

RESEARCH/STUDY

Breitbart thrives on Facebook, in part because the platform rewards sensational photos and videos

Breitbart's Facebook page has earned over 1 billion interactions since 2012, benefiting from preferential treatment and an algorithm that amplifies angry and divisive content

WRITTEN BY KAYLA GOGARTY

RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM CARLY EVANS

PUBLISHED 12/20/21 10:01 AM EST

Thanks to Facebook's preferential treatment and an algorithm favoring sensational content, the right-wing website Breitbart – which was run by former Trump strategist Steve Bannon on and off from 2012 till 2018 and had an outsized influence on the Trump campaign and administration – has been exceptionally successful in pushing far-right content on the platform. Media Matters analyzed Breitbart's Facebook posts since 2012 and found that the page earned millions of interactions on sensational photos and tens of millions of views on divisive videos related to immigration, guns, nationalism, and race.

Facebook has repeatedly caved to false allegations from right-wing politicians and media that they are being censored by the platform. In reality, right-wing political content runs rampant on Facebook and is aided, in large part, by the company, as it gives right-wing entities free rein and even refuses to make changes that would reduce false and divisive content. In fact, Facebook reportedly protected Breitbart specifically because of Trump's affinity for the site.

This latest study – along with our previous work and ongoing project – demonstrates that Facebook's capitulation to such baseless claims to avoid Trump's and other conservatives' ire has allowed right-leaning pages to spread sensational content and misinformation with impunity.

Key findings include:

- Breitbart has earned **over 1 billion interactions** (reactions, comments, and shares) since 2012. But **more than 80% of its engagement** (over 871 million interactions) came between January 1, 2017, and November 30, 2021.
- Breitbart posted the most in 2020 – with over 20,500 posts – and earned the most interactions that same year – over 286 million.
- Average interactions per photo post between January 1, 2017, and November 30, 2021, (50,000) far exceeded the average for other post types. Average interactions for video posts were 18,000 per post and average interactions for link posts were 9,000.
- **Six of the top 10** posts from Breitbart that were created between January 1, 2017, and November 30, 2021, contain videos with **divisive content related to immigration, guns, nationalism, or race** that have earned **tens of millions of views**.
- Breitbart's post with the most interactions since 2017 is a video from June 21, 2020, that allegedly showed a "black man harassing Trump supporters" and has 30 million views.

Jump to section...

- As Trump rose to power in 2015 and 2016, he was aided by Breitbart, which was one of Trump's earliest media allies and acted as a propaganda outlet for his administration. Simultaneously, Breitbart went from a fringe right-wing website that Bannon bragged about making "the platform for the alt-right" to an outlet with outsized influence on right-wing media and politicians. Trump directly rewarded Breitbart for its fealty and amplified its articles on social media.

In 2017, Facebook started prioritizing emotional reactions in its News Feed algorithm, weighing reactions like hearts or angry faces more than classic likes. Facebook implemented another change to the algorithm in 2018 that gave more weight to "meaningful social interactions" (MSI), particularly shares and comments. The platform's own researchers found that these changes led to "misinformation, toxicity, and violent content" being "inordinately prevalent among reshares." But Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg often resisted – and sometimes outright rejected – tweaks to the algorithm that would address the proliferation of false and divisive content but potentially hurt the company's bottom line.

Right-leaning pages such as Breitbart have benefited from this algorithm, and they frequently dominate conversations on Facebook with sensational and misleading content. Breitbart uses its Facebook page to promote outrageously racist and misogynistic content to its more than 5.2 million followers. The outlet has also enjoyed preferential treatment from Facebook – which exempted Breitbart from its moderation policies and even deemed it a trusted news source on the platform's curated News Tab, despite objections from employees.

Reportedly, Facebook did slightly adjust the algorithm in the spring of 2020 to reduce the proliferation of false content. However, based on our findings, this change has not affected Breitbart or other right-leaning pages, which continue to earn more engagement than other political and news-related pages, particularly on sensational photo content. In fact, according to a Media Matters analysis of the top political news pages on the platform, Breitbart was ranked within the top 10 pages with the most engagement in 2020 and 2021, earning hundreds of millions of interactions on its posts.

Breitbart has earned over 870 million interactions since 2017, and it posted most frequently in 2020

In our latest analysis, Media Matters reviewed over 116,700 posts from Breitbart's page since 2012 using CrowdTangle and found the page earned over 1 billion interactions during that time. Notably, as Trump and Breitbart both rose to prominence in 2015 and 2016, Breitbart's engagement grew on Facebook, even as Bannon's "platform of the alt-right" was a reliable home for vile anti-Semitism, misogyny, racism, and anti-immigrant vitriol.

