



RESEARCH/STUDY

Facebook has a problem with sensational and misleading content despite VP Nick Clegg's claims

Right-wing personalities Ben Shapiro and Dan Bongino earned hundreds of millions more interactions in 2020 and the beginning of 2021 than in previous years

WRITTEN BY KAYLA GOGARTY

RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM CARLY EVANS & KELLIE LEVINE

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Right-wing personalities who post sensational and misleading content continue to earn high engagement on Facebook, despite Vice President of Global Affairs Nick Clegg's comments that "Facebook's systems are not designed to reward provocative content." In a new study, Media Matters found that Ben Shapiro and Dan Bongino, two right-wing figures who frequently post sensational stories and fearmongering or misleading content on Facebook, actually earned significantly more engagement in 2020 and 2021 than in previous years – undermining Clegg's claims.

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- On March 31, Clegg wrote a response to allegations that "social media fuels polarization, exploits human weaknesses and insecurities, and creates echo chambers where everyone gets their own slice of reality, eroding the public sphere and the understanding of common facts." In the article, Clegg discussed Facebook's ranking system and claimed that Facebook actually downranks sensational content and pages that consistently post this content.

Central to many of the charges by Facebook's critics is the idea that its algorithmic systems actively encourage the sharing of sensational content and are designed to keep people scrolling endlessly. Of course, on a platform built around people sharing things they are interested in or moved by, content that provokes strong emotions is invariably going to be shared. At one level, the fact that people respond to sensational content isn't new. As generations of newspaper sub-editors can attest, emotive language and arresting imagery grab people's attention and engage them. It's human nature. But Facebook's systems are not designed to reward provocative content. In fact, key parts of those systems are designed to do just the opposite.

Facebook reduces the distribution of many types of content – meaning that content appears lower in your News Feed – because they are sensational, misleading, gratuitously solicit engagement, or are found to be false by our independent fact checking partners. For example, Facebook demotes clickbait (headlines that are misleading or exaggerated), highly sensational health claims (like those promoting “miracle cures”), and engagement bait (posts that explicitly seek to get users to engage with them).

Facebook's approach goes beyond addressing sensational and misleading content post-by-post. When Pages and Groups repeatedly post some of these types of content to Facebook, like clickbait or misinformation, Facebook reduces the distribution of all the posts from those Pages and Groups. And where websites generate an extremely disproportionate amount of their traffic from Facebook relative to the rest of the internet, which can be indicative of a pattern of posting more sensational or spammy content, Facebook likewise demotes all the posts from the Pages run by those websites.

Despite Clegg's claims, posts that sensationalize or fearmonger about stories often earn more engagement than other types of posts. On June 3, 2020, the top English-language post from a Facebook page was a video from right-wing figure Candace Owens in which she disparages George Floyd and says that the Black community is “unique” because its members are “the only people that fight and scream and demand support and justice for the people in our community that are up to no good.” Media Matters previously reported that this video earned more interactions than any other post from political pages that posted about last spring's protests against police brutality following Floyd's killing, and it has since been viewed more than 95 million times.

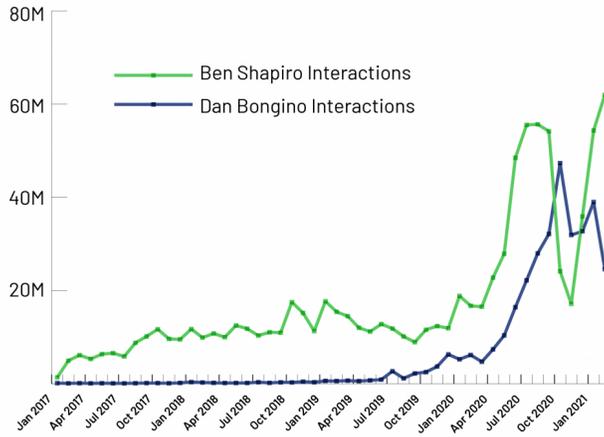


Additionally, Media Matters has repeatedly found that right-leaning pages, which frequently fearmonger and post misleading content, consistently earn equal or more engagement than left-leaning or ideologically nonaligned pages. In a January study, Media Matters reported that right-leaning pages earned nearly 9 billion interactions on roughly 2.3 million posts between January 1 and December 15, 2020, which accounted for 45% of total interactions from political pages. It would not be without precedent for Facebook to allege systems are balanced while treating sensational right-leaning content differently, as there are numerous examples of Facebook capitulating to conservatives and giving right-wing pages preferential treatment, particularly The Daily Wire.

