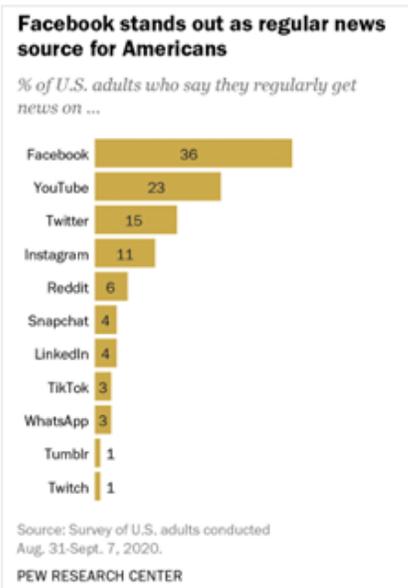


Who is Winning the Facebook “Top Ten” Battle?



Tim Chambers | Principal, and US Digital Practice Lead, Dewey Square Group
 tchambers@deweydigital.com
 @tchambers

It would be hard to overstate the importance of Facebook as a media platform and news source to the American public: **According to a 2021 Pew Research study, seven in ten Americans of all ideologies used the platform, and over 36 percent of adult Americans regularly got their news from it.** That same study found that “the share of U.S. adults who get news through Facebook is higher than the shares who regularly get news through YouTube (23%), Twitter (15%), Instagram (11%) and other platforms.”



Despite right-wing efforts to “work the refs” by complaining about Facebook’s supposed “liberal bias,” **researchers** have repeatedly found that the fundamentals of the Facebook platform consistently give an advantage to conservative content by helping position it among the most engaging content to its users. Though Facebook is notoriously reticent

to allow outside researchers to review anything about their inner workings, the few looks we do have inside Facebook’s core algorithm have found that it **tends to reward content that incites emotional and “angry” responses five times more than it does for content that receives “likes.”** The result of Facebook’s algorithmic decision is that the most divisive, incendiary content is more likely to reach users’ feeds.

This study looks at a few of the **past efforts by the technology press and researchers** to study this question of the platform and right-leaning versus left-leaning content, but then we ask two more fundamental questions:

- Given this fundamental imbalance between conservative and left-leaning Facebook publishers, how far behind are progressive Facebook content creators in comparison to their right-wing counterparts?
- Which brands inside the progressive space consistently generate content — and best use the online ad systems on this platform — that can consistently move to the Top Ten of Facebook’s platform?

So, who is really winning the Facebook TopTen Battle?

As has been widely seen in popular lists such as **this one from New York Times technology columnist Kevin Roose**, researchers and the technology press have looked at what content typically garners sufficient engagement to be among the Top Ten Facebook posts each day.



Roose’s daily Top Ten posts, which are widely shared throughout social media, are often dominated by right-wing brands and right-wing social media content producers.

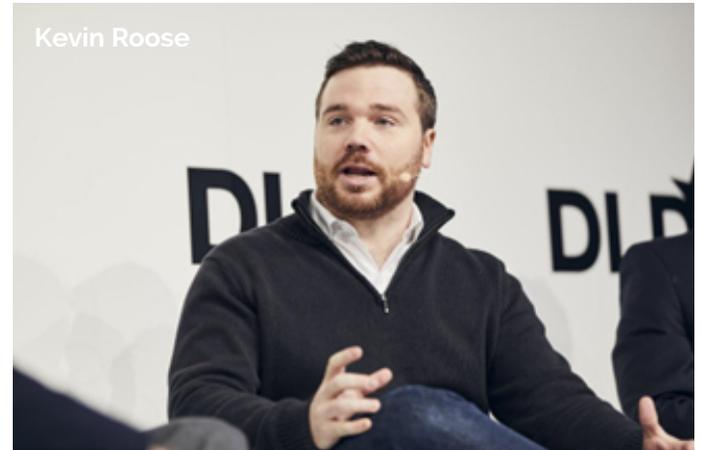
Four Dueling “Facebook Top Ten Lists”

Kevin Roose uses this **methodology: looking at “the sources of the ten top-performing link posts by U.S. Facebook pages every day, ranked by total interactions.”** He pulls this data from Meta’s analytics platform, CrowdTangle. While CrowdTangle data **has significant blind spots**, this is likely the best data source available to any third-party researchers. This opaqueness to external researchers and validators and dependence on a curated and limited tool, is a longstanding problem with Meta. This is even more concerning given that Meta has shown numerous signs of **underfunding and potentially restricting CrowdTangle itself as a resource**, and press reports indicate that **Meta could completely turn off CrowdTangle** as soon as late 2022.

