

Facebook's amoral algorithms

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This is the editor's letter in the current issue of The Week magazine.

In the chaotic days after the 2020 election, Facebook employees warned CEO Mark Zuckerberg that the platform was being used to promote bogus claims of massive election fraud. With then-President Trump whipping up fury over a "rigged" election, Zuckerberg ordered that Facebook give new weight to existing "news ecosystem quality" scores, so that mainstream sources like major newspapers had priority in newsfeeds over extremist websites such as *Breitbart*. But the platform soon reverted to its old algorithm, spewing out election disinformation like a sewage spill. As former Facebook employee Frances Haugen told the world this week, the tech behemoth knows that outrage, anger, and conspiracy theories — what it internally calls "bad for the world" content — generate more emotion, engagement, and dopamine hits. "If they change the algorithm to be safer," Haugen said, "people will spend less time on the site, they'll click on less ads, they'll make less money."

This simple, amoral calculation explains why Facebook has enabled QAnon to infect millions, white supremacists to glorify mass shootings, and Burmese to massacre the Rohingya. Through Facebook, anti-vaxxers have spread lies that have caused hundreds of thousands of needless deaths. Teenage girls use Facebook and its Instagram app to swap tips on cutting and starving themselves. Zuckerberg invariably expresses dismay when these horrors come to light, but his fixes have been limited and temporary. Facebook has made him the global emperor of a supranational realm of 3 billion users; shutting off the "bad for the world" firehose would diminish his creation's audience and influence. He's incapable of self-regulating, just as Purdue wouldn't stop pushing opioids and Big Tobacco wouldn't stop selling cigarettes. Regulating social media to minimize divisive and dangerous disinformation will be fiendishly difficult. But if we wait for Facebook to fix itself, we'll keep waiting.