According to Clegg, Facebook demotes all posts from pages run by websites that "generate an extremely disproportionate amount of their traffic from Facebook relative to the rest of the internet, which can be indicative of a pattern of posting more sensational or spammy content." But right-wing personalities such as Ben Shapiro and Dan Bongino continue to get millions of interactions on posts from their Facebook pages, which often include sensational stories, fearmongering commentary, and misleading content from their respective websites. In fact, these pages earned significantly more engagement in 2020 and the first three months of 2021 than in 2017, 2018, and 2019 combined.

Total monthly interactions earned by Ben Shapiro and Dan Bongino on Facebook

January 1, 2020, through March 22, 2021



From a study of 114,401 posts from Ben Shapiro's Facebook page and 9,875 posts from Dan Bongino's Facebook page



Ben Shapiro

Ben Shapiro and his right-wing media outlet The Daily Wire thrive on Facebook, consistently earning high engagement on content which promotes right-wing narratives – partly because both use a network of numerous Facebook pages to amplify material. Facebook has also contributed to The Daily Wire's success, allowing it to break the platform's rules against using coordinated activity without repercussion and even reportedly changing the News Feed algorithm to benefit right-wing sources like the site.

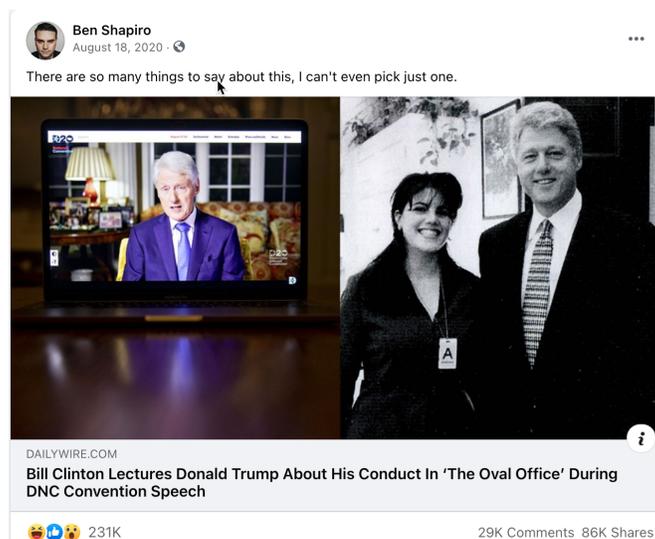
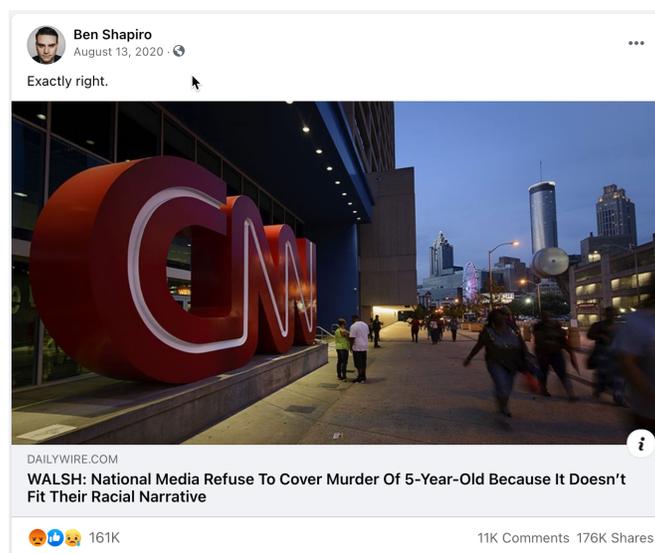
Using data from CrowdTangle, Media Matters analyzed over 114,000 posts from Shapiro's page and found that these posts **earned over 924 million interactions in roughly the last four years** – between January 1, 2017, and March 22, 2021. Notably, Shapiro's engagement on Facebook in 2020 and the beginning of 2021 has significantly increased compared with other years, even though the content has been largely sensationalized or misleading. In fact, in 2020 he earned more than twice the engagement he had in 2019. This pattern continued in 2021, with Shapiro earning nearly 20,000 average interactions on his posts.