Meta’s Response

 Reacting to the attention received by Roose, **Meta countered by creating its own four lists of what it says was most seen on Facebook — a list that appears more apolitical and eclectic than Roose’s list** — using its own techniques. Their version includes data based on each post’s social reach, not only the engagements. Meta does not make social reach data available to third-party researchers or validators, meaning that their numbers cannot be checked or verified by researchers. Further, Meta’s social reach data is based only on the social reach of content seen in a user’s main Facebook feed, or the Suggested For You and Reels. It does **not** include reach from posts within Facebook groups, which are a major source of circulation and organization, particularly for political content. Also, unlike Roose, Meta’s list includes all post types inside the above restrictions, not only content with weblinks. Meta **lists their methodology in full here**.

Meta summarizes: “Overall, we believe this paints a more complete picture than the CrowdTangle data alone, which was never supposed to show the reach of content on Facebook.” This last section of this comment indicates one of the researchers’ main complaints about the incompleteness of the data made available by Facebook via CrowdTangle. **Meta releases a version of this report quarterly**.



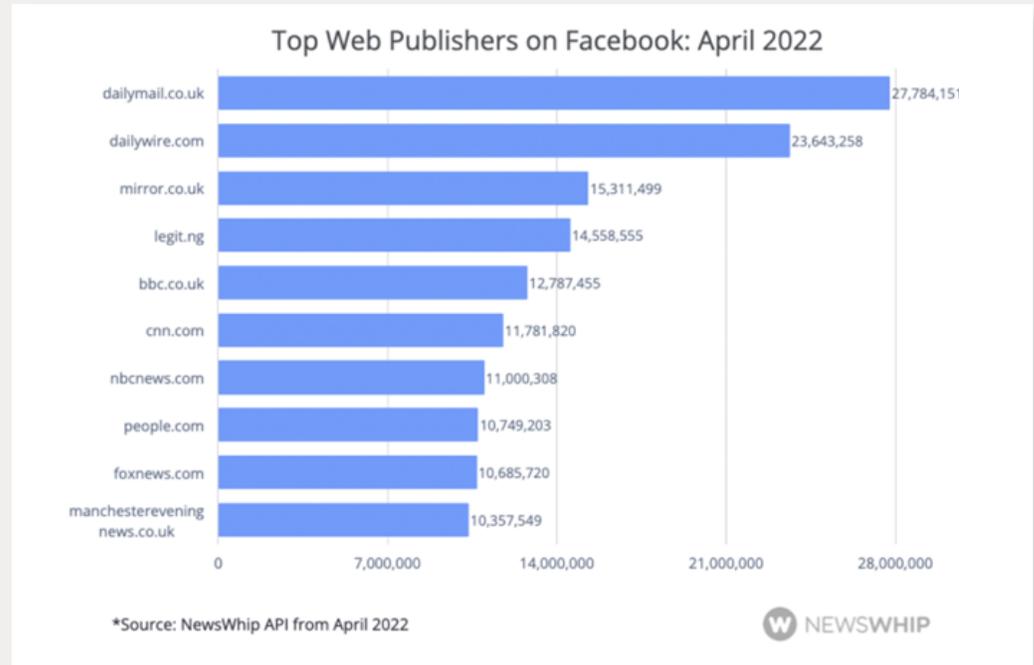
Facebook’s version of the Top Ten list has received a number of **strong responses from critics** making claims like: “This is yet more PR...they’re trying to control the narrative around CrowdTangle reporting” and counter the work of the New York Times’ Roose and others with [Meta’s] own handpicked metrics.”

NewsWhip’s Top Facebook Publishers

 **NEWSWHIP** A third view of Facebook’s Top Ten publishers

comes from the third-party social listening vendor **NewsWhip**. NewsWhip’s list includes the Top Ten posts in the English language, sorted by engagement on Facebook. Specifically, the NewsWhip Top Ten technique focuses on publishers who have web domains and then looks at the English language links to their web content shared on the platform. They then rank posts by “Facebook likes, shares, and comments **to their web content**, ranked by domain. **Additionally, these rankings do not include media natively uploaded to a Facebook Page.**” So NewsWhip’s list does not include Facebook posts that lack web links or Facebook native video posts.

With these caveats, here is NewsWhip's [view for May 2022](#), focused on English language content only. Like Roose's listing, NewsWhip's listing is regularly dominated by right-wing brands:



Even with these limitations, NewsWhip also consistently sees right-wing dominance in their monthly updates. As NewsWhip wrote in May: "The most striking thing is that no other publisher was really that close to the top two, with The Daily Wire [Ben Shapiro's right-wing social media property] having 50% more engagement than its closest rival, and The Daily Mail [a right-wing populist UK tabloid] essentially doubling everyone other than The Wire." This list mirrors [their top Facebook web publishers in the 1Q of 2022](#).

