

**Statement for the Record of Media Matters for America
U.S. House of Representatives, Subcommittee on the Judiciary -- Antitrust,
Commercial, and Administrative Law**

March 12, 2021

**RE: Hearing on Reviving Competition, Part 2: Saving the Free and Diverse
Press**

Dear Chairman David N. Cicilline and Ranking Member Ken Buck, and Members of the Committee,

Media Matters for America is a 501(c3) media watchdog and research information center. We work daily to document how misinformation and disinformation spread online, helping to fracture the integrity of an already vulnerable media landscape.

A robust, free, and diverse media is important now more than ever, especially as it pertains to local news. However, since the beginning of the Great Recession, total newsroom employment has fallen, tumbling by about a quarter overall from 2008 to 2019.¹ Across the country, the business model for local and regional newspapers is failing. Conservative propaganda machines and bad actors like Sinclair Broadcasting Group have seized on this opportunity and are creating an ecosystem that is filling a local news void that many don't necessarily notice is infected with right-wing propaganda.^{2 3}

This is even more troubling as people lean on digital platforms for their news, which has led to major social media platforms taking more control over how news content is shared and consumed online. According to a recent Pew Research Center survey, about half of Americans (53%) say they get news from social media.⁴

¹ Elizabeth Grieco, Pew Research Center, "10 charts about America's newsrooms," April 28, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/28/10-charts-about-americas-newsrooms/>

² Meryl Kornfield, The Washington Post, "Sinclair TV stations delay airing interview with 'Plandemic' researcher amid backlash," July 25, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/media/2020/07/25/sinclair-tv-stations-delay-airing-interview-with-plandemic-researcher-amid-backlash/>

³ Spencer Silva, Media Matters for America, "A hyperpartisan local news site is throwing everything at the wall to stoke voter fraud concerns in Georgia," December 17, 2020, <https://www.mediamatters.org/local-news/hyperpartisan-local-news-site-throwing-everything-wall-stoke-voter-fraud-concerns>

⁴ Elisa Shearer, Pew Research Center, "More than eight-in-ten Americans get news from digital devices," January 12, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/12/more-than-eight-in-ten-americans-get-news-from-digital-devices/>

Facebook, Twitter, Google, and other platforms are essentially controlling who sees what news, and whether it's biased or accurate. This is a dangerous precedent, and these platforms have shown why; we have demonstrated that Facebook, for instance, has catered to conservatives at every possible opportunity.

Time and again, conservative media figures and politicians have invoked a similar playbook of claiming that the mainstream media is unfairly biased against them. And those claims have extended to social media. We anticipate GOP members at his hearing will invoke the same false and repeatedly debunked narrative, claiming that there is anti-conservative bias online.

Media Matters has conducted several studies of hundreds of Facebook pages to investigate whether there is anti-conservative bias on the platform, with data going back to 2018.⁵ At every point, left-wing and right-wing pages had similar interaction rates (reactions, comments, and shares). This was reinforced in our latest study, in which we found that right-leaning pages earned the most interactions in 2020, accounting for **45%** of total interactions from political pages.⁶ Despite right-wing claims to the contrary, **no data show any evidence of systemic bias against conservative content online.**

And in study after study -- on voting, abortion, and the national protests of police violence against unarmed Black people -- we've found right-leaning pages and sources getting more engagement than other sources.^{7,8,9}

In fact, a Media Matters study from June 2020 found that posts from right-leaning pages about the police brutality protests earned more engagement than posts from nonaligned or left-leaning pages.¹⁰ Right-leaning Facebook pages received over 48 million interactions -- or nearly 40% of all interactions -- despite representing only a quarter of all posts about the protests.