Breitbart's Facebook posts and engagement

	Total posts	Total interactions	Average interactions per post
2012	600	79,000	130
2013	10,600	1.7 million	160
2014	4,400	1.1 million	250
2015	7,600	57.2 million	7,500
2016	12,500	122.1 million	10,000
2017	12,600	128.6 million	10,200

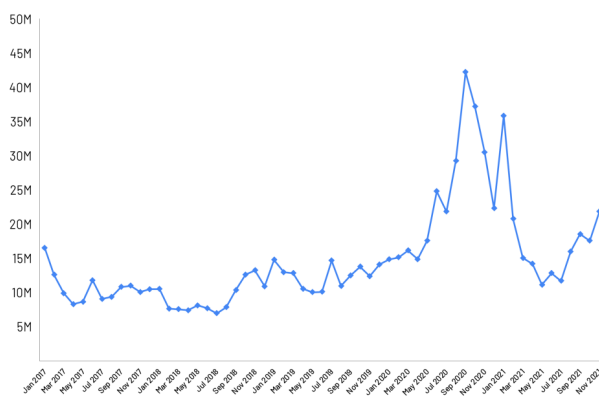
2018	13,900	111.1 million	8,000
2019	16,800	149.7 million	8,900
2020	20,500	286.5 million	14,000
Jan 1-Nov 30, 2021	17,200	195.4 million	11,300

After Breitbart's initial rise on the platform, Facebook's algorithm that made the platform more angry and divisive further propelled the outlet's content. In fact, over 80% of Breitbart's engagement came between January 1, 2017 – the year Facebook started making changes to its algorithm – and November 30, 2021. We found that the Facebook page posted at least 81,000 times during that time frame and earned over 871 million interactions, or roughly 10,700 average interactions per post.

Notably, Breitbart posted most frequently in 2020 – with over 20,500 posts – and earned the most interactions that same year – over 286 million. In fact, the page earned over 20 million total monthly interactions every month between June 2020 and February 2021 (and then again in November 2021), even as Facebook supposedly deployed an emergency “break glass” strategy to reduce misinformation during the 2020 election cycle.

Total monthly interactions Breitbart earned on Facebook

January 1, 2017, through November 30, 2021



From a study of 81,077 posts from Breitbart's Facebook page. Facebook interactions include reactions (like, love, wow, haha, sad, angry), comments, and shares.

MEDIA MATTERS
FOR AMERICA

Despite Facebook's "break glass" measures, six of the top 10 posts from Breitbart between Election Day on November 3 and November 7, when Joe Biden was declared president-elect, contained false or misleading information about the election.



November 7, 2020 · 🌐

The presidential election results for Antrim County in Michigan have flipped from Joe Biden to President Donald Trump after computer "software glitched and caused a miscalculation of the votes."

The initial election results showing Joe Biden winning the presidential race for Antrim County, Michigan, have now been corrected to show President Trump as the county's winner after a software glitch was fixed, according to a report by 9&10 News.

The corrected election results now show President Trump winning the county by more than 2,000 votes.

Thousands of Michigan ballots that were meant for Republican candidates were wrongly counted for Democrats in Antrim county. Antrim is also one of 47 counties in Michigan that uses the same software that experienced this "glitch."

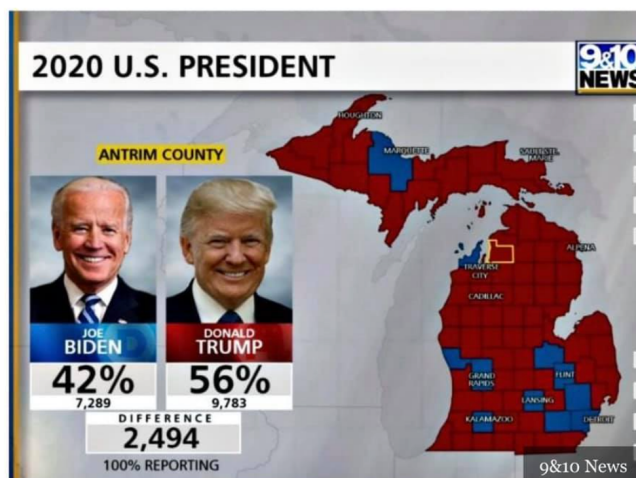
"If all this wasn't enough, in Antrim County, ballots were counted for Democrats that were meant for Republicans, causing a 6,000-vote swing against our candidates," said Michigan Republican Party chairwoman Laura Cox during a press conference.