Media Matters Facebook Top Political Posts



The last major effort at a Facebook Top Ten list comes from the

research organization **Media Matters**. **Media Matters updates their listing regularly**. Like Roose, Media Matters produces a Top Ten list compiled daily, also sourced from CrowdTangle data. Similar to both Kevin Roose and NewsWhip's Facebook lists, Media Matters's dataset is ranked by the social engagement of each post, not by social reach data like Meta's, which is unavailable to outside researchers.

However, unlike Kevin Roose, or NewsWhip's offering, [the methodology for Media Matters's Facebook Top Ten ranking includes all Facebook posts CrowdTangle surfaces, not simply posts with weblink content associated with them](#). This explicitly includes text, photos, native and live videos. Also, unlike NewsWhip, Media Matters' methodology specifically focuses on publishers that are "political or news-related" and that "target a U.S. audience," **not merely those that publish in English**.

This makes Media Matters's list, to our view, the most complete and relevant for purposes of U.S.-based research into disinformation and platform effects, as it is sourced from the most complete dataset that Meta shares with any researchers and does not focus only on posts with web links.

Media Matters also includes human-based analysis to gauge the ideological leanings of content publishers, breaking them down into left-leaning, right-leaning, and nonaligned. This can be difficult to do correctly, but Media Matters has engaged in a quality control process. In a double-coded analysis, their researchers "determined the ideological alignment of a page by looking to see if an ideology was clearly stated in a page's title, about section, profile, or header pictures."

Additionally, Media Matters’s bias analysis requires the consensus of at least two researchers/analysts to label a Facebook entity as right-leaning, left-leaning or nonaligned.

Like the listings from Roose and NewsWhip, Media Matters consistently shows that **right-leaning content publishers dominate**.

	PAGE NAME	IDEOLOGY
1	Yellowstone National Park	Nonaligned
2	Donald Trump Jr.	Right-leaning
3	The Other 98%	Left-leaning
4	Yellowstone National Park	Nonaligned
5	Terrence K Williams	Right-leaning
6	NRA - National Rifle Association of America	Right-leaning
7	Yellowstone National Park	Nonaligned
8	ForAmerica	Right-leaning
9	The Other 98%	Left-leaning
10	Ben Shapiro	Right-leaning

Media Matters data comes from the best source of Facebook data that is currently available to (and capable of being verified and validated by) outside researchers, it is not limited to weblink-based content only, and it adds to its analysis of researcher data on content publishers’ political and ideological leanings.

In our view, **Media Matters’s data gives the fullest view that will best help us answer our core questions in this paper.**

So we will use Media Matters’s dataset for the next section of this report.

NEWSWHIP	KEVIN ROOSE/CROWDTANGLE	MEDIA MATTERS	META
Quarterly	Daily	Daily	Quarterly
Sort by engagements	Sort by engagements	Sort by engagements	Mix - includes by engagements; includes sort by reach
English language only	✔ US Focused	✔ US Focused	✔ Global and US
✔ All possible posts using from web domains	Web link shares only from pages	✔ All possible posts	Mix, but limited
No sort bipartisan lean	No sort bipartisan lean	✔ Includes bipartisan lean	No sort bipartisan lean

Our Methodology for Answering Our Core Question: Who is Winning? And by How Much?

We return to the overall question of this paper and start with the first question: **"Given this fundamental**

imbalance, how far behind are progressive Facebook content creators to their right-wing counterparts?"

After we have answered the first question, we will approach the second one: "Who among left-leaning political content publishers consistently DO make it into the Facebook Top Ten?"

As indicated above, we used Media Matters's data. In addition, we made the following methodology choices in our analysis:

1

We chose to look at a recent six-month timeframe which we believe is representative of the last few years' news cycles: October 1, 2021, to April 6, 2022. This range covers 187 days or just over six months. We chose this date range, in particular, because it was a long time frame to avoid small-sample bias, recent enough to be relevant to current discussions, and also that it avoided a few anomalous and historic news items that might skew results. Specifically, we chose this time frame to exclude the leak of the Supreme Court's decision of *Dobbs v Jackson Women's Health Organization* which overturned *Roe v Wade* which protected women's reproductive rights, and reactions to the recent mass shootings in Buffalo, New York and Uvalde, Texas.

In our opinion, the leak of the Supreme Court's Decision is the biggest news on reproductive rights since the *Roe v. Wade* decision itself in 1972 and the *Casey* decision in 1992. Similarly, the Texas mass shooting during this time period is the second-largest spree killing since Sandy Hook in 2012, and over 20 million viewers saw the January 6th hearings which included unusual spikes of traffic towards progressive voices covering that historic event. These hugely dramatic and relatively rare news stories could skew what content reaches the Facebook Top Ten, giving us a dataset that is not typical for longer-term recent trends.

