

# It's Not Just Facebook—"Old Media" Spreads Misinformation, Too

DAVID MOSCHELLA | JANUARY 2022

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**Defending Digital Series, No. 1:** Policymakers wanting to assign blame for societal misinformation (and regulate social media) need to examine both new and old media—conservative and liberal alike. Focusing on one type of media or one particular company is unfair and unwarranted.

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Hostility toward social media, particularly Facebook, has been escalating on Capitol Hill and in the news media since 2016, when Russian misinformation was often blamed for Donald Trump's victory over Hillary Clinton. Even as the passions of that year's presidential campaign have cooled—and subsequent analysis has revealed that the impact of Russian election interference was exaggerated—the idea that Facebook is a dangerous source of societal misinformation has become deeply rooted as conventional wisdom in the mainstream media.<sup>1</sup> This is distorting the ongoing policy debate about the extent to which Internet platforms play a role in disseminating misinformation and their obligations to combat it.

As with Russian interference, the view that Facebook is a dangerous source of misinformation is significantly exaggerated—and mainstream media should be less focused on dissing a competitor and more concerned with getting its own house in order. Consider that America's major television networks, cable channels, and other leading news organizations all served as super spreaders for the following 10 examples of damaging, high-profile misinformation:

1. In Ferguson, Missouri, according to contemporaneous press reports that became enshrined in popular culture, Michael Brown had his hands up, while saying "Don't shoot!" Subsequent investigations by the U.S. Justice Department revealed that while the Ferguson Police Department "engages in a pattern of unconstitutional stops and arrests in violation of the Fourth Amendment," as many protesters contended, that was not the story in this case: The evidence shows Brown fought, tried to take the gun, and was moving back toward the officer who shot him.<sup>2</sup>
2. The Steele dossier, with its allegations of Donald Trump's salacious misconduct and cooperation with Russia, was widely reported to have come from "highly credible" former British intelligence sources. But the document was opposition research that turned out to consist of thin and unsubstantiated information.<sup>3</sup>
3. Initial social media videos appeared to show Nicholas Sandmann and a group of fellow students from Covington High School on a field trip to the National Mall taunting a native American elder while chanting "Build that wall!" Most mainstream media outlets

ran with and amplified this story, making it into a huge national issue. But subsequent reporting revealed that the students did no such thing.<sup>4</sup>

4. The Black Lives Matter protests during 2020 were widely described as “mostly peaceful.”<sup>5</sup> But while analyses have found that 94 percent of the protests were peaceful, the media downplayed the remaining 6 percent which were the most violent protests across the United States since the 1960s, in which 2,037 police officers were injured, with 2,385 cases of looting, 624 cases of arson, hundreds of police vehicles burned or seriously damaged, and an estimated \$2 billion in property damage in 140 U.S. cities. Describing this as “mostly peaceful” is like describing the South side of Chicago as “mostly safe” because 94 percent of the residents haven’t been shot.<sup>6</sup>
5. It was widely reported that Russia put “bounties” on U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan, and that President Trump did nothing in response. But the Biden administration later admitted that the CIA has only “low to moderate confidence” in such bounties.<sup>7</sup>
6. Claims that COVID-19 may have begun in a laboratory in Wuhan, China were quickly dismissed and widely reported to have been “debunked” as a “racist conspiracy theory” until many scientists stepped forward to say that a lab accident is a distinct possibility. Many have called for the World Health Organization to properly investigate, and the Biden administration saw fit to undertake its own 90-day review. China continues to stonewall and retaliate against any and all such inquiries.<sup>8</sup>
7. The April 2019 discovery of a laptop that Hunter Biden allegedly left with a computer repair shop was quickly dismissed as “Russian disinformation” when it provided information about his business dealings in Ukraine and China. Both the laptop and its contents were later confirmed to be authentic.<sup>9</sup>
8. *The New York Times* reported and many others repeated that officer Brian Sicknick died after being struck with a fire extinguisher by rioters during the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol. That story was subsequently corrected to note that Officer Sicknick died the following day from natural causes.<sup>10</sup>
9. When interest in using the antiparasitic medication ivermectin to treat COVID-19 surged after Australian researchers observed that it killed the COVID virus in a lab setting, rather than simply state that the medical consensus is that the drug is not effective for COVID, and that dosage levels designed for large animals are very dangerous, the mainstream press quickly dismissed the drug as a “horse de-wormer.” But ivermectin is not just for animals. It has been safely used by humans for nearly 40 years. Because it has all but eliminated river blindness in many countries, it’s on the World Health Organization’s list of “essential medicines”; its developers won the 2015 Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine.<sup>11</sup>
10. Kyle Rittenhouse, the Illinois teenager who shot three men at a riotous protest in Kenosha, Wisconsin, was repeatedly called a “white supremacist” who illegally carried a gun across state lines. Yet, whatever one thinks of Mr. Rittenhouse’s actions, investigators could not demonstrate the former, and trial evidence clearly disproved the latter. He may sue for libel.<sup>12</sup>