"The county clerk came forward and said, 'tabulating software glitched and caused a miscalculation of the votes,'" continued Cox. "Since then, we have now discovered that 47 counties use this same software in the same capacity."

"Antrim County had to hand-count all of the ballots, and these counties that use this software need to closely examine their results for similar discrepancies," added the chairwoman.

"The people of Michigan deserve a transparent and open process," said Cox.

MICHIGAN COUNTY FLIPS FROM BIDEN TO TRUMP AFTER 'GLITCH' FIXED



Election officials follow strict rules when it comes to ballot counting, handling and reporting.

Source: Bipartisan Policy Center

[Get Accurate Election Info](#)

186K

25K Comments 101K Shares



November 6, 2020 · 🌐

...

BREAKING: Utah Attorney General Sean Reyes announced Friday he will assist President Trump's legal fight, calling the 2020 election process "compromised."



BREITBART.COM

UT AG Says Election Process 'Compromised,' Will Help Trump Legal Fight

Utah Attorney General Sean Reyes (R) announced Friday that he will assist President Donald Tru...





















































































































































































































































































































Breitbart

November 7, 2020 · 🌐

...

REVEALED: Two Georgia counties using the same electronic voting software as a Michigan county that experienced a glitch have also reported encountering glitches during the 2020 election.

Voting machines crashed in Georgia's Spalding and Morgan Counties on Tuesday morning because of what election officials described as a "glitch."

A Georgia election official said that a technical glitch that halted voting in the two counties was caused by a vendor uploading an update to their election machines the night before the election, according to a report by Politico.

"That is something that they don't ever do. I've never seen them update anything the day before the election," said Marcia Ridley, elections supervisor at Spalding County Board of Election.

Ridley added that she did not know what the upload contained.

The report said that the Georgia counties used software made by Dominion Voting Systems — the same software used in most Michigan counties, according to the Detroit Free Press.

Dominion Voting Systems is also used in Michigan's Antrim County, the Detroit Free Press reported.

In Antrim County, a glitch caused thousands of Michigan ballots that were meant for Republican candidates to be wrongly counted for Democrats, according to Michigan Republican Party chairwoman Laura Cox, who added that 47 other counties in Michigan used the same software that experienced the reported glitch.

The glitch, which "caused a miscalculation of the votes" in Antrim County, was so detrimental that it had actually caused the county to flip blue in favor of Joe Biden. The presidential election results have since been corrected, flipping the county back from Biden to President Donald Trump.

GEORGIA COUNTIES USING SAME SOFTWARE AS MICHIGAN COUNTIES ALSO ENCOUNTER 'GLITCH'



Jessica McGowan/Getty Images



As expected, election results have taken longer this year. The US has laws, procedures, and established institutions to ensure the integrity of our elections.

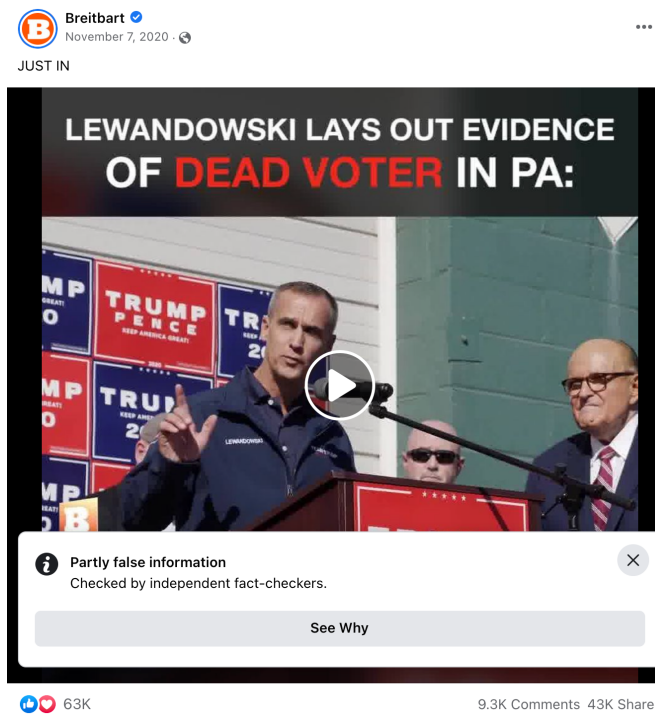
Source: Bipartisan Policy Center

[Get Accurate Election Info](#)