2

We intentionally excluded content published by mainstream news brand accounts and the accounts for currently-active or very recently-active political figures (both official government accounts and official campaign accounts).

For instance, our study excludes the official pages for Fox News, MSNBC, Senator Mitch McConnell (both his official and campaign accounts), and former president Barack Obama.

However, to be clear, we included content from political pundits that are not serving as newscasters, even if Fox News hosts their political shows, MSNBC, or other mainstream news entities.

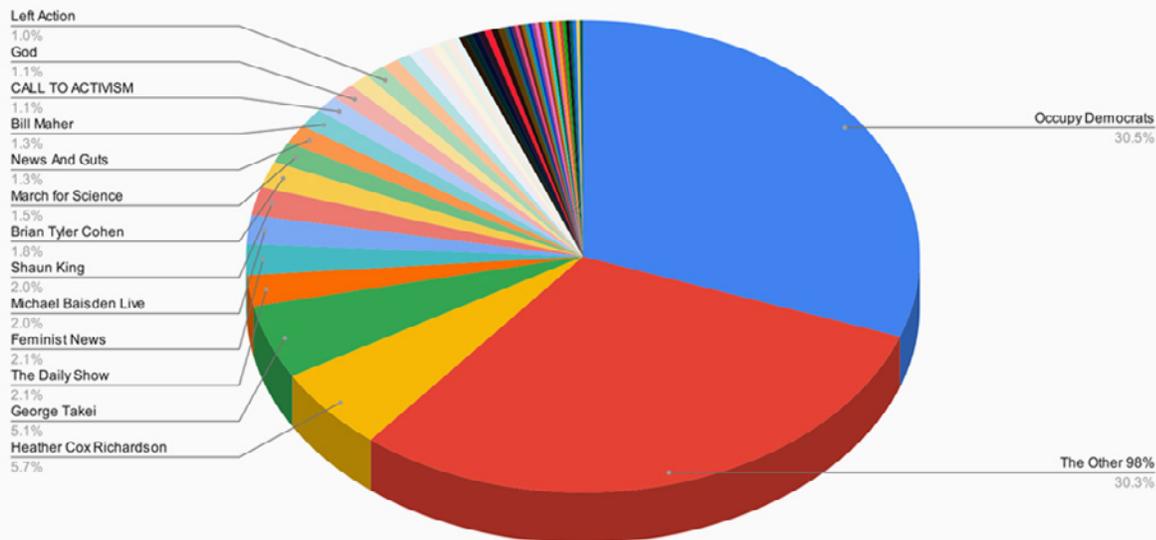
Our goal here is to omit voices that **may be amplified purely by the vagaries of the news cycle or by individual political content that lawmakers or recent politicians post about** and instead focus on left-leaning or right-leaning content creators and political brands that are not formally part of the political or news establishment, and thus not making it into the Top Ten purely by the "luck" of breaking news.

3

We counted how many days a publisher had at least one post in the Facebook Top Ten. Our question is how consistently publishers break into this top tier over time, not how many individual posts make it there. So with these criteria in place, what do we see as the current state of play among top Facebook content providers?

How many Days in the FB Top Ten

by Percentage of All Left-Leaning Publishers
(Excluding Traditional News & Political Officials)



Which Left-Leaning Content Providers are Consistently Making the List Now?

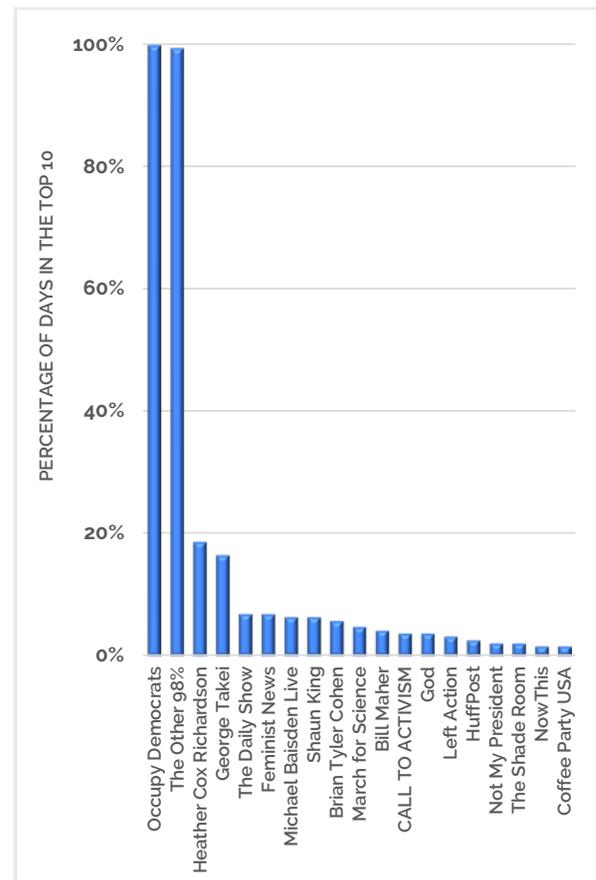
With this methodology, we looked at all political Facebook posts from left-leaning publishers during our six-month time window, identified those political content creators that had made it into the Top Ten most engaged posts at least once, and then sorted them by the number of days that each had made it on the list. **Only two publishers were responsible for about 60% of the days left-leaning publishers spent in the Facebook Top Ten posts.** Approximately 40% of all creators who made it into the Top Ten during these six months were divided into a diverse list of other actors.