Nonetheless, allegations that social media companies are biased against conservatives and censoring right-wing content have become a common narrative in right-wing media and, ironically, recurrent content on the same social media platforms the narrative targets. These claims are just another iteration of the long-term right-wing effort to brand most of the

⁵ John Whitehouse, Media Matters for America, "The data is crystal clear: There is absolutely no evidence of anti-conservative bias on Facebook," August 20, 2019,

<https://www.mediamatters.org/facebook/heres-data-facebooks-bias-report-doesnt-show-you>

⁶ Kayla Gogarty, Media Matters for America, "Conservatives spent 2020 accusing Facebook of being biased against them, but engagement data tells a different story," January 2, 2021,

<https://www.mediamatters.org/facebook/conservatives-spent-2020-accusing-facebook-being-biased-against-them-engagement-data-tells>

⁷ Kayla Gogarty, Media Matters for America, "Right-wing talking points get most engagement in Facebook posts about voting, including unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud and attacks on voting by mail," June 18, 2020,

<https://www.mediamatters.org/voter-fraud-and-suppression/right-wing-talking-points-get-most-engagement-facebook-posts-about>

⁸ Madelyn Webb and Natalie Martinez, Media Matters for America, "Study: Right-wing sources dominate abortion-related news on Facebook," May 28, 2019,

<https://www.mediamatters.org/facebook/study-right-wing-sources-dominate-abortion-related-news-facebook>

⁹ Kayla Gogarty, Media Matters for America, "Study: Right-wing fearmongering leads Facebook engagement about peaceful protests," June 5, 2020,

<https://www.mediamatters.org/black-lives-matter/study-right-wing-fearmongering-leads-facebook-engagement-about-peaceful-protests>

¹⁰ Ibid.

mainstream press as biased against conservatives. The goal is to “work the refs” and get favorable treatment, this time from tech giants.¹¹

But many of these allegations of censorship or bias can actually be explained through technical arguments in which political motivations play no role. And that showcases, at best, a preoccupying level of digital illiteracy among those making the allegations and, at worst, the inherent bad faith of these claims.¹²

This playbook has been working for conservatives for over half a century, at least since Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater gave reporters covering his campaign pins that read “Eastern Liberal Press.”¹³ The strategy of putting the onus of proving neutrality on the mainstream press worked -- media have since over-represented conservatives, engaged in false equivalences, offered platforms to far-right hacks in the name of balance, and prioritized negative coverage of Democratic politicians -- and the same playbook is now being applied to tech giants.¹⁴¹⁵¹⁶¹⁷¹⁸

This, too, seems to be working: These platforms have groveled in response to accusations of bias by tapping extremist figures and far-right grifters as advisers or by having their leadership appear on right-wing propaganda shows to appease right-wing audiences.¹⁹²⁰

¹¹ Paul Krugman, The New York Times, “Working the Refs,” October 31, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/31/opinion/working-the-refs.html>

¹² Cristina Lopez G., Media Matters for America, “When conservatives claim censorship, they’re often just showcasing their tech ignorance,” April 10, 2019, <https://www.mediamatters.org/sean-hannity/when-conservatives-claim-censorship-theyre-often-just-showcasing-their-tech-ignorance>

¹³ The New York Times, “Goldwater Bestows Pins on Reporters Who Ride His Plane,” September 20, 1964, <https://www.nytimes.com/1964/09/20/archives/goldwater-bestows-pins-on-reporters-who-ride-his-plane.html>

¹⁴ Zachary Pleat, Media Matters for America, “Study: NY Times, Wash. Post quote more than twice as many Republicans as Democrats in political coverage,” July 20, 2018, <https://www.mediamatters.org/new-york-times/study-ny-times-wash-post-quote-more-twice-many-republicans-democrats-political>

¹⁵ Media Matters Staff, Media Matters for America, “On Roland Martin Unfiltered, Angelo Carusone discusses how right-wing pundits engage in ‘a working the refs strategy’ on cable TV,” October 5, 2018, <https://www.mediamatters.org/angelo-carusone/roland-martin-unfiltered-angelo-carusone-discusses-how-right-wing-pundits-engage>

¹⁶ Carlos Maza, Dayanita Ramesh, and John Kerr, Media Matters for America, “VIDEO: How False Equivalence Ruins Trump-Clinton News Coverage,” October 21, 2016, <https://www.mediamatters.org/donald-trump/video-how-false-equivalence-ruins-trump-clinton-news-coverage>

¹⁷ Parker Molloy, Media Matters for America, “Why is this man on my TV?” October 2, 2018, <https://www.mediamatters.org/erick-erickson/why-man-my-tv>

