



By Kevin Roose - Aug. 27, 2020

## What if Facebook Is the Real ‘Silent Majority’?

*Right-wing influencers are dominating the political discussion on Facebook, raising questions about whether it will translate into electoral success in November.*

Listen, liberals. **If you don't think Donald Trump can get re-elected in November, you need to spend more time on Facebook.** Since the 2016 election, I've been obsessively tracking how partisan political content is performing on Facebook, the world's largest and arguably most influential media platform. Every morning, one of the first browser tabs I open is CrowdTangle — a handy Facebook-owned data tool that offers a bird's-eye view of what's popular on the platform. I check which politicians and pundits are going viral. I geek out on trending topics. I browse the previous day's stories to see which got the most reactions, shares and comments.

Most days, the leader board looks roughly the same: conservative post after conservative post, with the occasional liberal interloper. (If you want to see these lists for yourselves, you can check out @FacebooksTop10, a Twitter account I created that shows the top 10 most-interacted-with link posts by U.S. Facebook pages every day.)

It's no secret that, despite Mr. Trump's claims of Silicon Valley censorship, Facebook has been a boon to him and his allies, and hyperpartisan Facebook pages are nothing new. (In fact, my colleague John Herrman wrote about them four years ago this month.) **But what sticks out, when you dig in to the data, is just how dominant the Facebook right truly is. Pro-Trump political influencers have spent years building a well-oiled media machine that swarms around every major news story, creating a torrent of viral commentary that reliably drowns out both the mainstream media and the liberal opposition.**

The result is a kind of parallel media universe that left-of-center Facebook users may never encounter, but that has **been stunningly effective** in shaping its own version of reality. Inside the right-wing Facebook bubble, President Trump's response to Covid-19 has been strong and effective, **Joe Biden is barely capable of forming sentences, and Black Lives Matter is a dangerous group of violent looters.**

Mr. Trump and his supporters are betting that, **despite being behind Mr. Biden in the polls, a “silent majority” will carry him to re-election.** Donald Trump Jr., the president's oldest and most online son, made that argument himself at the Republican National Convention this week. And while I'm not a political analyst, I know enough about the modern media landscape to know that looking at people's revealed preferences — what they actually read, watch, and click on when nobody's looking — is often a better indicator of how they'll act than interviewing them at diners, or listening to what they're willing to say out loud to a pollster. Maybe Mr. Trump's “silent majority,” in other words, only seems silent because we're not looking at their Facebook feeds.

“We live in two different countries right now,” said Eric Wilson, a Republican digital strategist and digital director of Marco Rubio's 2016 campaign. Facebook's media ecosystem, he said, is “a huge blind spot for people who are up to speed on what's on the front page of The New York Times and what's leading the hour on CNN.”

To be sure, Facebook is not the only medium where right-wing content thrives. Millions of Americans still get their news from cable news and talk radio, where conservative voices have dominated for years. Many pro-Trump Facebook influencers also have sizable presences on Twitter, YouTube and other social networks. But the right's dominance on Facebook, specifically, is something to behold. Here are just a few data points I pulled from CrowdTangle this week:

- **The conservative commentator [Ben Shapiro](#) has gotten 56 million total interactions on his Facebook page in the last 30 days. That's more than the main pages of ABC News, NBC News, The New York Times, The Washington Post and NPR combined.** (Data from a different firm, NewsWhip, showed that Mr. Shapiro's news outlet, The Daily Wire, was the No. 1 publisher on Facebook in July.)

- **Facebook posts by Breitbart, the far-right news outlet, have been shared four million times in the past 30 days**, roughly three times as many as posts from the official pages of every Democratic member of the U.S. Senate combined.
- **The most-shared Facebook post containing the term “Black Lives Matter” over the past six months is a June video by the right-wing commentators The Hodgetwins, which calls the racial justice movement a “damn lie.”** The second most-shared Black Lives Matter post? **A different viral video from The Hodgetwins, this one calling the movement a “leftist lie.”** (The Hodgetwins also have the 4th, 6th, and 12th most shared posts.)
- **Terrence K. Williams, a conservative comedian and Trump supporter, has averaged 86,500 interactions per Facebook post** in August, more than twice as many as Joe Biden, the Democratic presidential nominee, who has averaged 39,000 interactions per post. (Mr. Trump outdoes them both, naturally, with an average of 92,000 interactions per post.)

**A few caveats, before my Democratic readers jump off the nearest pier.**

These figures include only posts on public pages, in public groups, and by verified accounts, and they don't include Facebook ads, where the Biden campaign has been outspending the Trump campaign in recent weeks. Counting Facebook interactions doesn't tell you how someone felt about a post, so it's possible some conservative posts are being hate-shared by liberals. And Facebook has argued that engagement isn't the same thing as popularity.

*“These points look mostly at how people engage with content, which should not be confused with how many people actually see it on Facebook,” Joe Osborne, a Facebook spokesman, said in a statement. Mr. Osborne added that “when you look at the content that gets the most reach across Facebook, it's not at all as partisan as this reporting suggests.”*

(Facebook does not disclose this type of data publicly, except once in a while in response to my tweets.)

Democrats aren't totally absent from Facebook's upper echelon. **Ridin' With Biden**, a pro-Biden page started in April by the founders of the **liberal Facebook page Occupy Democrats**, has quadrupled its following over the past three months, and routinely gets more engagement than Breitbart and other right-wing heavy-hitters. Individual posts by Bernie Sanders, Barack Obama and other prominent Democrats have broken through in recent weeks.

And political campaigners have pointed out, correctly, that being popular on the internet isn't a guarantee of electoral success. (“Retweets don't vote,” as an experienced Democratic operative once told me.) In addition, Facebook's older, more conservative user base may not reflect what's happening on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, which draw a younger crowd.

Still, the platform's sheer scale makes it vital to understand. **As of 2019, 70 percent of American adults used Facebook, and 43 percent of Americans got news on the platform**, according to the Pew Research Center. (Those numbers may have increased because of the pandemic.) We know that the company's product decisions can make or break political movements, move fringe ideas into the mainstream, or amplify partisan polarization. Registering four million voters before the November election, as Facebook has said it would do, could be a decisive force all on its own. (Typically, higher turnout benefits Democrats, but given what we know about the media diets of hyperactive Facebook users, who knows?)

**The reason right-wing content performs so well on Facebook is no mystery. The platform is designed to amplify emotionally resonant posts, and conservative commentators are skilled at turning passionate grievances into powerful algorithm fodder.** The company also appears willing to bend its rules for popular conservative influencers. Recent reports by BuzzFeed News and NBC News, based on leaked documents, found that Facebook executives had removed “strikes” from the accounts of several high-profile conservative pages that had shared viral misinformation in violation of the company's rules. Over the past few years, I've come to view my daily Facebook data-dive as **a kind of early-warning system — a rough gauge of what's grabbing America's attention** on any given day, and which stories and perspectives will likely break through in the days to come. And looking at Facebook's lopsided political media ecosystem might be a useful reality check for Democrats who think Mr. Biden will coast to victory in November.

After all, **Mr. Trump's surging popularity showed up online before it showed up in any polls in 2016.** And even though much about Facebook, and American politics, has changed in the past four years, the basic laws of social media physics still apply. Controversy wins. Negative beats positive. All attention looks good to an algorithm. Brad Parscale — the digital director of Mr. Trump's 2016 campaign — told "60 Minutes" that of everything Mr. Trump did that year, **the thing that actually moved the needle was Facebook.** "Facebook was the method," Mr. Parscale said. "It was the highway which his car drove on."

**That highway is still open. And right now, the fastest cars on it have MAGA bumper stickers.**