Content Creators by Percentage of Days in Top Ten Most Engaged Posts

The list is dramatically dominated by two entities: Occupy Democrats and The Other 98%. Both of these publisher pages made it into the Top Ten virtually every day within the date range of our study, and saw much more content seeing "Top Ten Days" than any other left leaning publisher.

The next publisher in terms of performance was Heather Cox Richardson, who had content in the Top Ten for roughly 35 days, or 18.7% of the time studied. The Daily Show reached sixth place and was already in the single-digit percentages — in terms of days in the Top Ten — at 6.5%.

After this, engagement drops off further for other Facebook Publishers, as you can see in this other view — the percentage of all the days in our study each page spent in the Facebook Top Ten:



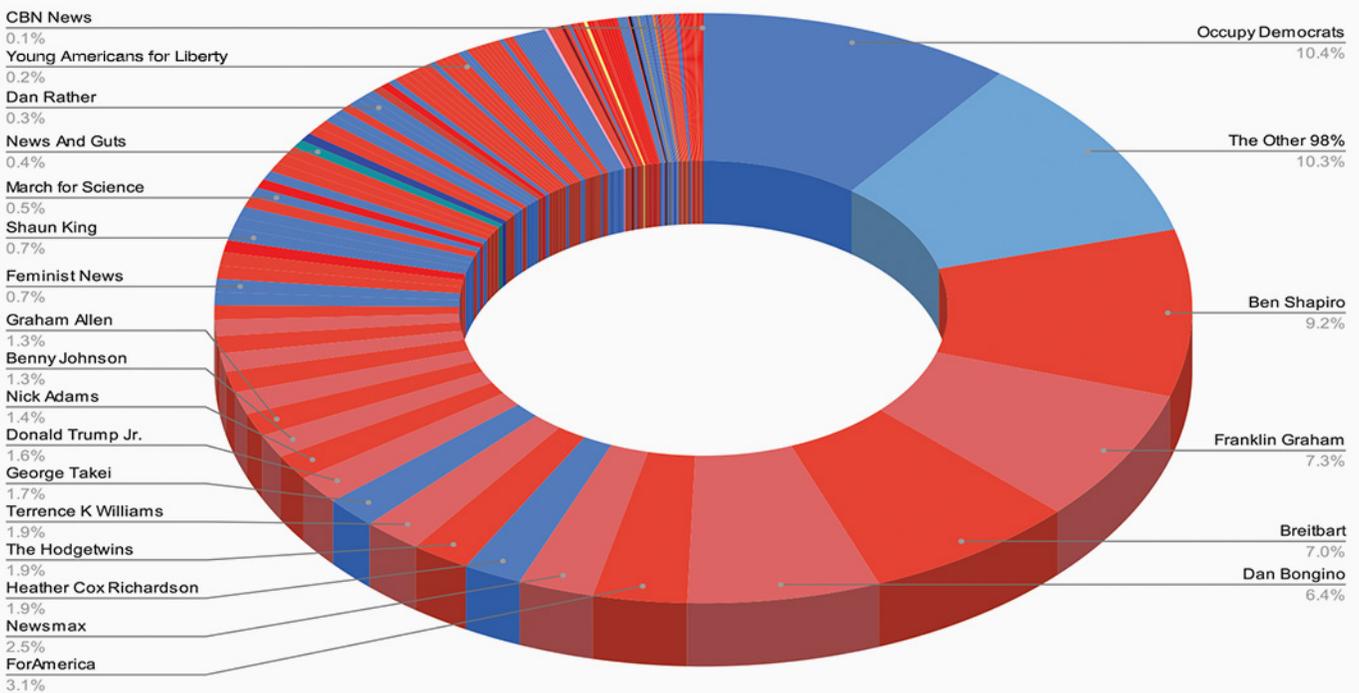
How Far Behind Are Left-Leaning Content Providers to the Right-Wing Counterparts?