¹⁸ Rob Savillo, Media Matters for America, “STUDY: Top Newspapers Give Clinton Email Story More Coverage Than All Other Trump Stories,” November 4, 2016, <https://www.mediamatters.org/donald-trump/study-top-newspapers-give-clinton-email-story-more-coverage-all-other-trump-stories>

¹⁹ Cristina Lopez G., Media Matters for America, “Facebook took advice from a far-right figure who blamed gay marriage for hurricanes,” January 9, 2019, <https://www.mediamatters.org/facebook/facebook-took-advice-far-right-figure-who-blamed-gay-marriage-hurricanes>

²⁰ Media Matters Staff, Media Matters for America, “Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey says Twitter factors in ‘off-platform behavior’ when deciding on suspensions,” August 8, 2019, <https://www.mediamatters.org/sean-hannity/twitter-ceo-jack-dorsey-says-twitter-factors-platform-behavior-when-deciding>

We saw this more than ever throughout Trump's first two and a half years in office, when the president seemed unwilling to adhere to the same policies the rest of Twitter users were expected to follow.²¹ In June 2019, Twitter created public interest exemptions to its rules, giving the company leeway to leave up tweets from government officials that violate company policies on the platform.²² In October 2019, the company expanded on this policy, publishing a blog about its strategy for handling tweets from world leaders that violate platform rules.²³ Though neither of these posts called out Trump by name, they were very clearly written with him in mind. This type of policy making and response offers evidence that in reality, the social media and tech platforms have pro-Trump/pro-conservative slant. And it also allowed conservatives and extremists to promote online lies about the 2020 election that directly contributed to the January 6 insurrection on the U.S. Capitol.

A BuzzFeed report last August even revealed that Facebook employees have voiced concern and collected evidence showing that the platform gives preferential treatment to right-wing Facebook pages.²⁴ The report further demonstrates how Facebook has caved to pressure from conservatives, despite evidence repeatedly debunking their baseless accusations of bias.

Facebook's impulse to appease right-wing cries of bias, despite all evidence to the contrary, puts the company in a position where it will be amplifying lies and enabling extremists and white supremacists at the expense of American democracy and with great risk to our safety.

This is a narrative and tactic that must be quashed, as it serves as a distraction from the very real and troubling issues that plague social media and tech platforms.

**Sincerely,
Media Matters for America**

Here are some key takeaways from our analyses of claims of bias on Facebook:

From January 2020 through December 2020: A Media Matters study on Facebook pages that regularly post about American political news found that right-leaning pages consistently earned more weekly interactions than left-leaning or ideologically nonaligned pages.²⁵

Key findings from that study:

²¹ Parker Molloy, Media Matters for America, "No, it's not proof of "bias" when social media companies enforce their rules," October 22, 2020,

<https://www.mediamatters.org/twitter/no-its-not-proof-bias-social-media-companies-enforce-their-rules>

²² Twitter Safety, "Defining public interest on Twitter," June 27, 2019,

https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/publicinterest.html

²³ Twitter Inc., "World Leaders on Twitter: principles & approach," October 15, 2019,

https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/worldleaders2019.html

²⁴ Craig Silverman and Ryan Mac, BuzzFeed News, "Facebook Fired An Employee Who Collected Evidence Of Right-Wing Pages Getting Preferential Treatment," August 6, 2020,

<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/facebook-zuckerberg-what-if-trump-disputes-election-results>

²⁵ Kayla Gogarty, Media Matters for America, "Conservatives spent 2020 accusing Facebook of being biased against them, but engagement data tells a different story," January 2, 2021,

<https://www.mediamatters.org/facebook/conservatives-spent-2020-accusing-facebook-being-biased-against-them-engagement-data-tells>

