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Executive Summary

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If even a handful of Republican deniers are elected this year to state offices that oversee presidential elections—such as governor and secretary of state—the 2024 process could descend into chaos and violence, making the events of 2020 - 2021 seem tame by comparison.
”

The claim that Joe Biden did not legitimately win the 2020 election has evolved from a backward-looking Big Lie to an article of faith in the Republican Party that elections in the United States are generally corrupt. GOP nominees for state and federal office have elevated the falsehood to a central campaign theme in the 2022 midterms.

Social media platforms have promised to protect the upcoming elections from mis- and disinformation, but their flawed policies and inconsistent enforcement result in the continued amplification of election denialism, especially in key battleground states.

The consequences of denialism are grave. Beyond undermining trust in elections and other democratic institutions, the phenomenon is used to justify enactment of restrictive voting laws that disproportionately harm people of color. Denialism has also fueled harassment and death threats aimed at election administrators, causing many experienced officials to make plans to leave their jobs before the 2024 presidential election, a prospect that would increase the chances of logistical snafus and reinforce baseless claims of fraud.

If even a handful of Republican deniers are elected this year to state offices that oversee presidential elections—such as governor and secretary of state—the 2024 process could descend into chaos and violence, making the events of 2020 - 2021 seem tame by comparison.

This report assesses the role the major social media platforms have

played in the spread of election denialism and recommends what they can do now to mitigate further harm to democratic institutions and norms. Its main findings include:

- Facebook’s continued exemption of politicians from its fact-checking program facilitates election-denial lies by influential public figures.
- Twitter’s on-again/off-again enforcement of its Civic Integrity Policy has allowed denialism to gain momentum since early 2021. A whistleblower’s complaint in August 2022 described the company’s efforts to stem misinformation as poorly managed, starved for resources, and focused on putting out public relations “fires.”
- Increasingly plagued by political misinformation, TikTok has announced tough-sounding policies related to elections, but the platform’s haphazard enforcement has failed to slow the spread of deniers’ lies.
- YouTube has allowed its popular long-form video platform to be exploited by proponents of disinformation such as the myth of widespread “ballot trafficking” as portrayed in the movie “2000 Mules.”

To address these and other aspects of election denialism, we have made a series of recommendations to the social media companies, as described here in capsule form:

Recommendations in Brief

1 Greater transparency

Social media companies need to disclose how their automated systems rank, recommend, and remove content and how these systems interact with human content moderators.

2 Independent audits

Independent auditing would allow nongovernmental third parties to check whether social media platforms are weighing the intended benefits of the services they offer against potential risks to users and society at large.

3 Consistent, stable election-related policies

The major platforms must treat protecting elections and the democratic norms that go with them as a year-round job, not one that is suspended between elections.

4 Enhanced fact-checking

Research shows that fact-checking has a positive effect on people's ability to distinguish truth from lies. Fact-checking has an even more positive effect if people previously exposed to the lie in question are informed of that fact.

5 Removal of demonstrably false content

Removing provably untrue content makes a more definitive statement than labeling and down-ranking. Removed content can be preserved for future study even as it is kept from being shared.

6 The next threat

Social media companies have been too reactive in addressing election denialism and related threats to democracy. They need to focus more on identifying dangers that are just over the horizon.

Introduction

“
Electional denialism casts doubt on more than election procedures past, present, and future. In the eyes of its most extreme believers, American democracy itself no longer functions fairly, and political opponents—Democrats—must be stopped by any means necessary, including the sort of violence unleashed at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.”

Roughly 70 percent of Republican voters tell pollsters that Joe Biden was not legitimately elected president in 2020. This figure has remained steady since early 2021, despite prolific litigation, audits, federal and state investigations, and televised congressional hearings that collectively demolish Donald Trump’s claim that the election was “stolen” from him.¹

Election denialism has mutated into an article of faith among a supermajority of Republicans and many GOP nominees for federal and state office. Denialism casts doubt on more than election procedures past, present, and future. In the eyes of its most extreme believers, American democracy itself no longer functions fairly, and political opponents—Democrats—must be stopped by any means necessary, including the sort of violence unleashed at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.

In this fevered environment and with the November midterm elections fast approaching, several of the major social media companies recently announced the equivalent of public health initiatives that they hope will reduce the spread of the denialist disease.

Meta Platforms, which owns Facebook and Instagram, as well as the messaging services WhatsApp and Messenger, [said](#) it would remove misinformation about voting logistics, as well as calls for violence. As it did in 2020, the company said it would bar new

political ads during the last week of the campaign and reject ads that discourage voting or call into question an upcoming election. Meta, which formerly was known as Facebook, additionally promised to expand fact-checking and provide authoritative election information in Spanish.² In an interview, Meta spokesman Tom Reynolds disputed an earlier *New York Times* [report](#) that “elections are no longer a top priority” for CEO Mark Zuckerberg.³ While the *Times* emphasized that a dedicated 300-person elections team had been reduced to 60, Reynolds said that “hundreds of people dedicated full-time to this work are permanently embedded across more than 40 teams here.”

TikTok, the short-video platform increasingly popular with younger social media fans, [reiterated](#) its total ban on political ads, saying it would take new steps to block influencers from accepting undisclosed payment for spreading political messages. Owned by the Chinese technology giant ByteDance, TikTok emphasized that it intends

to remove “election misinformation, harassment—including that directed towards election workers—hateful behavior, and violent extremism.” The site added that it would broadly label content related to the midterms, including posts by candidates, political parties, and governments.⁴

For its part, Twitter [announced](#) that it is “activating enforcement of our Civic Integrity Policy for the 2022 U.S. midterms.” The policy prohibits misleading claims about how to vote, as well as falsehoods that “intimidate or dissuade people from participating” or, more broadly, that “undermine public confidence in an election.” Twitter said it would label offending tweets with links to credible information and promised that its algorithms would not amplify such content. On September 1, YouTube [said](#) that it is removing videos claiming widespread election fraud in 2020. And starting on Election Day 2022, people searching YouTube will be linked to authoritative results, countering potential false claims of victory by denialist candidates who, in fact, have lost.⁵ (See the sidebar on p. 8.)

These policy agendas all sound reasonable, as far as they go. But they obscure two major problems: First, each of these companies has failed in one or more critical ways to enforce its policies effectively. Second, it may be too late to meaningfully contain, let alone eradicate, election denialism online.

Haphazard responses

Meta maintains the industry’s most extensive network of outside fact-checking groups, whose findings can result in false content being labeled and down-ranked in users’ feeds. But the company is continuing its ill-considered fact-checking [exemption](#) for politicians, which it first announced in 2019. The exemption [opens the door](#) to unalloyed lying about fraudulent elections by influential public figures.⁶

Although still thought of by many people as a repository of teenage dance videos, TikTok is increasingly [plagued](#) by election misinformation.⁷ It has responded to the problem by issuing aggressive-sounding policies banning “false claims that seek to erode trust in public institutions,” such as elections, and making it more difficult to find such content on the site. But TikTok enforces these policies erratically. For example, research for this report found that the platform was blocking users from searching for the term “election fraud” but allowing them to scour the site for videos about “ballot trafficking,” which collectively attracted millions of views. After we asked TikTok about the anomaly, the platform began blocking searches for “ballot trafficking,” as well.

