

INSTANT MESSAGE INSURRECTION: THE RAPID GROWTH OF THE ALT-RIGHT ONLINE



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On January 6, 2021 armed protestors stormed the United States Capitol building in hopes of disrupting the count of Electoral College votes that would formalize the victory of President Joe Biden. With thousands of protestors on the outside, insurrectionists tore past barricades and Capitol police to enter the House floor and various legislators' offices, ransacking the building and leaving four people dead. This was the first time the Capitol had been breached in over 200 years, and the first time an insurrection has been incited by a sitting president.

For weeks prior to this coup, former President

Donald Trump continually encouraged his supporters on social media to come to the Capitol on January 6, to protest the formalization of the November 2020 election results, or to “stop the steal” as he repeatedly said. In the weeks leading up to the insurrection, Trump tweeted, “Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!” He continually perpetuated the notion that he had actually won the election and that there has been widespread voter fraud—despite the fact that there is no evidence to suggest misconduct in the November 2020 election, according to The New York Times. Upon the direction of the former president, alt-right groups on social media organized a “Stop the Steal” protest and insurrection on January 6.

Perpetuating violence and false narratives on social media platforms is nothing new for conservative organizations. Conservatives have an advantage when spreading factually inaccurate messages on social media, like Facebook and Reddit, in that they are often able to appeal to users' emotions such as fear and anger. An unidentified Facebook executive told Politico that “right-wing populism is always more engaging... the content speaks to an incredibly strong, primitive emotion.”

According to the Facebook-owned tool Crowdtangle, during the final weeks of the 2020 presidential campaign, the Facebook posts in the United States with the most engagement were from conservative figures outside of mainstream media including Ben Shapiro, Franklin Graham and Donald Trump himself. Left-wing posts made the top 25 much less frequently than these conservative voices.

While conservative messaging gains support because it plays on fear, there is also evidence to suggest that Facebook, itself, plays a large role in perpetuating these conspiracy theories and alt-right groups. Biden campaign spokesperson Bill Russo said, “It is a choice to create an algorithm that feeds the distrust and polarization that are tearing us apart.” In fact, the Facebook algorithm has learned to recommend posts and groups to users who have related interests, effectively increasing the platform for conspiracy theories such as “Stop the Steal.”

Research conducted by Facebook's own internal team published in the Wall Street Journal found that over 64% of the users joining these extremist right wing groups were doing so because of prompts from the recommendation engine. It is apparent that Facebook is



playing a significant role in increasing the engagement for groups that organize violent movements such as the January 6 insurrection.

The “Stop the Steal” movement broke down both physical and ideological barriers across the nation. Not only were protestors from all over the country, but many had varying political objectives. Whether it was far-right conspiracy theorists, moderate Trump supporters or pure anarchists, they all were united through social media, primarily Facebook. Social media provides the means to unite various conspiracy or conservative factions to collaborate on their greater goal of violence and civil unrest. “Stop the Steal” began almost immediately after the November 2020 election. Under the encouragement and misinformation spread by then-President Trump, participation in conservative Facebook groups about election fraud spiked significantly.

Dominick McGee was an owner of one of these Facebook groups. For years, his posts only received a few likes and comments. However, after the most recent presidential election, he began sharing content related to voter fraud and “Stop the Steal.” These posts received significantly more attention, garnering over 1500 likes and 440 comments. Eventually, he started his own Facebook group called “Win the Win.” Tens of thousands of people joined immediately, and by the time that McGee arrived at the Capitol on January 6, there were over 61,000 members of his group. Even though he lost touch with many of his family members and lost business for his credit repair company due to his posts, Dominick told The New York Times that “my beliefs overruled my fears of not being accepted.”

Dominick was able to find community, acceptance and motivation through far-right Facebook groups. These

groups can suck in radical and moderate conservatives alike and, once their beliefs have gotten too extreme for their friends or family, users find a new community online. This sense of acceptance is so central to human beings, however it has proven to be dangerous when individuals have the ability to connect in order to perpetuate misinformation and violence. As we saw on January 6, physical manifestations of these connections not only have the ability to threaten lives, but the very essence of our American democracy.

Many have called on Facebook to take responsibility for this spread of misinformation and danger online. However, they have yet to implement concrete measures to counter this. According to Olivia Solon, reporter for NBC News, the company currently operates on a strike basis, which means that if a group posts false information then they have a warning before the company takes action. False information is determined by an independent, third party fact checking source. The post is then sent to be determined whether or not it should be “escalated”—basically whether or not it could turn into a PR nightmare. Posts flagged as high priority are much more likely to be taken down quickly, while lower priority posts may stay up indefinitely.

Many advocates call for stricter and swifter policies for Facebook to counteract the spread of misinformation on social media. We do not have time to wait for incremental changes from Facebook; January 6 proved how dangerous these groups can be, and the count down to the next radical conservative catastrophe has already begun. Social media is not just a website anymore, it is a tool for organization and a weapon of white supremacy. The rapid spread of misinformation calls for a rapid response, and changing the way we regulate alt-right groups online is critical to preserving democracy, discourse and lives. The danger is as real as Facebook allows it to be.

