

the facebook files

A Wall Street Journal investigation

Facebook Inc. knows, in acute detail, that its platforms are riddled with flaws that cause harm, often in ways only the company fully understands. That is the central finding of a Wall Street Journal series, based on a review of internal Facebook documents, including research reports, online employee discussions and drafts of presentations to senior management.

Time and again, the documents show, Facebook's researchers have identified the platform's ill effects. Time and again, despite congressional hearings, its own pledges and numerous media exposés, the company didn't fix them. The documents offer perhaps the clearest picture thus far of how broadly Facebook's problems are known inside the company, up to the chief executive himself.

_01 Facebook Says Its Rules Apply to All. Company Documents Reveal a Secret Elite That's Exempt

By Jeff Horwitz

Mark Zuckerberg has said Facebook allows its users to speak on equal footing with the elites of politics, culture and journalism, and that its standards apply to everyone. In private, the company has built a system that has exempted high-profile users from some or all of its rules. The program, known as "cross check" or "XCheck," was intended as a quality-control measure for high-profile accounts. Today, it shields millions of VIPs from the company's normal enforcement, the documents show. Many abuse the privilege, posting material including harassment and incitement to violence that would typically lead to sanctions. Facebook says criticism of the program is fair, that it was designed for a good purpose and that the company is working to fix it.

_02 Facebook Knows Instagram Is Toxic for Many Teen Girls, Company Documents Show

By Georgia Wells, Jeff Horwitz and Deepa Seetharaman

Researchers inside Instagram, which is owned by Facebook, have been studying for years how its photo-sharing app affects millions of young users. Repeatedly, the company found that Instagram is harmful for a sizable percentage of them, most notably teenage girls, more so than other social-media platforms. In public, Facebook has consistently played down the app's negative effects, including in comments to Congress, and hasn't made its research public or available to academics or lawmakers who have asked for it. In response, Facebook says the negative effects aren't widespread, that the mental-health research is valuable and that some of the harmful aspects aren't easy to address.

_03 Facebook Tried to Make Its Platform a Healthier Place. It Got Angrier Instead.

By Keach Hagey and Jeff Horwitz

Facebook made a heralded change to its algorithm in 2018 designed to improve its platform—and arrest signs of declining user engagement. Mr. Zuckerberg declared his aim was to strengthen bonds between users and improve their well-being by fostering interactions between friends and family. Within the company, the documents show, staffers warned the change was having the opposite effect. It was making Facebook, and those who used it, angrier. Mr. Zuckerberg resisted some fixes proposed by his team, the documents show, because he worried they would lead people to interact with Facebook less.

Facebook, in response, says any algorithm can promote objectionable or harmful content and that the company is doing its best to mitigate the problem.

_04 Facebook Employees Flag Drug Cartels and Human Traffickers. The Company's Response Is Weak, Documents Show.

By Justin Scheck, Newley Purnell and Jeff Horwitz

Scores of Facebook documents reviewed by The Wall Street Journal show employees raising alarms about how its platforms are used in developing countries, where its user base is huge and expanding. Employees flagged that human traffickers in the Middle East used the site to lure women into abusive employment situations. They warned that armed groups in Ethiopia used the site to incite violence against ethnic minorities. They sent alerts to their bosses about organ selling, pornography and government action against political dissent, according to the documents. They also show the company's response, which in many instances is inadequate or nothing at all. A Facebook spokesman said the company has deployed global teams, local partnerships and third-party fact checkers to keep users safe.

_05 How Facebook Hobbled Mark Zuckerberg's Bid to Get America Vaccinated

By Sam Schechner, Jeff Horwitz and Emily Glazer

Facebook threw its weight behind promoting Covid-19 vaccines—"a top company priority," one memo said—in a demonstration of Mr. Zuckerberg's faith that his creation is a force for social good in the world. It ended up demonstrating the gulf between his aspirations and the reality of the world's largest social platform. Activists flooded the network with what Facebook calls "barrier to vaccination" content, the internal memos show. They used Facebook's own tools to sow doubt about the severity of the pandemic's threat and the safety of authorities' main weapon to combat it. The Covid-19 problems make it uncomfortably clear: Even when he set a goal, the chief executive couldn't steer the platform as he wanted. A Facebook spokesman said in a statement that the data shows vaccine hesitancy for people in the U.S. on Facebook has declined by about 50% since January, and that the documents show the company's "routine process for dealing with difficult challenges."

_06 Facebook's Effort to Attract Preteens Goes Beyond Instagram Kids, Documents Show

By Georgia Wells and Jeff Horwitz

Facebook has come under increasing fire in recent days for its effect on young users. Inside the company, teams of employees have for years been laying plans to attract preteens that go beyond what is publicly known, spurred by fear that it could lose a wave of users critical to its future. "Why do we care about tweens?" said one document from 2020. "They are a valuable but untapped audience." Adam Mosseri, head of Instagram, said Facebook is not recruiting people too young to use its apps—the current age limit is 13—but is instead trying to understand how teens and preteens use technology and to appeal to the next generation.

_07 Facebook's Documents About Instagram and Teens, Published

By Wall Street Journal Staff

A Senate Commerce Committee hearing about Facebook, teens and mental health was prompted by a mid-September article in The Wall Street Journal. Based on internal company documents, it detailed

Facebook's internal research on the negative impact of its Instagram app on teen girls and others. Six of the documents that formed the basis of the Instagram article are published here.

[_08 Is Sheryl Sandberg's Power Shrinking? Ten Years of Facebook Data Offers Clues](#)

By Stephanie Stamm, John West and Deepa Seetharaman

The Wall Street Journal reviewed 10 years of Facebook annual employee lists, which showed names, titles and managers for Facebook's staffers and contract workers. The data show which teams under which executives have expanded the fastest, providing an unusually detailed public view of the company's shifting power centers and priorities.