Twitter’s notice that it is “activating” its Civic Integrity Policy papers over the fact that it stopped enforcing the policy in March 2021, putting its election-related rules on hiatus for 16 months. Just days after the activation announcement, *The Washington Post* [revealed](#) that Twitter’s former head of security has filed a whistleblower complaint with the federal government containing damning allegations about how the company deals with mis- and disinformation. The complaint includes a draft of an analysis the company itself commissioned from an outside consulting firm. The consultants found that Twitter operates “in a constant state of crisis,” providing inadequate resources to its analysts and content moderators

who chase violations “tweet by tweet and account by account,” rather than employing more efficient automated enforcement tools.⁸

YouTube, a subsidiary of Google, was the last major platform to reveal its midterms strategy—a continuation of its [pattern](#) of hanging back to allow rivals to absorb the brunt of critics’ attention.⁹ The video platform’s past election-season performance does not provide reason for optimism. For example, it belatedly announced in December 2020 that it would [remove](#) misleading claims that “widespread fraud or errors changed the outcome” of that year’s election. But YouTube applied the policy only to content uploaded after December 9, which allowed untold numbers of denialist videos to remain available, contributing to the erosion of trust in democracy.¹⁰

These haphazard responses to the challenges presented by elections in a highly polarized political environment are one of the reasons denialism has gripped such a large portion of the conservative American imagination. In 2020, Trump led an online campaign to persuade voters that the only way he could lose would be if polling were “rigged.” Once he did lose, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, among other platforms, unwittingly [provided venues](#) for Stop the Steal adherents to mobilize, which culminated in the assault on the Capitol.¹¹

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The number of potential voter fraud cases that the Associated Press identified in the six battleground states that Donald Trump contested in 2020—a total that would have made no difference in the outcome. Joe Biden won Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin and their 79 Electoral College votes by more than 311,000 popular votes, combined. The AP found that there were a mixture of fraudulent votes cast for Biden and Trump.

Deniers on the ballot

Since then, the contagion has permeated Republican electorates in the critical battleground states of Arizona, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. In midterm primaries in those key swing states, denier candidates have won nearly two-thirds of Republican nominations for state and federal offices with authority over elections, according to a *Washington Post* analysis. These mostly Trump-endorsed politicians will appear on November ballots not only as nominees for U.S. Senate and House seats, but also as candidates for governor, attorney general, and secretary of state—offices that determine how elections are run and whether their results get certified.¹²

The platforms have instituted some safeguards at the most obviously perilous moments around elections. But in many cases, the security measures are inconsistently enforced or eased once the crisis passes, which allows for long periods when misinformation spreads freely. “This should be a 24/7, 365-days-a-year undertaking,” said Yaël Eisenstat, who briefly worked on election integrity for Facebook in 2018 and more recently has started a technology-focused advisory firm. “You have to enforce the policies steadily.”¹³

Preaching election denialism doesn’t guarantee victory, of course. The January 6th insurrection ultimately failed to stop Joe Biden from becoming president. This year, Trump’s favored candidates for governor and secretary of state in Georgia both lost high-profile primaries to incumbent Republicans who acknowledge Biden’s win. Moreover, it isn’t clear whether denialism will prove an effective strategy for corraling independent voters in general elections. But even if Trump-backed deniers win in only a handful of battleground states this fall, in 2024 they could make the

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The number of restrictive voting laws enacted since the beginning of 2021 by 18 states. Many of the statutes disproportionately hinder voters of color, according to NYU’s Brennan Center for Justice.

chaotic aftermath of the 2020 presidential election seem mild by comparison.

On social media, as on cable television and at rallies, the election denial narrative takes the form of a quintessential conspiracy theory. Depending on who tells the tale, the 2020 plot involved polling machines controlled by shadowy foreign forces, suitcases of phony ballots, and/or legions of “mules” who illegally stuffed drop boxes. These contentions have been debunked by all serious observers—not least, Trump’s own attorney general, [William Barr](#), and [Christopher Krebs](#), the Trump administration official in charge of election cybersecurity.¹⁴

Despite these authoritative refutations, GOP candidates from [town council aspirants](#) on up are betting that election denialism and other forms of extreme partisanship will do the trick in November. Consider how these 2022 primary winners used social media to sow confusion and promote lies, with no apparent restriction or response by the platforms:

- **Doug Mastriano**, the Republican nominee for governor of Pennsylvania, helped lead Trump’s effort to block the certification of that state’s backing for Biden. Mastriano has used Facebook to declare that Biden “[cheated](#)” in 2020¹⁵ and, specifically, that corrupt late night “[vote dumps](#)” in Pennsylvania and other states led to Trump’s defeat.¹⁶
- With the Capitol mob chanting, “Hang Mike Pence!” **Dan Cox** [tweeted](#), “Pence is a traitor.” In a June 2022 Facebook post, the Republican gubernatorial candidate in Maryland called the 2020 election the “[GREAT HEIST](#).”¹⁷

- Taking to Facebook to condemn the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s August 2022 search for classified documents at Trump’s Mar-a-Lago estate, **Kristina Karamo**, the GOP nominee for secretary of state in Michigan, [posted](#): “With all this corruption happening, are we still naive enough to think these people wouldn’t cheat in elections[?]”¹⁸

- **Abraham Hamadeh** has used social media to vow that if elected attorney general in Arizona, he would use his authority to put Democrats in prison. “I’m going to prosecute the crimes of the rigged 2020 election,” he [tweeted](#) in May 2022.¹⁹

Beyond individual races, denialism is disrupting the broader political ecosystem. Its proponents have invoked the false claim to justify passage of laws that disproportionately hinder people of color seeking to vote. Since the beginning of 2021, Republicans in 18 states have enacted 34 laws that restrict access to the polls, according to NYU’s [Brennan Center for Justice](#). The restrictions include curbs on early voting and heightened voter-identification requirements.²⁰ “The platforms have to decide whether they want to be enablers of white supremacist backlash to greater participation by Black and Brown voters,” Adam Lioz, senior policy counsel at the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, said in an interview.

At the same time, denialism widely disseminated on social media platforms has sparked threats of violence against state and local election administrators. In two [criminal cases](#) this year in Michigan and Nebraska, federal prosecutors showed that defendants

had used Instagram to menace election officials. One harasser created a harrowing tableau of mutilated bodies accompanied by text saying, “I’d [sic] be a shame if something happened to your daughter at school.”²¹ A March 2022 [survey](#) of election administrators found that 44% said that social media has made their job “a lot” more difficult, while one in six said they had been personally threatened as a result of their work. Twenty percent said that they plan to quit before 2024.²² This loss of practical experience could lead to logistical breakdowns that would further undermine public confidence in elections.

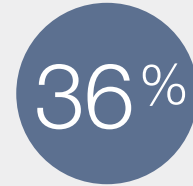
Two caveats

This report assesses the role that the major social media platforms have played in the spread of election denialism and recommends what they can do now to mitigate further harm to democratic institutions and norms. Two caveats are in order:

First, social media platforms are not the sole engine driving election denialism. Without Donald Trump’s uniquely corrosive attacks on U.S. elections, law enforcement, and other public institutions, we would not face such a dire situation. Republican leaders also have played a key role by echoing Trump’s shameless claims or remaining silent. This obeisance reflects fear of Trump’s wrath, but also a calculation that denialism helps justify restrictive voting laws that lower Democratic turnout and boost Republican success at the polls. Fox News and even-more-extreme right-wing cable outlets also have exacerbated denialism, as have pro-Trump talk radio, podcasts, and websites. Still, it’s important to remember that these other misinformation sources energetically seek to amplify their content via social media and that versions of the denialist narrative ricochet among platforms, gaining credibility on the political right by means of sheer repetition.