This was our view of the left-of-center Facebook content publishers compared to each other. The next obvious question is how does the left-leaning camp compare to their right-leaning competition?

Using the same methodology, we created a visual chart to compare **right-leaning and left-aligned Facebook publishers during the same time frame from the Media Matters dataset.**

The chart below compares the number of days each Publisher was able to get at least one post into the Facebook Top Ten most engaging posts on Facebook during this timeframe:

How many Days in the FB Top Ten by Percentage of All Publishers (Excluding Traditional News & Political Officials)

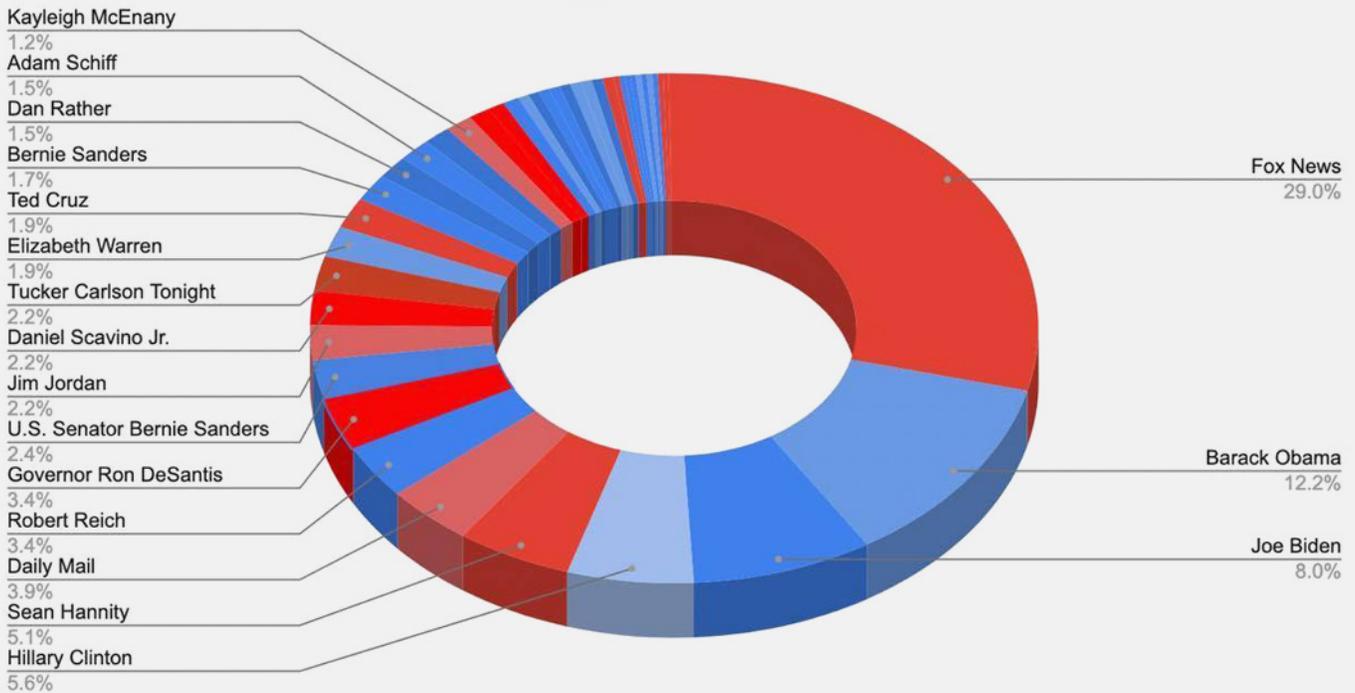


After Occupy Democrats and The Other 98%, there is a dramatic drop before the next left-leaning content creator in this ranking. Heather Cox Richardson ranks next, and in this larger view that includes right-leaning publishers, she sees only 1.9% of the percentage of all publishers we analyzed during this date range in question.

As we listed before, this study intentionally used a methodology that excluded mainstream news and active and recent political officials' pages. We did not want to focus on pages that made the top ten placement by "accident" of what news was breaking. Instead, this study focused on those who created original political content that consistently made up the day's most engaging posts.

That being said, here is another visualization for the same period, focusing primarily on mainstream news pages and political officials. The imbalance between left and right-leaning pages is less, but it is still dramatic here as well.

How many Days in the FB Top Ten Traditional News & Political Officials Only



Disparity by Engagement

In addition to the disparity in terms of total days left-leaning and right-leaning pages saw in the Facebook Top Ten, we also identified substantial disparities in total engagement between left-leaning and right-leaning publishers.