👍👎👉 67K

10K Comments 44K Shares

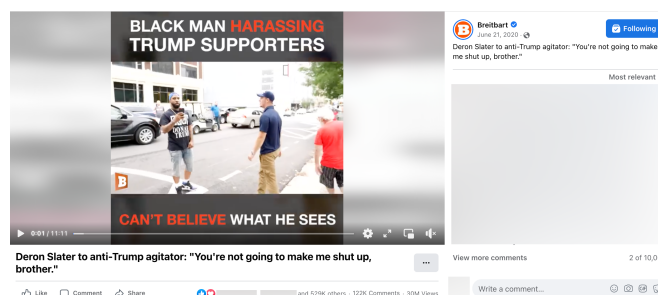


Six of Breitbart's top 10 posts shared sensational videos with tens of millions of views

Nine of the 10 posts with the most interactions from Breitbart between January 1, 2017, and November 30, 2021, contained photos or videos; they ranged from 383,000 to 1.1 million interactions each.

Additionally, six of the top 10 posts contained sensational videos related to immigration, guns, nationalism, or race, including videos of an alleged crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border and attacks on the Black Lives Matter movement. Notably, the post with the most interactions since 2017 was a video from June 21, 2020, that allegedly shows a "black man harassing Trump supporters" and has 30 million views.

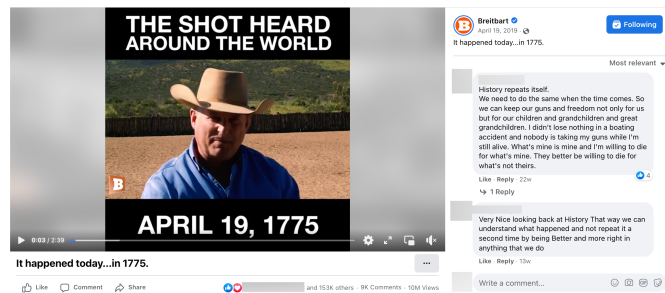
- Over 1.1 million interactions and 30 million views



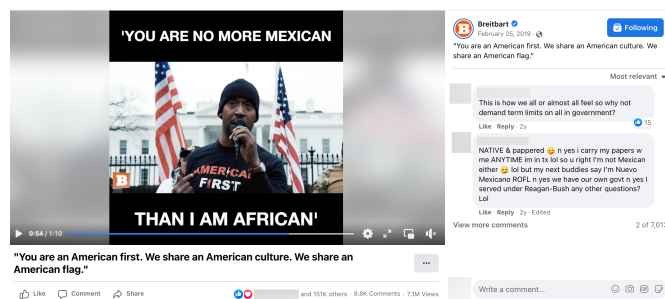
- Over 980,000 interactions and 27 million views



- Over 466,000 interactions and 10 million views



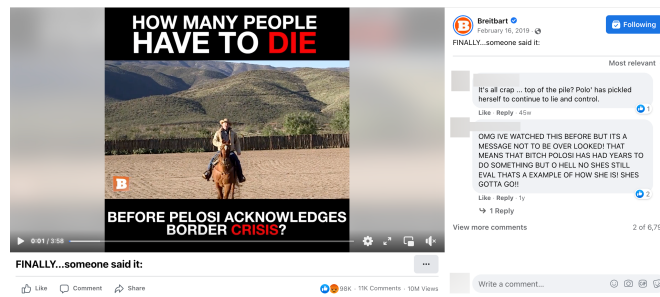
- Over 402,000 interactions and 7.1 million views



- Over 402,000 interactions and 6.7 million views



- Over 395,000 interactions and 10 million views



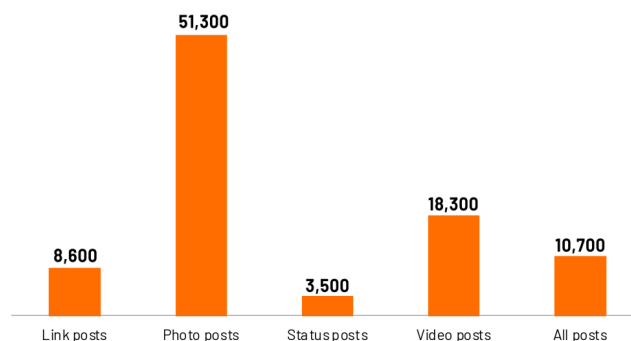
Breitbart earns the highest average interactions on photo posts, even though the page posts mostly links

Breitbart's posts with photos perform particularly well. Since 2017, posts with photos accounted for roughly 4% of the total posts, but they earned almost 20% of the page's interactions. Nearly 92% of all posts contained links — usually to Breitbart's own website — but these posts earned roughly 73% of the interactions. Posts with videos also accounted for roughly 4% of the total posts and earned nearly 8% of interactions.