[_09 The Facebook Whistleblower, Frances Haugen, Says She Wants to Fix the Company, Not Harm It](#)

By Jeff Horwitz

Frances Haugen, a former Facebook product manager who gathered documents that formed the basis for the Journal's series, said she had grown frustrated by what she saw as the company's lack of openness about its platforms' potential for harm and unwillingness to address its flaws. A Facebook spokesman Andy Stone said the company strives to balance free expression with safety. "To suggest we encourage bad content and do nothing is just not true," he said. Listen to Ms. Haugen on the Journal's podcast.

[_10 Facebook Says AI Will Clean Up the Platform. Its Own Engineers Have Doubts.](#)

By Deepa Seetharaman, Jeff Horwitz and Justin Scheck

Facebook executives have long said artificial intelligence would address the company's chronic problems keeping what it deems hate speech and excessive violence off its platforms. That future is farther away than those executives suggest, according to internal documents. Employees say Facebook removes only a sliver of the posts that violate its rules, and that Facebook's AI can't consistently identify first-person shooting videos, racist rants and even, in one notable episode, the difference between cockfighting and car crashes, according to the documents. Facebook, in response, says it takes other actions to reduce how many people view content that violates its policies and that the prevalence of that material has been shrinking.

[_11 How Many Users Does Facebook Have? The Company Struggles to Figure It Out](#)

By Sam Schechner and Jeff Horwitz

Facebook is struggling to detect users' creating multiple accounts on its flagship platform, according to internal documents, raising questions about how the social-media giant measures its audience. One Facebook presentation called the phenomenon of single users with multiple accounts "very prevalent" among new accounts, after an examination of roughly 5,000 recent sign-ups indicated that as many as 56% were opened by existing users. Facebook says those numbers are incorporated into estimates it discloses of duplicate accounts, and that such accounts pose a challenge for many large internet companies.

[_12 Facebook Increasingly Suppresses Political Movements It Deems Dangerous](#)

By Jeff Horwitz and Justin Scheck

Internal Facebook documents show that people inside the company have long discussed a systematic approach to restrict features that disproportionately amplify incendiary and divisive posts. Facebook rejected those efforts because they would impede the platform's usage and growth. Instead, Facebook is making ad hoc decisions about groups it deems harmful, such as a movement by far-right activists after the Jan. 6 Capitol riot to form what they called a Patriot Party. The company's approach puts it in a role of refereeing public discourse that strays from its public commitment to neutrality. Facebook acknowledges tension in its work on such viral social movements, and says it has invented new technologies and balanced difficult trade-offs to develop its solutions. (Listen to a related podcast.)

_13 Facebook Services Are Used to Spread Religious Hatred in India, Internal Documents Show

By Newley Purnell and Jeff Horwitz

Facebook researchers documented how its platform has contributed to divisive, inter-religious conflict in India, according to internal records. The company's researchers found hate speech spiked by 300% amid bloody riots, and that Indian users held the company responsible for failing to prevent or police it. Facebook has traced some of the stream of hate to influential entities tied to India's ruling government but hasn't taken action amid concerns about "political sensitivities." Facebook says hate speech against Muslims is rising world-wide, and that the company is working to improve enforcement on its platforms.

_14 Facebook's Internal Chat Boards Show Politics Often at Center of Decision Making

By Keach Hagey and Jeff Horwitz

Facebook employees and their bosses have hotly debated whether and how to restrain right-wing publishers, with more-senior employees often providing a check on agitation from the rank and file, according to internal documents viewed by the Journal. The documents, which don't capture all of the employee messaging, didn't mention equivalent debates over left-wing publications. Other documents also reveal that Facebook's management team has been so intently focused on avoiding charges of bias that it regularly places political considerations at the center of its decision making. Facebook says it enforces its rules equally and doesn't consider politics in its decisions.

_15 Is Facebook Bad for You? It Is for About 360 Million Users, Company Surveys Suggest

By Georgia Wells, Deepa Seetharaman and Jeff Horwitz

Facebook researchers have found that 1 in 8 of the app's users report engaging in compulsive use of social media that affects their sleep, work, parenting or relationships, and the problems were perceived by users to be worse on Facebook than any other major social-media platform, according to documents reviewed by The Wall Street Journal. The documents highlight the company's research into the possible negative impacts on the day-to-day lives of a broad swath of users. Facebook said it has built tools and controls to help people manage when and how they use its services.

_16 Facebook Allows Stolen Content to Flourish, Its Researchers Warned

By Keach Hagey and Jeff Horwitz

About 40% of traffic to pages in 2018 went to those with content that was plagiarized or recycled, according to the company's internal reports. The researchers said the tactic is an effective way to build a large audience and has been used by foreign and domestic groups that post divisive content and peddle

false information. “This is the basic game plan used by many bad actors,” one researcher wrote. Facebook says it has taken steps to address the issues, including removing fake accounts and reducing distribution of unoriginal news reporting.

17 Facebook’s Pushback: Stem the Leaks, Spin the Politics, Don’t Say Sorry

By Keach Hagey, Georgia Wells, Emily Glazer, Deepa Seetharaman and Jeff Horwitz

Part of Facebook’s response to the disclosures made by the whistleblower was to push politics to the forefront. The company’s goal, according to Republicans and Democrats familiar with its outreach, was to muddy the waters, divide lawmakers along partisan lines and forestall a cross-party alliance that was emerging to enact tougher rules on social-media companies in general and Facebook in particular.

“When our work is being mischaracterized, we’re not going to apologize,” said Facebook spokesman Andy Stone. “We’re going to defend our record.”