The second caveat is that grappling with false election claims is no easy challenge for the platforms. Distinguishing harmful falsehoods from ordinary political rhetoric can be difficult. The increasing popularity of video—especially fleeting, sarcastic clips on TikTok—presents obstacles, as moving imagery is far trickier to analyze and filter than text. The sheer scale of the most popular platforms, which collectively host billions of pieces of fresh content a day, means that social media companies have to rely on automated moderation systems, which struggle with context and nuance. The companies also deploy human moderators, but most of them work for third-party vendors for modest pay and under sometimes-unsettling circumstances. [Outsourcing](#) in this manner reduces labor costs but undercuts reviewers’ effectiveness.²³

Nevertheless, social media companies should be held responsible for the choices they have made, whether to farm out content moderation or assemble their vast social networks with inadequate concern for building commensurate guardrails. These businesses derive billions upon billions of dollars in annual advertising revenue, more of which needs to be devoted to ameliorating the harms to which they contribute. The malady of election denialism in the U.S. has become one of the most dangerous byproducts of social media, and it is past time for the industry to do more to address it.



The percentage of news that Republican political candidates shared from January to July 2022 that came from sites rated “unreliable” by NewsGuard, a nonpartisan website analysis organization. The comparable figure for Democratic candidates: only 2%. These figures were up substantially in percentage terms from 2020, according to [researchers](#) at NYU’s Center for Social Media and Politics.

Origins of the Crisis

“
Election denialism evolved in 2021 from an obsession with former President Trump’s inability to accept defeat into a broader, if equally baseless, attack on the patriotism of all Democrats, as well as non-Trump-loving Republicans, and legions of election administrators, many of them career government employees.”

Donald Trump’s election denialism dates back at least as far as his 2016 campaign for the Republican presidential nomination. Faced with early primary competition from Ted Cruz, Trump accused the Texas senator of benefitting from fraud. When Cruz won the Colorado caucuses in April of that year, about 200 Trump backers gathered at the state Capitol in Denver, [chanting](#), “Stop the steal!”²⁴

Even after Trump won the White House, he [railed on Twitter](#) that the reason he lost the popular vote was that Democrats conspired to have millions of illegal immigrants cast ballots for Hillary Clinton—another lie.²⁵ The [real story](#) about fraud in 2016 concerned Russian operatives who created fake social media accounts and bought advertisements to heighten divisiveness in the American electorate and boost Trump’s chances.²⁶

Four years later, the major social media companies appropriately introduced features that would help people participate in elections amid the lethal Covid-19 pandemic. But these precautions were not methodical or entirely effective.

On the positive side, from March through Election Day 2020, Meta platforms helped 4.5 million users register to vote and 100,000 to sign up as poll workers. Facebook labeled 180 million pieces of content and demoted them in users’ feeds because fact-checkers deemed the material

untrue. Another 265,000 posts were removed altogether because they violated company voter-interference policies, including its ban on calls for poll watching that suggested intimidation. The company removed tens of thousands of Facebook and Instagram accounts associated with the violence-tinged QAnon conspiracy movement.

Twitter made similar efforts. From late October through mid-November 2020, it posted notices telling users not to be overly suspicious of delayed election results and that voting by mail is legitimate. During the same several-week period, the company labeled some 300,000 tweets under its Civic Integrity Policy as “disputed and potentially misleading.” Twitter also [removed](#) tens of thousands of QAnon accounts.

YouTube, by contrast, illustrated why it has a [reputation for lagging behind](#) other major platforms on self-policing.²⁷ From September through November 2020, it removed more than 8,000

channels for election-related offenses, along with many thousands of associated videos. But at times, the Google subsidiary seemed obtuse about promoting lies. One illustration: It refused to take down a heavily viewed [video](#) posted on November 4, 2020, by the far-right One America News Network in which an anchorwoman declared, “President Trump won four more years in office last night.” YouTube

acknowledged that the video was “demonstrably false” and “undermine[d] confidence in elections,” but still declined to remove it. Instead, the platform stopped running ads with the video and appended a notice that election “results may not be final.”²⁸

After January 6th, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube all banned Trump, citing the real danger that having repeatedly

used the platforms to encourage the Capitol mob, he would incite yet more violence. Barring an incumbent president was a bold move, and it was more than justified. Had the platforms continued to allow Trump to exploit their reach, a group of election experts said in a joint [statement](#) at the time, he could have “undermined the peaceful transition of power, which is essential to a working democracy.”²⁹

Twitter: A Whistleblower Emerges

In the fall of 2021, a Facebook whistleblower leaked internal company documents that she alleged show that top management prioritizes profits over principled corporate policy.

Now it is Twitter’s turn. In a whistleblower complaint filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission and other government agencies, the company’s former head of security, Peiter “Mudge” Zatkó, [portrayed](#) Twitter as a topsy-turvy operation that rushes to snuff out public relations “fires,” rather than deliberately protecting its 330 million monthly users and society at large.¹

The main thrust of the complaint is that Twitter violated the terms of an 11-year-old [settlement](#) with the Federal Trade Commission by falsely claiming that it has an effective security plan.² In an important secondary disclosure, Zatkó included a draft report prepared at Twitter’s request by an outside consulting firm which describes the company’s attempts to blunt mis- and disinformation—including efforts related to elections—as starved for resources and generally feeble.

A lack of sophisticated in-house tracking technology “forces analysts and content moderators to analyze and action against violations tweet by tweet and account by account, a time-consuming process

that will keep Twitter reliant on unscalable human power,” the 24-page draft report by the Alethea Group stated. In 2021, the company’s Site Integrity team employed only two “subject matter experts” on misinformation, the report noted. Alethea Group based its assessment on interviews with Twitter employees and internal company documents.

Twitter lashed out at Zatkó, a famed hacker who had been hired to identify the company’s security flaws. CEO Parag Agrawal said Zatkó had been fired after 15 months for “ineffective leadership and poor performance.” The complaint created “a false narrative that is riddled with inconsistencies and inaccuracies,” Agrawal added. Under Security and Exchange Commission rules, Zatkó stands to collect a monetary award if his claims are vindicated.

In contrast to the CEO’s harsh, dismissive comments, Twitter executives familiar with the Alethea Group report privately said that it provided a snapshot of the company in the wake of its harried response to the chaotic 2020 election. Today, these executives said, efforts to counter mis- and disinformation have become more systematized and efficacious. On Twitter, they predicted, the 2022 midterm and 2024 presidential elections will go more smoothly.

