

# Misinformation expert says she was fired by Harvard under Meta pressure

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One of the world's leading experts on misinformation says she was fired by Harvard University for criticising Meta at a time that the school was being pledged \$500m from Mark Zuckerberg's charity. Joan Donovan says her funding was cut off, she could not hire assistants and she was made the target of a smear campaign by Harvard employees. In a legal filing with the US education department and the Massachusetts attorney general first published by the Washington Post, she said her right to free speech had been abrogated. The controversial claims stem in part from Donovan's publication of the Facebook papers, a bombshell leak of 22,000 pages of Facebook's internal documents by the whistleblower Frances Haugen, who used to work at the company. Donovan, believing them to be of huge public interest, began publishing them to Harvard's website for anyone to access. "From that very day forward, I was treated differently by the university to the point where I lost my job," Donovan told the Logic. In an October 2021 meeting of the dean's council which advises the Harvard Kennedy School, where Donovan worked, the former Facebook communications head Elliot Schrage allegedly argued that Facebook "should not be the arbiter of truth", according to Semafor. A little over a week later, the dean, Douglas Elmendorf, emailed Donovan asking her to justify her approach to studying misinformation in a climate "when there is no independent arbiter of truth (in this country or others) and constitutional protections of speech (in some countries)?". Donovan reproduced the email in her complaint, adding that Zuckerberg also frequently uses the term "arbiter of truth". Last year she was told her main project would be wound down. This year the school eliminated her position. In an email to the Post, the Harvard Kennedy School said Donovan's departure was not related to Meta. It said it struggled to find a faculty sponsor to oversee her, which is a university policy. It also said she was not fired. Donovan "was offered the chance to continue as a part-time adjunct lecturer, and she chose not to do so", the statement said. Donovan had made a name for herself in part by testifying before Congress and speaking publicly about how the spread of misinformation financially benefited tech companies. The filing was put together with the assistance of Whistleblower Aid, a Washington-based organization that also helped Haugen, who alleged that Meta knew its platforms helped to spread harmful misinformation. Donovan claims that Zuckerberg and his wife, Priscilla Chan, both Harvard alumni, have given it hundreds of millions of dollars, including promising \$500m to the school's Kempner Institute for the Study of Natural and Artificial Intelligence. "There are a handful of tried and true means to coerce someone or some entity to do something they would not otherwise do, and influence through financial compensation is at or near the top of the list," the filing says. "Objectively, \$500m is certainly significant financial influence."