In fact, average interactions per photo post far exceeded the average for other post types, with over 50,000 interactions. The average for video posts and link posts were roughly 18,000 and 9,000 interactions, respectively.

Average interactions on Breitbart's Facebook posts, by post type

January 1, 2017, through November 30, 2021

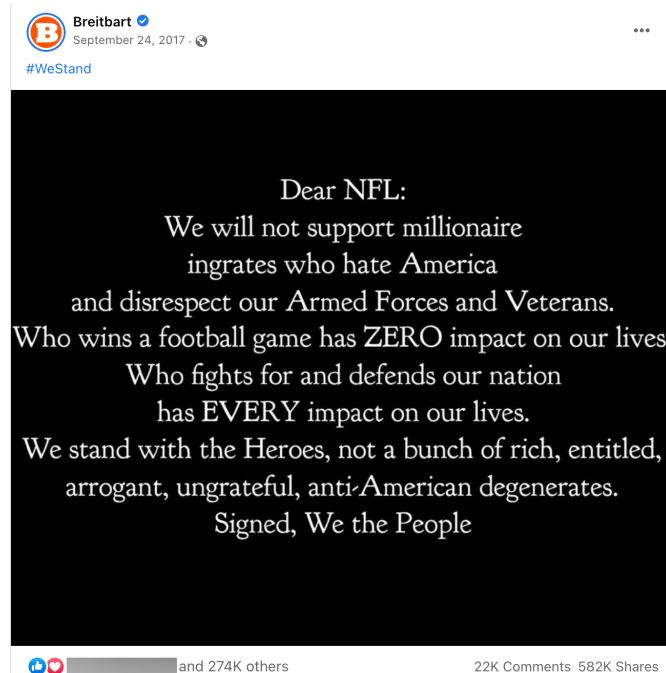


From a study of 81,077 posts from Breitbart's Facebook page.
Average interactions have been rounded to the nearest hundred.
Facebook interactions include reactions (like, love, wow, haha, sad, angry), comments, and shares.

MEDIA MATTERS
FOR AMERICA

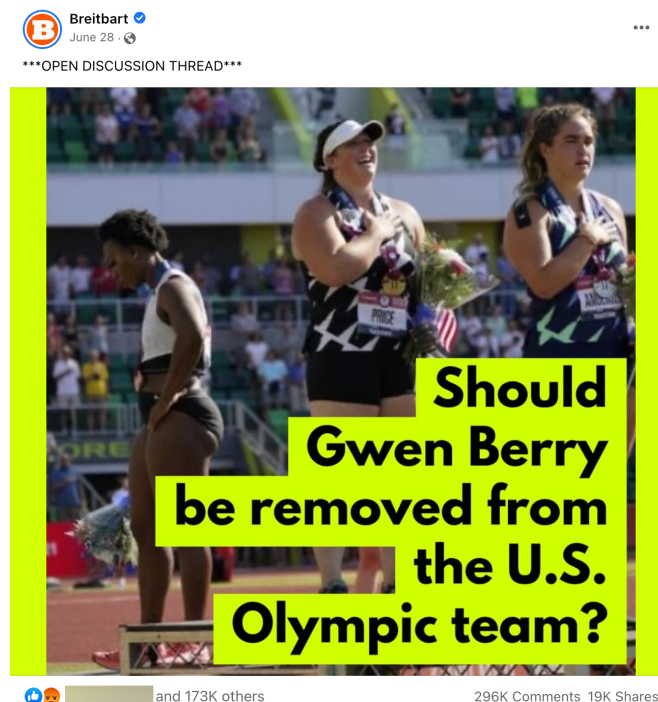
Photos also accounted for nearly three-quarters (72) of the top 100 posts with the most interactions from Breitbart since 2017. Only nine of the top 100 posts were links, and 19 were videos.

The three photo posts with the most interactions villainized Americans who disagree with Breitbart's political stances.



and 274K others

22K Comments 582K Shares



and 173K others

296K Comments 19K Shares



Methodology

Using CrowdTangle, Media Matters compiled all posts from Breitbart's Facebook page between January 1, 2012 and November 30, 2021. We reviewed data for these posts, including total interactions (reactions, comments, and shares), post type, and video views.