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/interactive/2022/twitter-whistleblower-sec-spam/>

² https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2011/03/ftc-accepts-final-settlement-twitter-failure-safeguard-personal-information-0?itid=ik_inline_enhanced-template

But apart from banning Trump, the platforms' response to fallout from the 2020 election displayed a tendency toward ambivalence and inconstancy. Behind-the-scenes episodes at Facebook illustrate the point:

A number of Facebook employees responded to Trump's denialism in the wake of his defeat by advocating internally for emergency measures to calm the tone and content of users' feeds. According to the 2021 [book](#) *An Ugly Truth: Facebook's Battle for Domination*, by *New York Times* journalists Sheera Frenkel and Cecilia Kang, Mark Zuckerberg agreed to giving more weight to what the company calls "news ecosystem quality," or NEQ. A secret internal ranking assigned to publishers based on signals of their authoritativeness, NEQ favors mainstream organizations like the *Times* and disfavors hyper-partisan outlets like the right-wing Gateway Pundit website and Occupy Democrats on the left. Some Facebook employees argued that the NEQ tweak created a "nicer News Feed" which they argued should continue even after the contentious post-election period. But by the end of November 2020, the content-ranking algorithm had been returned to normal.³⁰

Facebook's equivocation about tamping down election denial and other polarizing content can be traced to the company's countervailing interest in the growth of its user base and advertising revenue. Frenkel and Kang wrote that senior executives worried that maintaining a calmer News Feed beyond the election period would result in users spending less time on the platform. User screen time and engagement with content are crucial metrics for the advertisers that provide the lion's share of Facebook's (and other platforms') revenue. "The bottom line was that we couldn't hurt our bottom line," a Facebook data scientist



The number politicians whose statements Meta fact-checks. Since 2019, the company has declined to check the accuracy of politicians' assertions on the theory that voters need to hear what their would-be representatives say. When Facebook banned Donald Trump in January 2021, it cited the danger of his inciting violence, not his lies about election fraud.

told the authors. Reynolds, the Meta spokesman, said in an email that "no change to News Feed is ever made solely because of its impact on time spent" on the platform.

If the platforms could painlessly press a button to jettison misinformation and fraud, they probably would, Laura Edelson, a post-doctoral computer science researcher at NYU's Tandon School of Engineering, told us. In the absence of a magic button, social media companies seeking to achieve dramatic reductions in harmful content would have to alter the algorithms that rank, recommend, and remove unwanted posts, said Edelson, who studies online political communication and has [clashed](#) with Meta over access to the company's political advertising data. But top executives are not willing to consider overhauling their core algorithms. That's because doing so could reduce user session time and decrease engagement, the issue that reportedly arose when Facebook pondered the move to a nicer News Feed in late 2020.

During the same period, right-wing Facebook Groups were seething over the alleged illegitimacy of Biden's victory, according to a [joint investigation](#) by ProPublica and *The Washington Post*. Averaging at least 10,000 posts a day, the barrage included numerous calls for the use of force, foreshadowing January 6th. "LOOKS LIKE CIVIL WAR is BECOMING INEVITABLE!!!" one user posted a month before the Capitol assault. "WE CANNOT

ALLOW FRAUDULENT ELECTIONS TO STAND!" In the months before Election Day, a Facebook task force removed hundreds of Groups spewing violent rhetoric. But shortly after voters went to the polls, Facebook eased enforcement. As a result, the pace of Group removals slowed noticeably, even as Facebook played a critical role in amplifying the stolen-election narrative.³¹

Twitter did not help matters when, in March 2021, it suspended enforcement of its Civic Integrity Policy. It reasoned that it could stand down because the 2020 election was over. As CNN has [reported](#), the company even tolerated a loophole that allowed a theoretically banned Trump to continue to beat the election-denial drum. Twitter permitted a Trump spokesperson to tweet out statements in which the former president declared that the 2020 election was "rigged" and "stolen."³²

Twitter and Facebook grievously misread the political environment. Election denialism was evolving in 2021 from an obsession with the former president's inability to accept defeat into a broader, if equally baseless attack on the patriotism of all Democrats, as well as non-Trump-loving Republicans, and legions of election administrators, many of them career government employees. While Twitter and Facebook stepped back, denialism spread as a Republican campaign theme in hundreds of races that will culminate in the 2022 midterms.

The Social Media Companies Respond

We offered the social media companies an opportunity to respond to our analysis. Some of their comments are integrated into the main body of the report. Here, we provide additional industry perspectives:



Meta

The owner of Facebook and Instagram characteristically was the most forthcoming in response to our inquiries. As some Meta representatives ruefully note, the company’s transparency, at least relative to its industry rivals, provides outside observers with more to criticize. That said, as the largest social media corporation, and one with ample public relations and political lobbying capacity, Meta merits the scrutiny it receives.

- As a general matter, Meta spokesman Tom Reynolds said, “We do not want misinformation on our platforms, and we do not benefit from this content. In fact, our systems are designed to reduce misinformation, not to amplify it. Any suggestion otherwise is wrong. We use a combination of artificial intelligence, human review, and input from partners—including fact-checkers—to address problematic content, which again is not aligned with our business interests.”
- Acknowledging that its Facebook Groups feature at times has engendered the exchange of election misinformation and extremist incitement, Meta in 2020 stopped recommending any political Groups to Facebook users and has maintained that policy since then. Groups that repeatedly violate the platform’s Community Standards are removed, Reynolds said. Meta also has expanded its efforts to remove “coordinated harassment and threats of violence against election officials and poll workers,” he said.
- Beyond labeling and demoting content that has been deemed false by its outside fact-checking network, Meta notifies users before they try to share such content. The company also informs people if something they have shared is later determined to be false.



YouTube

Google’s globally popular video platform did not take advantage of the opportunity to provide an on-the-record response to our analysis. Here are some of the main points from YouTube’s September 1 [announcement](#):

- The platform’s search algorithm favors “authoritative...news sources like PBS News-Hour; *The Wall Street Journal*; Univision; and local ABC, CBS, and NBC affiliates.” During the midterms campaign, search results related to voting will include information panels directing viewers to Google’s how-to-vote and how-to-register-to-vote features.
- The platform is removing videos “encouraging interference in the democratic process, inciting violence, or advancing certain types of elections misinformation.” In an apparent reference to Facebook, which exempts politicians from its fact-checking procedures, YouTube said, “We enforce our policies consistently for everyone, regardless of the speaker’s public figure status or their political viewpoint.”
- YouTube said that, in anticipation of the midterms, it would launch a media-literacy campaign on the platform, “providing tips on identifying different manipulative tactics used to spread misinformation, from using emotional language to cherry-picking information.”



Twitter

A much smaller and less financially stable company, Twitter emphasized the need to triage resources as it pays attention to election-related misinformation, not just in the U.S., but around the world. This imperative helps explain why the company activates its Civic Integrity Policy only during and immediately after election season, Twitter representatives told us.

- As the U.S. midterms approach, Twitter [said](#) it will deploy “pre-bunks” (as opposed to after-the-fact “debunks”). Available in English, Spanish, and all other languages supported on Twitter, pre-bunks appearing directly in users feeds and in search results will be designed “to get ahead of misleading narratives on Twitter and to proactively address topics that may be the subject of misinformation.”
- Twitter said it is also refining its algorithms to prevent misleading tweets from being recommended to users.
- The micro-blogging platform said it will launch a dedicated “Explore” tab that will include national election news, in both English and Spanish, which has been selected by Twitter’s in-house curation team, as well as localized news chosen according to a user’s state. The platform will offer public service announcements based on information from nonpartisan government and voting-advocacy organizations.



TikTok

Like YouTube, TikTok did not respond to specific aspects of our argument. A spokesman provided a general statement via email: “We’re committed to protecting the integrity of our platform and have dedicated teams working to safeguard TikTok during elections. We prohibit and remove election misinformation and other violations of our policies, work with accredited fact-checkers who help us assess content, and partner with authoritative sources to provide access to election information.” The company’s August 22 election-policy [update](#) includes commitments that:

- TikTok will label content related to the 2022 midterms, allowing users to click through for information about races in their state. Users will also have the opportunity to filter out videos with words or hashtags they wish to exclude from their “For You” or “Following” feeds.
- Out of an abundance of caution, TikTok will make questionable content ineligible for recommendation while it is being fact-checked.
- The platform will inform viewers of content that fact-checkers deem “unsubstantiated” and prompt them to reconsider before sharing the potentially misleading information.