This deeply divisive misinformation was not the result of random or occasional errors; it stemmed from a mainstream media too keen to assume the worst of those it disagrees with, even in volatile areas such as racial unrest, presidential elections, national security, and a global pandemic. Of course, many news organizations eventually amended their articles and posted corrections. But the damage to society and specific individuals was done. The original stories were aggressively pursued for weeks, months, and even years, and were seen and discussed by tens of millions of people, dominating much of the national dialog. Corrections are typically published once and discussed as briefly as possible. Many Americans still believe the original versions.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, although unsubstantiated claims about stolen elections and vaccine safety have long been minority views, rightly ridiculed from the morning talk shows through late night comedy, the falsehoods above were the majority views, and those who publicly challenged them risked being defamed, harassed, ostracized, censored, boycotted, and/or fired. This obvious imbalance has added to today's widespread distrust of mainstream media and political institutions, and it helps explain why false stories fall on so many receptive ears. The sad reality is that if mainstream media insists something is true, many people are now reflexively skeptical in the same way many others are skeptical of anything coming from Fox News.

### **Facebook Is Getting Too Much of the Misinformation Blame**

Given this situation, policymakers should seek a more balanced view of the many causes of societal misinformation. In pushing back against the conventional wisdom, it's helpful to keep the following five points in mind:

1. **Facebook hasn't been the source of the most important examples of misinformation.** Neither the fear of vaccines nor the false claims of election fraud started with Facebook nor did any of the 10 items above. Although the Sandman story was spurred by an Internet video, the real amplification came from mainstream media, and claims of election fraud have come overwhelmingly from President Trump, whose presence cuts across all major media.
2. **Mainstream media is still far more influential as a source of news than Facebook.** The Pew Research Center's 2021 finding that 48 percent of Americans "either sometimes or often get news" from social media (just 19 percent often, 29 percent sometimes) is frequently cited as evidence of Facebook's vast influence.<sup>14</sup> But the vast majority of Americans continue to get most of their news from television, radio, and the print media in either their traditional or online versions.
3. **Many of Facebook's critics in the media have a fundamental conflict of interest.** The time that consumers spend on Facebook attracts billions of advertising dollars that once went to traditional media businesses, while Facebook and other online services also provide access to a much broader set of competing information (e.g., blogs, podcasts, videos, etc.).<sup>15</sup> Thus, it's often in the interest of publishers and television networks to tarnish Facebook's image and support efforts to curb its influence. Indeed, an alternative title for this column could have easily been: "Old Media Agrees: New Media Is the Problem."
4. **Using data to give consumers more of what they like is what media companies do.** Whether it's MSNBC vs. Fox News, *The Atlantic* vs. *The National Review*, or countless magazines, websites, blogs, and individual social media accounts, everyone tracks what readers respond to. That Facebook relies more on algorithms just means it uses automated tools

instead of traditional focus groups, reader surveys, page views, clickbait, likes, shares, and editorial gut feel. The goal of increasing engagement is the same. (In a future issue of this series, we will argue that, in general, algorithms are less biased than people.)

5. **No company is capable of being an effective “arbiter of truth.”** While Facebook is partly like a telephone company and partly like a media firm, it is fundamentally much more the former. Facebook should block speech that is also illegal or clearly problematic offline—harassment, threats, fraud, terrorism, direct incitement, child pornography, etc. Simply being “wrong” is not among these illegalities, and there are just too many examples of something being deemed true today, but false tomorrow, or vice versa. In cases where information is highly dubious and involves public health or safety, the company would be better off using some sort of rating system. But getting out of censorship business means acknowledging—at least tacitly—that suspending President Trump’s Facebook account and limiting the sharing of the Hunter Biden laptop story were serious mistakes.

Among 46 nations surveyed recently by Reuters, the United States ranked last in media trust. Only 29 percent of Americans agreed with the statement “I think you can trust most news most of the time.”<sup>16</sup> Most mainstream media—newspapers, magazines, radio, and television—and many U.S. policymakers like to blame this on President Trump, Fox News, and social media, but mainstream media itself is also a significant part of the problem. Policymakers who want to assign blame for societal misinformation (and regulate social media) need to examine both new and old media—conservative and liberal alike. To put so much of the focus on one type of media or one particular company is both unfair and unwarranted.

## About This Series

ITIF's "Defending Digital" series examines popular criticisms, complaints, and policy indictments against the tech industry to assess their validity, correct factual errors, and debunk outright myths. Our goal in this series is not to defend tech reflexively or categorically, but to scrutinize widely echoed claims that are driving the most consequential debates in tech policy. Before enacting new laws and regulations, it's important to ask: Do these claims hold water? Read more at [itif.org/defending-digital](https://itif.org/defending-digital).

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