

AI

# Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen points to 2018 algorithm overhaul as key problem

Haugen secretly copied tens of thousands of pages of Facebook research.

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Francis Scialabba

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Facebook has had one hell of a half-week, but in the name of *Emerging Tech Brew*, we're zooming right in on the algorithm part of this story. So let's talk about Frances Haugen, the [Facebook whistleblower](#) who leaked tens of thousands of pages of the company's internal research on its algorithms.

Haugen, who worked on Facebook’s civic integrity team for nearly two years, secretly copied the documents before leaving the company in May. She alleges that many of Facebook’s problems stem from a 2018 algorithm overhaul, in which the company began awarding high-engagement posts (ones with spiking reactions, comments, and shares) the highest priority in users’ feeds.

- **The problem:** Facebook’s internal research found “angry content” gets the highest engagement—and therefore the most Home Feed real estate.

Haugen told *60 Minutes*: “Political parties have been quoted, in Facebook’s own research, saying, ‘We know you changed how you pick out the content that goes in the home feed. And now if we don’t publish angry, hateful, polarizing, divisive content—crickets. We don’t get anything. And if we don’t get traffic and engagement, we’ll lose our jobs.’”

Haugen’s takeaways aligned with [reporting](#) by MIT Tech Review in March, which found that the company’s algorithms are geared to prioritize “hate speech” and “incendiary” content—and that Facebook hasn’t stopped it.

**Looking ahead:** This conversation [isn’t all about](#) Section 230. Since algorithms amplify what they’re taught to value, it seems likely that to fight toxicity, tech giants may have to switch out engagement with a whole new set of incentives. And since that’s not the most profitable path, federal regulation may end up needing to dictate that.

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