Amplifying the ‘Ballot Trafficking’ Myth

“
Illegal ballot collecting
does occur, but only
rarely, and there is no
evidence that it tends
to favor Democrats.”

One way to appreciate the role that social media companies are playing in amplifying election denialism is to chart the rise of one of the phenomenon’s central myths: that widespread, highly coordinated “ballot trafficking” by Democrats tainted the 2020 election and remains a threat in 2022 and beyond.

Specifically, the conservative activists chiefly responsible for spreading the claim on social media and via a film called “2000 Mules” contend that thousands of paid “mules” illegally stuffed 400,000 ballots into drop boxes in five swing states—more than enough to tilt the election to Biden.

Ballot trafficking is a more ominous-sounding version of what has traditionally been referred to as ballot collecting or harvesting. The concern is that elections can be undermined by the bundling of substantial numbers of mail-in or absentee ballots and delivery of these ballots to polling places or drop boxes. The implication is that the named voters did not fill out the ballots themselves or may not even exist.

Illegal ballot collecting does occur, but only rarely, and there is no evidence that it tends to favor Democrats. In North Carolina, a 2018 congressional election was rerun after a [Republican operative](#) was criminally prosecuted for orchestrating the gathering of hundreds of forged absentee ballots. In 2022, two Democratic women in

Arizona [pleaded guilty](#) to felony “ballot abuse” in connection with four improperly gathered ballots in a primary two years earlier.³³

Ballot collection isn’t necessarily illegal. Alabama is the sole state that mandates that only a voter herself may return her mail ballot. According to [Ballotpedia](#), 25 states and the District of Columbia allow someone chosen by a voter to return a ballot. Eleven states specify who may return a ballot, typically limiting the role to household or family members or caregivers. Thirteen states don’t have laws on the issue. And generally speaking, a ballot that has been properly completed will be counted, even if another person returns it in an unlawful manner.³⁴

So, how did the current furor over ballot trafficking emerge? Researchers at the University of Washington’s [Center for an Informed Public](#) charted increasing use of the term primarily on Twitter, although they observed corresponding trends on other platforms. From December 2020 through

April 2022, they found that while intensifying online activity around the term may appear organic, in fact, it was “high-follower accounts from GOP leaders, conservative activist organizations, and right-wing media outlets and pundits [that] participated in—and in many cases, helped to seed and/or catalyze—the spread of ‘ballot trafficking’ claims.”³⁵ In other words, there was a concerted effort to amplify the allegation of ballot trafficking on social media.

Social media traction

The effort began to take shape in early 2021, when top Republicans started attaching ballot trafficking allegations to multifaceted attacks on their foes. Ronna McDaniel, chairwoman of the Republican Party, [tweeted](#) from her official account in March 2021: “Democrats in Washington want to eliminate the filibuster so they can destroy more energy jobs, raise taxes, and force states to allow ballot trafficking.” Over the next few months, Breitbart and other right-wing media outlets published articles, widely shared on social media, about ballot trafficking based on an investigation by [True the Vote](#), a conservative Houston-based organization. True the Vote said it had used cellphone “ping” data and video surveillance footage to track ballot traffickers making numerous deposits in drop boxes in Georgia.

The term gained traction on Twitter shortly after a Breitbart [article](#) in August 2021 quoted True the Vote’s president, Catherine Engelbrecht, as saying, “Ballot trafficking will soon be exposed on a massive scale.” An echo chamber formed that included former Trump associate Steve Bannon’s podcast, the influential [Gateway Pundit](#) website, and QAnon-associated channels on the encrypted

Telegram messaging service. In January 2022, authorities in Georgia announced that they would investigate True the Vote’s falsehoods. “It’s more of an issue if prominent voices are endorsing misinformation because it causes others to take it seriously,” Katie Harbath, former director of election policy at Facebook and now head of [Anchor Change](#), a civic technology consultancy, said in an interview.

Social media attention soon escalated when a [trailer for “2000 Mules”](#) began circulating on YouTube, the conservative-oriented video site Rumble, and other platforms. The movie was directed by Dinesh D’Souza, based on True the Vote’s research. A veteran conservative [provocateur](#) who pleaded guilty to felony campaign finance charges in 2014 and was pardoned by Trump in 2018, D’Souza has called the violent

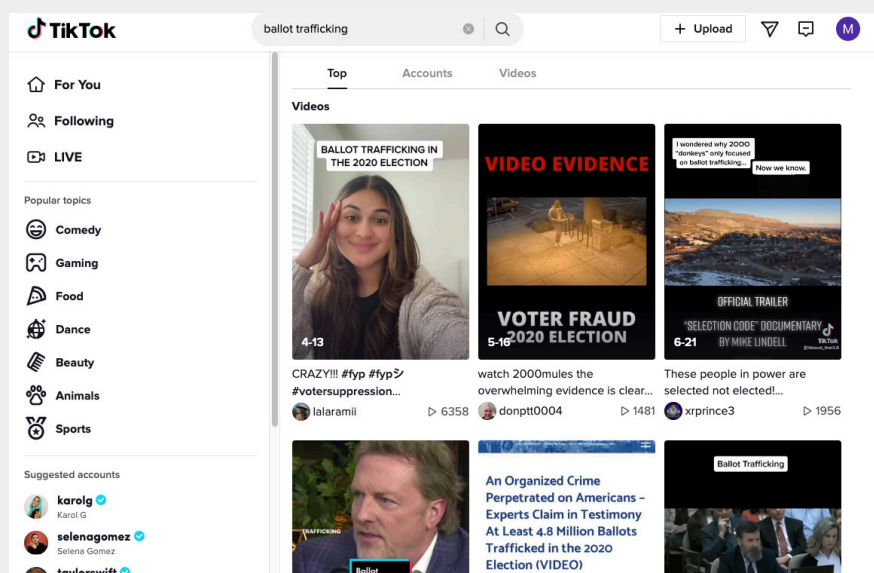
January 6th mob “a bunch of rowdy people walking through a hallway.”³⁶

In “2000 Mules,” D’Souza presents True the Vote analysis that purports to cross-reference cellphone data and surveillance tape to show that unnamed individuals repeatedly traveled from the offices of liberal nonprofits to drop boxes in Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. In an [interview](#) with Fox News, D’Souza said the evidence points to “something like 400,000 illegal votes.” Calling it “a genius production,” Trump personally hosted the movie’s premiere at Mar-a-Lago.³⁷

Elsewhere, “2000 Mules” elicited a less enthusiastic response. It was debunked by [PolitiFact](#), the [Associated Press](#), and other news organizations. Its indistinct surveillance footage does

Political Misinformation on TikTok

In late August, a search on TikTok for “ballot trafficking” produced a wealth of conspiracy theories and endorsements of the widely debunked movie “2000 Mules.” After we pointed this out to TikTok, the platform blocked searches for the term, noting that it “may be associated with behavior or content that violates our guidelines.”



not, as claimed, show the same people depositing ballots in multiple drop boxes. During a sworn [deposition](#) as part of the House investigation of January 6th, William Barr, the former Trump administration attorney general, explained that the ping data demonstrates, at most, that certain cellphone customers repeatedly were in the vicinity of drop boxes, many of which were in pedestrian-friendly locations. The Georgia Bureau of Investigation “was unimpressed with [the cellphone data], and I was similarly unimpressed with it,” he testified. “If you take two million cellphones and figure out where they are physically in a big city like Atlanta, just by definition, you’re going to find many hundreds of them have passed by and spent time in the vicinity of these boxes. The premise that if you go by a box, five boxes, or whatever it was, you know that’s a ‘mule,’ it’s just indefensible.”³⁸

In theaters, “2000 Mules” [grossed](#) \$1.5 million in ticket sales, a respectable figure for a documentary. On social media, the movie’s three-minute trailer and even shorter snippets became a sensation. One can watch an excerpt from [The Megyn Kelly Show](#) on YouTube during which D’Souza tells the former Fox News anchor that the film lifted the term “mules” from the drug- and sex-trafficking context. On TikTok, a young conservative “micro-influencer” named Lala Ramirez breathlessly recounts the movie’s allegations and then muses that her own video “probably will be taken down” by the platform (it wasn’t at first, but after we mentioned it to TikTok, the platform did remove the post). Another TikTok user incongruously pairs a text statement—“BRING BACK THE GALLOWS FOR TREASON!!!”—with Led Zeppelin’s “Whole Lotta Love.” Facebook, by contrast, applied fact-checking labels to content about “2000 Mules” and demoted it in users’ feeds.