- Right-leaning pages earned the most interactions in 2020, with nearly 9 billion interactions on roughly 2.3 million posts. **Right-leaning pages accounted for 45% of total interactions from political pages and nearly 30% of total posts.**
- **Left-leaning pages earned nearly 5 billion interactions in 2020 on roughly 1.3 million posts.** These pages accounted for over 25% of total interactions for political pages and posted only 16% of total posts.
- **Right-leaning pages also had the highest interaction rate, a performance metric that measures the engagement of a Facebook page in relation to the number of page “likes” it has and how frequently it shares posts.** Conservative pages had an overall average interaction rate of 0.97%, while left-leaning pages had a rate of 0.83% and nonaligned pages had a rate of only 0.27%.
- Pages like Occupy Democrats, Donald J. Trump, and Ben Shapiro earned between four and six times more interactions than The New York Times, one of the world’s best-know sources of fact-based news. That’s likely because Facebook’s algorithm amplifies content that invokes an emotional response, rewarding sensational and divisive content and contributing to polarization.^{26,27} Thus, reliable legacy media does not earn nearly as much engagement as sensational content from partisan pages. We found that half of the top 10 political pages that earned the most interactions from January 1 to December 15, 2020, were right-leaning pages. These five pages **were:**
 - Donald J. Trump (over 867 million interactions)
 - Fox News (over 511 million interactions)
 - Ben Shapiro (over 380 million interactions)
 - Breitbart (over 338 million interactions)
 - Dan Bongino (over 235 million interactions)

From March 2019 through July 2019:

- **Right-leaning pages on average earned more interactions per week than left-leaning pages.** Between March 18 and August 4, 2019, right-leaning Facebook pages earned on average about 45,000 more interactions (reactions, comments, and shares) per week than left-leaning pages.²⁸

From July 2018 through mid-March 2019:

- **Right-leaning and left-leaning pages on average earned roughly the same number of interactions per week.** Throughout our 37-week study, right-leaning pages earned on average about 372,000 weekly interactions and left-leaning pages earned on average about 369,000 weekly interactions. Partisan pages earned more interactions than pages without political alignment every week of this study, earning on average only about 283,000 weekly interactions.²⁹

²⁶ Andrew Marantz, The New Yorker, “Why Facebook Can’t Fix Itself,” October 12, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/10/19/why-facebook-cant-fix-itself>

²⁷ Jeff Horwitz and Deepa Seetharaman, The Wall Street Journal, “Facebook Executives Shut Down Efforts to Make the Site Less Divisive,” May 26, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-it-encourages-division-top-executives-nixed-solutions-11590507499>

²⁸ Natalie Martinez, Media Matters for America, “Despite bias claims, new data shows that Facebook is still not censoring conservatives,” August 13, 2019, <https://www.mediamatters.org/facebook/despite-bias-claims-facebook-not-censoring-conservatives>

²⁹ Natalie Martinez, Media Matters for America, “Study: Facebook is still not censoring conservatives,” April 9, 2019, <https://www.mediamatters.org/facebook/study-facebook-still-not-censoring-conservatives>

From January 2018 through July 2018:

- **Right-leaning pages in total have a bigger presence on Facebook:**
Right-leaning Facebook pages had a higher total number of interactions than left-leaning Facebook pages. Right-leaning pages had 23% more total interactions than nonaligned pages and 51% more total interactions than left-leaning pages. Images shared by right-leaning pages -- including memes that frequently include false and bigoted messages -- were by far the highest performing content on the Facebook pages examined.³⁰

Images posted by right-wing meme pages on Facebook actually received the most weekly interactions (reactions, comments, and shares) of all political-related content in that 2018 study.³¹ These pages regularly posted false and/or derogatory content about immigrants and people of color.³²

- The study of 463 prominent Facebook pages that regularly posted political content between January 1, 2018, and July 1, 2018, found that images posted by right-leaning pages were the highest performing content.

³⁰ Natalie Martinez, Media Matters for America, "Study: Analysis of top Facebook pages covering American political news," July 16, 2018, <https://www.mediamatters.org/facebook/study-analysis-top-facebook-pages-covering-american-political-news>

³¹ Natalie Martinez, Media Matters for America, "Under Facebook's new algorithm, conservative meme pages are outperforming all political news pages," July 24, 2018, <https://www.mediamatters.org/facebook/under-facebooks-new-algorithm-conservative-meme-pages-are-outperforming-all-political-news>

³² Natalie Martinez, Media Matters for America, "How the Facebook right-wing propaganda machine works," August 31, 2018, <https://www.mediamatters.org/facebook/how-facebook-right-wing-propaganda-machine-works>