but twice, in two administrative appeals, that Qureshi is entitled to the information withheld—and the lawsuit is asking the court to confirm just that.



RFOB Briefly Banned From Instagram

In June, Meta's suppression tactics hit a target close to home: us. Meta briefly suspended the Real Facebook Oversight Board's Instagram account for a violation of "community guidelines" after we posted a spotlight thread on [the company's actions in Canada](#) restricting access to news. [The Real Facebook Oversight Board said in a statement:](#)

Meta has always worked to silence its critics, [including an effort to dissuade funders from supporting the Real Facebook Oversight Board and to keep us offline ahead of our 2020 launch](#). Today, after a post on Instagram critical of Meta's threat to ban access to news websites in Canada, our account was suspended. The posts, seen below, called out Meta's dangerous and repeated "strategy of intimidation, aimed at disrupting legislative processes around the world."



Clearly we struck a nerve, AI or human: our Instagram account has been suspended for vague violations of "community guidelines." The account, which has been active since 2020, regularly criticized bad Facebook/Meta policies.

To be clear: Meta is an unrestrained and unregulated threat to global democracy. Their actions in Canada — like Australia before, and potentially US states to follow, is intimidation and an affront to users, who are now barred from seeing important news without recourse. We're angry about our Instagram

account and will follow policy and potentially

appeal directly to Facebook's

Oversight Board, in spite of

its [embarrassing record](#) holding Meta accountable.

But this is much bigger — it's about Meta's tactics of silencing critics and using intimidation and threats to end run democratic processes.

Our account was restored a few hours later with no explanation.