Bigger Problems Overseas

Problems in the United States related to the amplification of hatred and political falsehoods pale in comparison to those in many other countries, especially in the developing world. The discrepancy stems from social media companies generally investing far more in overseeing their platforms in the U.S. and other English-speaking countries than they do elsewhere.

This tendency was underscored in late August 2022 when a former Twitter executive-turned-whistleblower [disclosed](#) an analysis of the company commissioned from an outside consulting firm. Based on interviews with Twitter employees and internal company documents, the 2021 analysis by the Alethea Group concluded that “although Twitter is a global company with a global mission, it is not currently set up to deliver globally on trust and safety.” In many markets outside of the U.S., the analysis found, outsourced reviewers of Twitter content “do not have the geographic expertise or language capabilities to understand important cultural or linguistic context, and therefore are not able to make accurate and consistent decisions on what is misinformation.”¹

At Facebook, “the painful reality is that we simply can’t cover the entire world with the same level of support,” Samidh Chakrabarti, then Facebook’s civic integrity lead, wrote in a 2019 post on an internal company message board. The concession became public as part of a [series of leaks](#) of Facebook documents in the fall of 2021.

Kenya²

The run-up to Kenya’s presidential election on August 9, 2022, was notable for the emergence of TikTok as a venue for political mis- and disinformation. According to a [report](#) from the Mozilla Foundation, TikTok, which is owned by the Chinese tech giant ByteDance, “has emerged as one of the most popular social media apps for sharing political content” in Kenya, a country widely viewed as a bellwether for democracy in Africa. The report quoted a former TikTok content moderator as alleging that reviewers are commonly asked to evaluate unrealistically large volumes of material in languages they don’t understand.³

As is the case in certain other African and Asian countries, disinformation in Kenya often focuses on ethnic rivalries that can spark violence. One TikTok video noted in the Mozilla report referred to the ultimate winner, William Ruto, as hating members of the Kikuyu tribe and seeking to “take revenge come 2022.” Another post juxtaposed narration about cleansing the country of Kikuyus, Luos, and other ethnic groups with graphic images of violence that had followed past elections. “The disinformation being spread on TikTok violates the platform’s very own policies,” the Mozilla report asserted. “TikTok is failing its first real test in Africa.”

TikTok [announced](#) in mid-July that it had launched an “elections hub” in Kenya as well as “an in-app guide to the 2022 general elections” designed “to help our community access factual and authoritative information about the Kenyan general elections.” The platform also stated that its Africa team had conducted “week-long engagements in Kenya targeting NGOs, government, media, corporate organizations, civil societies, educational institutions,” and others.⁴

Brazil

Facing a highly competitive race for reelection in Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro has doubled down on the sort of unsubstantiated narratives about election fraud that he deployed online and via other media during his victorious 2018 campaign. Much of this disinformation spreads on Meta’s highly popular WhatsApp messaging service and Google’s YouTube video platform.

In August 2022, the human rights group Global Witness produced evidence that Meta’s Facebook platform was not policing paid Portuguese-language political advertising in Brazil. The group described an [investigation](#) in which it had purchased 10 ads littered with falsehoods about election logistics and designed to delegitimize the process. Facebook permitted all of the ads to run. “All of the ads we submitted violate Meta’s [election ad policies](#),” Global Witness said.⁵

Bolsonaro and his supporters appear to be setting the stage for a potential post-election crisis by arguing that the only way he can lose to former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva is as a result of a rigged process.⁶ Although Bolsonaro’s allegations have been examined and repeatedly dismissed by Brazil’s electoral and judicial authorities, they have continued to gain traction online.⁷

Meta spokesman Tom Reynolds said that the company’s “extensive” preparations for Brazil’s 2022 election include promoting reliable information and labeling election-related posts, creating a “direct channel for the Superior Electoral Court to send us potentially harmful content for review,” and “closely collaborating with Brazilian authorities and researchers.”

1 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/interactive/2022/twitter-whistleblower-sec-spam/>

2 Meta has been [sued](#) in Kenya by a former content moderator who alleges that the third-party vendor that employed him subjected workers to exploitative conditions. At the request of the plaintiff’s legal team, Paul Barrett filed an expert statement with the Kenyan court summarizing the findings of a [2020 report](#) he wrote on the negative consequences of outsourced content moderation. Barrett was not paid for this written statement.

3 <https://foundation.mozilla.org/en/campaigns/kenya-tiktok/>

4 <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-africa/tiktok-launches-kenyan-elections-hub>

5 <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/digital-threats/facebook-fails-tackle-election-disinformation-ads-ahead-tense-brazilian-election/>

6 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/19/world/americas/brazil-bolsonaro-election-fraud-claim.html>

7 <https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/en/politica/noticia/2022-07/court-auditors-concludes-electronic-voting-machines-are-safe>; <https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/en/politica/noticia/2022-07/president-says-he-wants-transparency-brazilian-electoral-system>; <https://democraciadigital.dapp.fgv.br/en/studies/online-disinformation-and-questioning-of-election-results/>

Republican political candidates hopped onto the “2000 Mules” bandwagon. On Twitter, Kari Lake of Arizona told her supporters in this year’s Republican gubernatorial primary that not only had the 2020 presidential campaign been shot through with fraud, but there were “tons of election irregularities” in her own race—presumably intended to benefit one or more of her Republican rivals. But not to worry, the candidate [tweeted](#) in July 2022. “We are working with [the] 2000 Mules research teams to catch and expose those behind election fraud.” She [never did provide](#) evidence to support her repeated claims that that the midterm election process had been corrupted.³⁹

Arizona fervor

It should be no surprise that “2000 Mules” found a receptive audience among Arizona Republicans. The state has been a [breeding ground](#) for denialism since before the polls closed in 2020. Arizona hosted a phony controversy over whether [Sharpie pens](#) invalidated Trump ballots (they did not) and allegations that nearly 300 ballots had been cast for Biden in the names of [dead people](#) (in fact, the number of dead-person ballots was one). Arizona state legislators heard ballot-trafficking [testimony](#) from True the Vote representatives and hired a pro-Trump company called [Cyber Ninjas](#) to audit the results in Maricopa County. The ninjas found that Biden won with 360 more votes than in the original count.⁴⁰

In this environment, the four eventual Republican primary winners all made denialism a centerpiece of their campaigns. Lake had been arguing the denialist brief since ending her long run as a local Fox TV news anchor in 2021 to get into politics. In Facebook advertising, she promised to “ensure we have 100% voter ID, clean our election rolls, stop ballot trafficking,

“
Arizona state legislator Mark Finchem's campaign for secretary of state involves some of the most baroque conspiracy theories about an election process rife with hidden deceit. ‘Something is seriously wrong,’ he said in a Facebook ad, ‘when the company that is the vendor of equipment supporting elections has greater levels of authority than the people you elect to oversee them.’”

and ensure our elections are so transparent and accessible [that] no one can ever again cheat the system.”