We compare these actors by ranking all the posts from the right and left-leaning pages that we found in the Facebook Top Ten by the **total number of social engagements during the time frame of this study**.

As with the other metrics, we found that the right-leaning pages dominated their left-leaning counterparts in social engagements.

It was to be expected that those who made it to the Top Ten also saw a dramatic difference in engagement as well. Still, this data gives the scale and scope of this dominance during this time.

None of the CrowdTanble-based “Facebook Top Ten” lists we looked at showed true social reach for the content published by these pages, instead focusing on social engagement performance. To be frank, Meta simply refuses to release social reach data through CrowdTangle.

Left-Leaning Pages in Facebook Top 20

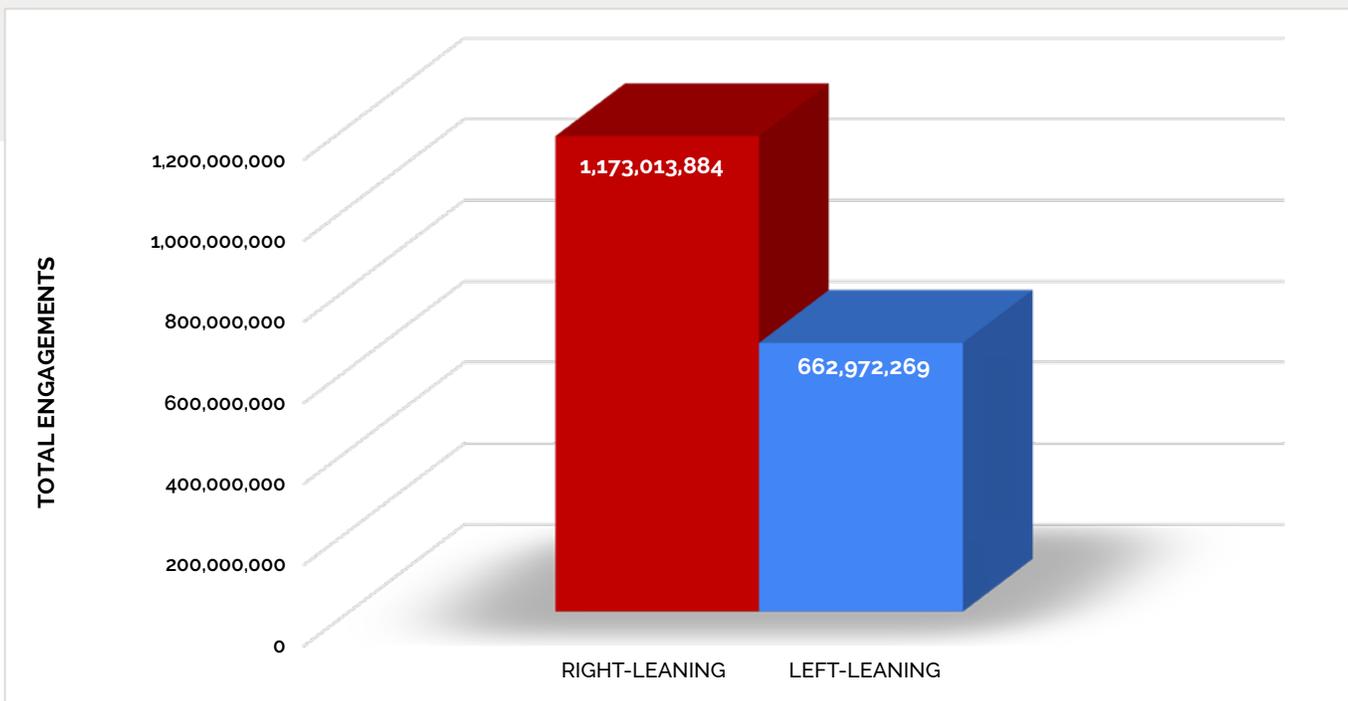
662,972,269
TOTAL ENGAGEMENTS

Right-Leaning Pages in Facebook Top 20

1,173,013,884
TOTAL ENGAGEMENTS

This is yet another severe limitation of transparency that researchers and technologists have been deeply concerned about for years, **including the founder of CrowdTangle after leaving Facebook**. And worse, there are **reports that Meta will end CrowdTangle altogether**, and has not announced any replacement.

Nonetheless, the precise performance metrics that we do have are important - and, in fact, are what Meta uses in their content algorithms to determine which content to push into users' feeds.