Ben Shapiro's Facebook posts and engagement

	Total Posts	Total Interactions	Average interactions per post
2017	15,000	86.4 million	5,800
2018	26,000	143.2 million	5,400
2019	31,000	150.5 million	4,900
2020	35,000	393.7 million	11,300
January - March 22, 2021	8,000	150.8 million	19,800
2017 - 2021	114,000	924.6 million	8,100

Shapiro's engagement drastically increased during May-September 2020 and January-March 2021, peaking in August 2020 and February 2021. During these two months, Shapiro earned roughly 45.6 million and 62.0 million interactions, respectively, and over 87% of the posts linked to Daily Wire articles. During each of these peaks in engagement, his top posts frequently included a mix of sensationalized, misleading, and fearmongering content.

For example, in August 2020, Shapiro's top posts included one linking to a Daily Wire article that exploits the tragic death of a 5-year-old by claiming that "the national media doesn't care that Cannon Hinnant died, and doesn't want you to care, because he was white," and a post with a link to a Daily Wire article that gives explicit details of former President Bill Clinton's affair during his presidency in response to Clinton calling Trump's Oval Office "chaos":



In February 2021, Shapiro's top posts included a complaint about "cancellation for being a conservative," claiming that "Disney dumped one of its leading stars because she wouldn't toe the

leftist line"; an anti-trans post that fearmongers about the inclusion of trans athletes; and a post claiming that "Hollywood elites have been dictating culture and insulting your values for far too long":

Ben Shapiro February 12

Are you guys feeling the unity yet?

Disney dumped one of its leading stars because she wouldn't toe the leftist line. Gina Carano isn't the first to face cancellation for being a conservative, and she certainly won't be the last.

It's not enough for conservatives to cancel their Disney+ subscriptions and tune out. We need to replace the legacy media companies that hold so much contempt for people like you and me. That's why the Daily Wire is thrilled to announce that Gina Carano will produce and star in a new feature film, exclusively for our Daily Wire Members. This is how we win back the culture - by creating quality content that takes conservatives and our values seriously.

Will you join us in this fight? For a limited time, use the promo code GINA to save 25% on your new membership. Together, we will win back the culture. Get started here ==> <https://utm.io/juc6U2>



and 296K others 27K Comments 48K Shares

Ben Shapiro February 25

She is absolutely correct.



DAILYWIRE.COM

'These Biological Males Are Just Taking It Away From Us': High School Girl Athlete Blasts Biden Administration For Abandoning Her Lawsuit

and 251K others 25K Comments 49K Shares



Dan Bongino

Right-wing media personality Dan Bongino’s Facebook page follows a similar pattern as Shapiro’s, with Bongino’s engagement drastically increasing in 2020 and 2021, according to Media Matters’ review of CrowdTangle data. Bongino’s page **earned over 351 million interactions in roughly the last four years** – between January 1, 2017, and March 22, 2021. In 2020, he earned more than 10 times the engagement of 2019. This pattern continued in 2021, with Bongino earning nearly 46,000 average interactions on his posts.

Dan Bongino’s Facebook posts and engagement

	Total Posts	Total Interactions	Average interactions per post
2017	400	1.5 million	3,800
2018	500	3.3 million	6,600
2019	1,900	22.7 million	11,700

2020	5,300	244.6 million	46,200
January - March 22, 2021	1,700	79.4 million	45,700
2017 - 2021	9,900	351.6 million	35,600

Bongino earned the most engagement in October 2020, with posts from his page racking up over 47.3 million interactions. The majority of these posts contain links to articles from his website, Bongino.com, or to Rumble, where he posts videos from his show. Top posts made during Bongino's October 2020 engagement peak included a post calling NBC's Savannah Guthrie "unhinged" and posts that linked to Bongino's articles accusing Kamala Harris of doing "a lot of lying" and asking, "Are you sick of hearing celebrities talking about politics?"

Dan Bongino October 8, 2020

Where are all the "independent" fact checkers?!



BONGINO.COM
Fact Check: Kamala Harris Made Up a Fake Quote From Abe Lincoln at the Debate
 Kamala Harris told a lot of lies during the VP debate, but this was the biggest one.

221K 47K Comments 122K Shares

Dan Bongino October 15, 2020

This was a complete DISGRACE to journalism and the entire electoral process. NBC should be ashamed.



RUMBLE.COM
Unhinged NBC "Moderator" Turns Town Hall Into Heated Debate With Trump
 They aren't even hiding it anymore. The media only care about taking down President Trump.

218K 102K Comments 33K Shares



• The high engagement numbers Shapiro and Bongino racked up on Facebook between January 1, 2020, and March 22, 2021 – over 868 million interactions combined – undermine Clegg’s assertion that Facebook’s algorithm doesn’t reward provocative content.