On Twitter, Lake called for [decertifying](#) Biden's electoral votes from Wisconsin and Arizona, “lock[ing] up all the criminals” involved in supposed ballot corruption, and recruiting volunteers to man vigilante [stakeouts](#) protecting drop boxes from ballot trafficking. This November, Lake will face Democrat Katie Hobbs, who as Arizona's current secretary of state, has stood fast in the face of [death threats](#) from deniers accusing her of orchestrating ballot fraud.⁴¹

Blake Masters, the Republican nominee challenging incumbent Democrat Mark Kelly for his U.S. Senate seat, has [tweeted](#) that “people are right to distrust the system.” Masters has tied the mistrust he encourages to a supposed leftist plot to usher in “[tens of millions of illegal aliens](#)” and turn them into reliable Democratic voters—a sanitized version of the

“[great replacement theory](#),” according to which liberals seek to supplant white, native-born Americans with immigrants and other people of color.⁴²

State legislator Mark Finchem's campaign to replace Hobbs as Arizona's secretary of state involves some of the most baroque conspiracy theories about an election process rife with hidden deceit. “Something is seriously wrong,” he said in a [Facebook ad](#), “when the company that is the vendor of equipment supporting elections has greater levels of authority than the people you elect to oversee them.”⁴³ The candidate's fantastical assertion about secretly powerful voting machine vendors refers to the evidence-free [allegations](#) by Trump's lawyers about such machines being manipulated by Venezuela and/or China to flip votes from Trump to Biden. Meta could label or reject such demonstrably false disinformation, but it chooses not to do so as a matter of policy. That is a mistake.

Conclusion and Recommendations

“
Over the past five years, the NYU Stern Center has emphasized the need for greater industry self-regulation. But as it became clear that the companies were not embracing broad self-regulatory measures, we have honed a proposal for enhancing the government's consumer protection authority to oversee social media.”

”

Why, then, do the major social media companies not police political misinformation as vigorously as they could? Katie Harbath, the former Meta election-policy director, worries that her ex-employer's other corporate priorities may be drawing management attention and company resources away from more aggressive self-regulation of election denialism.

Harbath may have a point. During the summer of 2022, Meta CEO Zuckerberg issued [stern warnings](#) to his 77,000 employees that the company faces one of the harshest downturns in its recent history and as a result would be “turning up the heat” in evaluations of worker productivity.⁴⁴ The company's troubles include the preference of younger social media fans for TikTok and new Apple privacy protections that limit the amount of user data Facebook and Instagram can gather. Meanwhile, Zuckerberg is pouring billions of dollars into the development of what he predicts will become the next online sensation: immersive, three-dimensional platforms referred to as “the metaverse.” All of these factors contributed to Meta posting back-to-back quarterly [profit declines](#) this year for the first time in more than a decade. “I'm nervous that most of the really good talent and a lot of the resources are flowing toward the metaverse,” Harbath said in an interview.

Laura Edelson, the NYU postdoctoral researcher, has had extensive dealings with current and former Meta employees (and is herself a former Silicon Valley software engineer). Based on her Meta contacts, she told us that she detects a mindset of resignation within the company premised on the notion

that Meta has done more than any of its rivals to protect elections—and in relative terms has been more transparent about it—but still gets roundly criticized. If no good deed goes unpunished, this thinking goes, why bother? It would be difficult to quantify the effect of this attitude, but it is one that will be familiar to anyone who has discussed the topic with Meta employees.

Richard Hasen, an election law professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, offers an even more jaundiced explanation. Hasen directs an initiative at UCLA called the Safeguarding Democracy Project and recently published [Cheap Speech: How Disinformation Poisons Our Politics—And How to Cure It](#). Referring to Meta, he said in an interview: “I don't see the commitment to enforcing their [election-related] policies,” adding, “They've let their guard down.” Meta has made a calculation, in his view, that Republicans are going to win control of Congress, and company executives do not wish to be at odds with Republican lawmakers who soon may be in a position to write tough new regulations aimed at the social media industry. “It looks,” he said, “like a cynical political calculation.” Meta did not respond to repeated requests for comment on Edelson's and Hasen's critiques.

Twitter, never as financially successful as Meta or Google/YouTube, currently has its own [distractions](#) and uncertainties. The whistleblower revelations in August could complicate the company's ongoing court battle against Elon Musk. The tech mogul is attempting to back out of his proposed \$44 billion

acquisition of Twitter, arguing that the company has not fully disclosed platform security problems. Separately, Twitter has conceded that a weakened overall economy is hurting its advertising business—to the extent that in its second quarter in 2022, it suffered a [net loss](#) of \$270 million.

Acknowledging that the company faces “headwinds,” a senior Twitter executive said in an interview that protecting elections has become an even higher priority for the company since 2020. “Are we ready to declare, ‘Mission accomplished’? No, we are not,” the executive said.

Recommendations

Over the last five years, the NYU Stern Center has emphasized the need for greater industry *self*-regulation. More recently, as it became clear that tech companies were not embracing broad self-regulatory measures, we have honed a [proposal](#) for enhancing the Federal Trade Commission's consumer protection authority to oversee social media—but with a clear prohibition on the government setting content policies or intervening in content decisions.⁴⁵

Even if Congress were to bolster the FTC's authority—a big “if”—First Amendment constraints on government regulation of expression would necessitate the companies taking greater responsibility for policing themselves. With that in mind, we recommend the following measures to protect against election denialism and other types of mis- and disinformation:

1

Greater transparency

This is the starting place for any set of reforms. Too little is known outside of the companies about how their automated systems rank, recommend, and remove content and how these systems interact with human content moderation. Greater voluntary disclosure of the criteria—and the weighting of criteria—that these algorithms rely on would facilitate a more informed policy debate about how the platforms should respond to the falsehoods that fuel election denialism. Although we are focusing here on voluntary steps industry can take, a number of [bills](#) introduced in Congress over the past couple of years include worthy ideas about disclosure. The European Union's newly adopted [Digital Services Act](#) likewise imposes reasonable transparency obligations which the companies presumably will have to adopt if they plan to continue to operate in the E.U.⁴⁶

2

Independent audits

Independent auditing would allow nongovernmental third parties to check whether social media platforms are weighing the intended benefits of the services they offer against potential risks to users and society at large. These risks include election denialism, as well as cyber harassment, racial and religious discrimination, and harms to younger users. Figuring out who would do the auditing and what standards they would apply would present difficult challenges. Again, the DSA provides an approach that the industry could consider on a voluntary basis. It's worth noting that Meta has funded a quasi-independent Oversight Board that reviews Facebook content decisions. But while this body seems like a serious-minded experiment, it does not have the ability to probe the company's automated and human filtering systems in the fashion that is necessary.

3 Consistency and stability in election-related policies

Protecting elections and the democratic norms that go with them is a year-round job. By putting its Civic Integrity Policy on hold between elections, Twitter has allowed denialism to gain momentum in the interim. Facebook's exemption of politicians from fact-checking gives voters access to what candidates and incumbents are saying, but that interest is outweighed by the need to protect the democratic process from a surging wave of falsehood. "No one should get a free pass to spread disinformation," a recent open [letter](#) to the social media companies from the Center for American Progress, Common Cause, and other civil society organizations stated.⁴⁷ We agree.