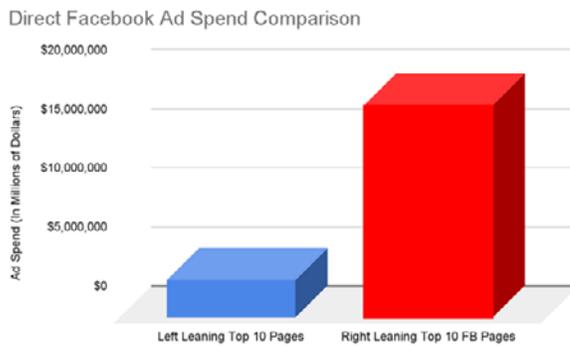


Looking at Total Ad Spend by Top Ten Content Pages

One of the next questions we have is “Which of the partisan Facebook publishers use online advertising to help them reach the Top Ten?” Online social spending to gain visibility and engagement can be fully legitimate and is one of the apparent goals of the Facebook platform’s efforts to **intentionally reduce the reach of “organic content,”** thus incentivizing content publishers to pay for reach. Given this trend overall on the platform, it seemed an important metric to study by evaluating the efforts from both sides using the platform. For this question, we tracked promoted posts and promoted account ads that were included in Facebook’s listing of political or issue advocacy advertising in the U.S.. Meta offers cumulative ad spend for May 7, 2018 — Jul 2, 2022.

LEFT-LEANING ACCOUNTS	DAYS IN TOP 10	FB ADS?	RIGHT-LEANING ACCOUNTS	DAYS IN TOP 10	FB ADS?
Occupy Dems	187	\$295,000	Ben Shapiro	165	\$6,300,000
The Other 98%	186	\$TBD	Franklin Graham	131	\$1,800
Heather Cox Richardson	35	none	Breitbart	127	none
George Takei	31	\$4,700	Dan Bongino	115	\$56,000
The Daily Show	13	\$2,700,000	For America	56	\$130
Feminist News	13	none	NewsMax	45	\$11,200,000
Michael Baisden Live	12	none	The HodgeTwins	35	\$143,600
Shaun King	12	\$179,900	Terrence K. Williams	35	\$2,900
Brian Tyler Cohen	11	none	Donald Trump Jr.	28	\$25,500
March for Science	9	\$3,600	Nick Adams	25	\$273,000

Facebook ad spend comparison by left-leaning and right-leaning pages



\$18,002,930 spent by **RIGHT-LEANING** Top 10 Pages
\$3,183,200 spent by **LEFT-LEANING** Top 10 Pages

Some important caveats to this data: it is not intended to be an in-depth study of Facebook ad spend, but rather a first look at how these Top Ten pages from both ideological sides directly spent on the Facebook ad platform promoting their own content. This is the most direct and "above board" way that pages are encouraged by the platform to boost reach.

This comparison does not look at other more sophisticated techniques that some Facebook publishers use of creating multiple pages that amplify the content of the central pages, nor does it study any advertising for other Facebook allies to these pages promoting their content indirectly. It does not look at inauthentic coordination to grow Facebook reach, which sites such as Daily Caller have used. Lastly, it does not look at web banner ads or display ads that might drive traffic to the publisher's Facebook pages. This all merits much deeper study.

But even with those limitations, this early view shows the very stark difference in fiscal commitments to ad spend by both groups.

Why this Matters to Progressives

Dan Pfeiffer **spoke about this same challenge** and the need to focus specifically on the content publisher space on Facebook:



Dan Pfeiffer

“ We have to figure out how to build up a progressive media infrastructure that competes, and **we have to figure out how we are to solve the Facebook problem.** We cannot exist in a world where Facebook is continuing to be dominated by Conservatives... How do we do that as a party? **The Republican message operation is top-down: it is Trump to Fox News to the base. Ours has to be bottom-up... I hope we all have serious discussions on how to do it.** How to build the tools and the infrastructure to make it happen. That is the only way we will compete. ”

To begin to answer these questions and have these discussions, we need an accurate map of where we are. Researchers wish we had better, more complete data from Meta (and all the other platforms), but this is the best view and highlights progressives' challenges in this arena.

Progressives need to empower and improve their top-performing Facebook accounts that have proven they know how to consistently break into widespread attention and engagement on the Facebook platforms, to dramatically up their game at boosting those accounts currently showing promise but not breaking through, and to create new brands that can compete in this arena.

This also matters deeply to the disinformation plague that Facebook enables. Progressives must invest in long-term, durable, and significant ways to build their own brands and communities on this platform. Even in the ever-changing social media landscape, Facebook will remain a key platform to inoculate against disinformation, share good, well-sourced information into the space, and to counter disinformation that has broken out into persuadable audiences.

We hope that this paper is a catalyst to that view and helps spark ideas on the tools, infrastructure, and operations needed to begin winning that arena.