

# They dont care: Facebook tells fact-checkers to lie as long as it helps the Democrats

[Facebook](#)

Journalists paid to help fix Facebook's fake news problem say they have lost trust in the platform

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▲ Brooke Binkowski is the former managing editor of Snopes, a factchecking site that has partnered with Facebook for two years. Photograph: Dan Tuffs for the Guardian

Journalists working as factcheckers for [Facebook](#) have pushed to end a controversial media partnership with the social network, saying the company has ignored their concerns and failed to use their expertise to combat misinformation.

Current and former Facebook factcheckers told the Guardian that the tech platform's collaboration with outside reporters has produced minimal results and that they've lost trust in Facebook, which has repeatedly refused to release meaningful data about the impacts of their work. Some said Facebook's hiring of a PR firm that used an [antisemitic narrative](#) to discredit critics – fueling the same kind of propaganda factcheckers regularly debunk – should be a deal-breaker.

“They’ve essentially used us for crisis PR,” said Brooke Binkowski, former managing editor of Snopes, a factchecking site that has partnered with Facebook for two years. “They’re not taking anything seriously. They are more interested in making themselves look good and passing the buck ... They clearly don’t care.”



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Facebook began building its [partnerships with news outlets](#) after the 2016 presidential election, during which fake stories and political propaganda reached [hundreds of millions of users](#) on the platform. The goal was to rely on journalists to flag false news and limit its spread, but [research and anecdotal evidence](#) have repeatedly suggested that the debunking work has [struggled to make a difference](#).

Facebook now has more than 40 media [partners](#) across the globe, including the Associated Press, PolitiFact and the [Weekly Standard](#), and has [said](#) false news on the platform is “trending downward”.

While some newsroom leaders said the relationship was positive, other partners said the results were unclear and that they had grown increasingly resentful of Facebook, especially following [revelations](#) that the company had paid a consulting firm to [go after opponents](#) by publicizing their association with billionaire Jewish philanthropist George Soros. The attacks fed into a well-known [conspiracy theory](#) about Soros being the hidden hand behind all manner of liberal causes and global events. It was later revealed that [Sheryl Sandberg](#), chief operating officer, had [directed her staff](#) to research Soros’s financial interests after he publicly criticized the company.

“Why should we trust Facebook when it’s pushing the same rumors that its own factcheckers are calling fake news?” said a current Facebook factchecker who was not authorized to speak publicly about their news outlet’s partnership. “It’s worth asking how do they treat stories about George Soros on the platform knowing they specifically pay people to try to link political enemies to him?”

“Working with Facebook makes us look bad,” added the journalist, who has advocated for an end to the partnership.



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▲ Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook COO, was reported to have directed her staff to research George Soros’s financial interests after he publicly criticized the company.

Photograph: Jim Lo Scalzo/EPA

Another factchecker who has long worked on the Facebook partnership said they were demoralized: “They are a terrible company and, on a personal level, I don’t want to have anything to do with them.”



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Binkowski, who [left Snopes](#) earlier this year and now runs her own [factchecking site](#), which does not partner with Facebook, said the Facebook-Snopes partnership quickly became counterproductive. During early conversations with Facebook, Binkowski said she tried to raise concerns about misuse of the platform abroad, such as the [explosion of hate speech and misinformation](#) during the [Rohingya crisis in Myanmar](#) and other [violent propaganda](#).

“I was bringing up Myanmar over and over and over,” she said. “They were absolutely resistant.”

Binkowski, who previously reported on immigration and refugees, said Facebook largely ignored her: “I strongly believe that they are spreading fake news on behalf of hostile foreign powers and authoritarian governments as part of their business model.”

Kim LaCapria recently left Snopes as a content manager and factchecker partly due to her frustrations with the Facebook arrangement. She said it quickly seemed clear that Facebook wanted the “appearance of trying to prevent damage without actually doing anything” and that she was particularly upset to learn that Facebook was paying Snopes: “That felt really gross ...

Facebook has one mission and factchecking websites should have a completely different mission.”

Binkowski said that on at least one occasion, it appeared that Facebook was pushing reporters to prioritize debunking misinformation that affected Facebook advertisers, which she thought crossed a line: “You’re not doing journalism any more. You’re doing propaganda.”



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A Facebook spokesperson repeatedly declined to comment on whether advertisers influenced factchecking, saying in an email, “The primary way we surface potentially false news to third-party factcheckers is via machine learning.”

After publication of this article, however, Facebook published a [blogpost](#) saying it does not ask partners to prioritize factchecks related to advertisers.

Other times, Snopes ended up factchecking satirical articles for Facebook, which felt like a waste of time and in certain instances, sparked intense [backlash](#) against Snopes, the former staffers said. Once Snopes became an official partner, there was also a noticeable increase in online harassment, death threats and attacks from far-right users and prominent conservatives who accused the factcheckers and Facebook of having a leftwing bias and agenda, Binkowski said.

When reporters got caught in these kinds of firestorms, Facebook let individual journalists shoulder the blame, she said: “They threw us under the bus at every opportunity.”

Added LaCapria: “We were just collateral damage.”

A Facebook representative said it has begun incorporating journalist safety training for new partners.



LaCapria, who is now working with Binkowski on her new site, said it became difficult to report on Facebook at Snopes due to the financial arrangement: “We knew that if anything involved Facebook it was at risk of being compromised.”

“Most of us feel it’s more trouble than it’s worth,” said one current factchecker.

Facebook has said that third-party factchecking is one part of its strategy to fight misinformation, and has claimed that a “false” rating leads an article to be ranked lower in news feed, reducing future views by 80% on average. The company has refused, however, to publicly release any data to support these claims.

One current factchecker said the process overall was too slow and that often their factchecks came too late: “By the time it gets to us, how many people have already seen it?”

In contrast, Angie Drobnic Holan, editor of PolitiFact, said the partnership was a “public service”, and that “Facebook is helping us identify questionable material”. The revenue from Facebook “added to our overall sustainability”, she said.

Asked of the impacts of her site’s work, she said, “Is it reducing fake content on Facebook? I don’t know, I can’t tell. Can Facebook tell? You would assume they could. I don’t have any way of knowing.”

Facebook said in a statement that it had “heard feedback from our partners that they’d like more data on the impact of their efforts”, adding that it has started sending “quarterly reports” with “customized statistics” to partners and would be “looking

for more statistics to share externally in early 2019". Facebook declined to share the reports with the Guardian.

PolitiFact has not yet received any reports, according to Holan, who said Facebook stated the documents must remain private once they are produced.

Snopes's founder and CEO, David Mikkelson, said he was unaware of any quarterly reports. In an interview, he also said he did not share Binkowski's concerns about the Facebook partnership and said he felt it has had a minimal impact on how Snopes operates.

"Our work remains the same," he said, adding that he did not expect Facebook to share data on how Snopes's work is affecting other publishers. "It's up to Facebook to decide the relative success of it."