4 Enhanced fact-checking

Facebook maintains the most extensive outside fact-checking [network](#) in the industry. Other companies should step up their programs in this area. But fact-checking is not a panacea, in part because the scale of the major platforms precludes review of more than a tiny fraction of potentially untruthful viral material and in part because determining falsehoods can be fraught with uncertainty. But some lies are demonstrable—for example, that large-scale fraud affected the outcome of the 2020 election or that the Holocaust did not happen—and social media should not lend its capacity for amplification to promoting such falsehoods. Research has shown that fact-checking has a [positive effect](#) on people's ability to distinguish truth from lies. Research has also shown that fact-checking has an even [more positive effect](#) if people previously exposed to the lie in question are informed of that fact—a retrospective boost for the truth that social media platforms have the technological ability to accomplish.⁴⁸

5 Removal of demonstrably false content

We have [argued](#) for several years that Facebook undercuts its fact-checking efforts by failing to remove demonstrably false content, such as the strain of election denialism infecting the Republican Party. Instead, Facebook labels false material and demotes it in users' feeds. Other platforms are similarly hesitant to remove provable falsehoods. This is unfortunate because removal makes a more definitive statement, and there is a way to preserve the false content so it may be studied by researchers, journalists, and anyone else who might be interested—namely, by retaining a clearly marked record copy that can be retrieved by a search but cannot be liked or shared or otherwise disseminated.⁴⁹

6 The next threat

Social media companies have been too reactive in addressing election denialism and related threats to democracy. They need to focus more on "threat ideation," meaning research and analysis aimed at identifying the danger that is just over the horizon. "It's really, really hard in my experience to get executives to focus on that sort of thing," Harbath, the former Facebook election-policy director, told us. But unless the top brass overcomes this reluctance, platforms will forever be playing a game of catch-up.

Endnotes

- 1 An outlying Washington Post/University of Maryland poll in January 2022 found that 61% of Republicans reject Biden's legitimacy, but an Economist/YouGov poll released five months later yielded a 75% denial rate. See <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2022/70-percent-republicans-falsely-believe-stolen-election-trump/>.
- 2 <https://about.fb.com/news/2022/08/meta-plans-for-2022-us-midterms/>
- 3 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/23/technology/mark-zuckerberg-meta-midterm-elections.html>
- 4 <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/our-commitment-to-election-integrity>
- 5 https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2022/-our-approach-to-the-2022-us-midterms
- 6 <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2019/facebooks-politician-exemption-is-likely-to-face-more-tests/>
- 7 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/14/business/media/on-tiktok-election-misinformation.html>
- 8 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/interactive/2022/twitter-whistleblower-sec-spam/>
- 9 <https://bhr.stern.nyu.edu/youtube-report>; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/08/25/youtube-content-moderation-strategy/>
- 10 <https://blog.youtube/news-and-events/supporting-the-2020-us-election/>
- 11 <https://www.justsecurity.org/74622/stopthesteal-timeline-of-social-media-and-extremist-activities-leading-to-1-6-insurrection/>
- 12 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/08/15/election-deniers-march-toward-power-key-2024-battlegrounds/>
- 13 Eisenstat left the company after six months following disagreements over her role.
- 14 Barr: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZeoSrp2sj4>; Krebs: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XtqTVQvjYUM>.
- 15 <https://www.facebook.com/Fight4pa/posts/pfbid02gdWC-CckjAsZ3z4dMjtQmW2H25dbFkUjJQM0Lw9MRLzoLsK1N-vdawuZdDkv7BXGKI>.
- 16 <https://www.facebook.com/Fight4pa/posts/pfbid0r1UqRKzJp11Gbf-5HBHKZrRRHV1W6ABGhsSwgWxKlKMMwDXKwhTzaevJ32e5T-V3el>. Mastriano did not respond to a request for comment.
- 17 https://www.fredericknews.com/news/politics_and_government/fellow-republicans-disavow-del-coxs-tweet-calling-vice-president-a-traitor/article_c5ee500c-98e7-5ad1-bf6e-974e4871aad8.html; <https://www.facebook.com/Official.Dan.Cox/posts/pfbid0ud5hS4dAFBDUvt-GVGcTG6EqFJViuDworoGmCk2UK8ndgU2JLccc1cxa4Qu9KNJul>. Cox did not respond to a request for comment.
- 18 <https://www.facebook.com/KristinaforSOS/posts/pfbid0SF4u-wx1pozvSCZB2ZUqmm5DbwXGvcN468PJi4VnLgY3hcEb-n5YuqWVUZgHPTMsNSI>. Karamo did not respond to a request for comment.
- 19 <https://twitter.com/AbrahamHamadeh/status/1540131847241203712>. Hamadeh did not respond to a request for comment.
- 20 <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/information-gaps-and-misinformation-2022-elections>
- 21 <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Testimony%20-%20Polite.pdf>
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- 28 <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/11/04/youtube-refuses-to-remove-vid-eo-that-appears-to-violate-its-policies.html>; <https://bhr.stern.nyu.edu/youtube-report>
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- 33 North Carolina: <https://apnews.com/article/2022-midterm-elections-north-carolina-general-raleigh-1f8751124b441d55be5f9317a2124e55>; Arizona: <https://www.azag.gov/press-release/guillermina-fuentes-enters-guilty-plea-yuma-county-ballot-harvesting-case>.
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- 35 https://www.cip.uw.edu/2022/04/30/ballot-trafficking-collection-narratives/?fbclid=IwAR1ZRPf5nXEPfCXCX60dCGs4vTEfP5jMr_ajpPcjTDx7Fu-7fA5jTKqFLDXI
- 36 This PolitiFact article contains links to material about D'Souza background: <https://www.politifact.com/article/2022/may/04/faulty-premise-2000-mules-trailer-about-voting-mal/>. Neither D'Souza nor Engelbrecht responded to requests for comment.
- 37 <https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2022/05/05/trump-implores-audience-at-2000-mules-premiere-do-something-to-fight-voter-fraud/>
- 38 <https://apnews.com/article/2022-midterm-elections-north-carolina-general-raleigh-1f8751124b441d55be5f9317a2124e55>
- 39 <https://www.azcentral.com/story/opinion/op-ed/laurieroberts/2022/08/02/win-lose-kari-lake-needs-back-up-her-claim-election-fraud/10215658002/>. Lake did not respond to a request for comment.
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- 41 <https://kdminder.com/news/2022/jul/30/man-arrested-sending-death-threat-sec-state-katie/>
- 42 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/04/09/tucker-carlsons-esposal-replacement-theory-is-both-toxic-ahistoric/>. Masters did not respond to a request for comment.
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- 46 U.S. legislation: <https://www.coons.senate.gov/news/press-releases/coons-portman-klobuchar-announce-legislation-to-ensure-transparency-at-social-media-platforms>; <https://trahan.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=2389>. E.U. Digital Services Act: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_20_2348
- 47 <https://www.commoncause.org/press-release/more-than-120-civil-rights-democracy-groups-call-on-social-media-giants-to-take-significant-actions-to-combat-election-disinformation-ahead-of-midterm-elections/>
- 48 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/11/10/facebook-fact-checks-effective-research/>
- 49 https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/files/documents/NYU20Domestic20Disinformation_Digital20Version.pdf

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