

Moral Responsibility and Social Networks

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Learning Goals

1. Introduce some principles of moral responsibility
2. Apply those principles to the case of what Facebook responsible for
3. Consider the implications of Facebook's recently created Oversight Board to Facebook's moral responsibility

Agenda

1. Responsibility as Causation
2. Intervening Agents: Housing Discrimination
3. Omissions: Vaccine misinformation
4. Moral Responsibility and Facebook's Oversight Board

1. Responsibility

In ethics, being ‘responsible’ is not always a good thing.

Not: being a responsible friend, parent, or colleague. Here ‘responsible’ means, roughly, ‘capable of being trusted’.

Rather: being responsible for something bad that happened. Here ‘responsible’ means, roughly, ‘at fault’, ‘to blame’.

When someone is responsible in this second sense, it’s appropriate to hold them responsible for the bad outcome in question.

Responsibility: an example



Responsibility: an example



On January 13, 2012, the cruise ship *Costa Concordia* collided with a rocky outcrop on the shores of a Tuscan Island. 32 people lost their lives in the accident.

Who is responsible for the deaths?

Responsibility: an example



A natural view:
the person who is responsible =
the person who *caused* the deaths.

In this case the captain, Francesco Schettino, was deemed to have caused the deaths, since he steered the ship off-course towards the island.

Responsibility as Causation

The Causation Principle:

To be *responsible* for some (bad) outcome is to have *caused* that (bad) outcome.

2. Intervening Agents

‘Intervening agents’: people who act ‘in between’ another agent and a bad outcome.

X is an intervening agent relative to Y and outcome O

X does something that has a bad outcome O, but if it wasn’t for something that Y did earlier, X wouldn’t have done what they did.

2. Intervening Agents

‘Intervening agents’: people who act ‘in between’ another agent and a bad outcome.

Example

Alice runs a small general goods store. On Monday, she sells some rat poison to Zebulon. On Tuesday, Zebulon uses that rat poison to poison his neighbor’s dog, causing its death.

Intervening Agents

Example

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Who is responsible for the dog's death?

- A) Zebulon [vote with 'No']
- B) Zebulon and Alice [vote with 'Yes']

Intervening Agents and Causation

Causation is transitive: if A causes B and B causes C, A causes C.

But on a standard philosophical picture, agents are *uncaused causes*.

No one causes Zebulon to do what he chooses voluntarily to do.

That's why Alice, on this picture, isn't responsible for the dog's death.

Intervening Agents and Social Networks

A central feature of harmful consequences of social networks: they are mediated by the actions of people, namely the users.

If Facebook were not responsible for any outcome that was mediated by intervening agents, it would not be responsible for much.

Case #1: Discriminatory Housing Ads

Boost Post

AUDIENCE

People you choose through interests

NYC Housing Market

Housing Market NYC

Your audience

Location - Living In: United States

Age: 18 - 65+

Exclude: Interests: Islamic

Less ▾

HOUSING MARKET NYC

New York City Housing

BUDGET AND DURATION

Total budget USD

\$5.00 USD

Estimated People Reached

By clicking Boost

Edit "Housing Market NYC" Audience

Detailed Targeting ?

INCLUDE people who match at least ONE of the following ?

Behaviors > Residential profiles

Likely to move

Interests > Additional Interests

Buying a House

First-time buyer

House Hunting

Add demographics, interests or behaviors | Suggestions | Browse

Narrow Audience

EXCLUDE people who match at least ONE of the following ?

Behaviors > Multicultural Affinity

African American (US)

Asian American (US)

Hispanic (US - Spanish dominant)

Add demographics, interests or behaviors | Browse

Your audience selection is **great!**

Potential Audience Size: 112,000 people ?

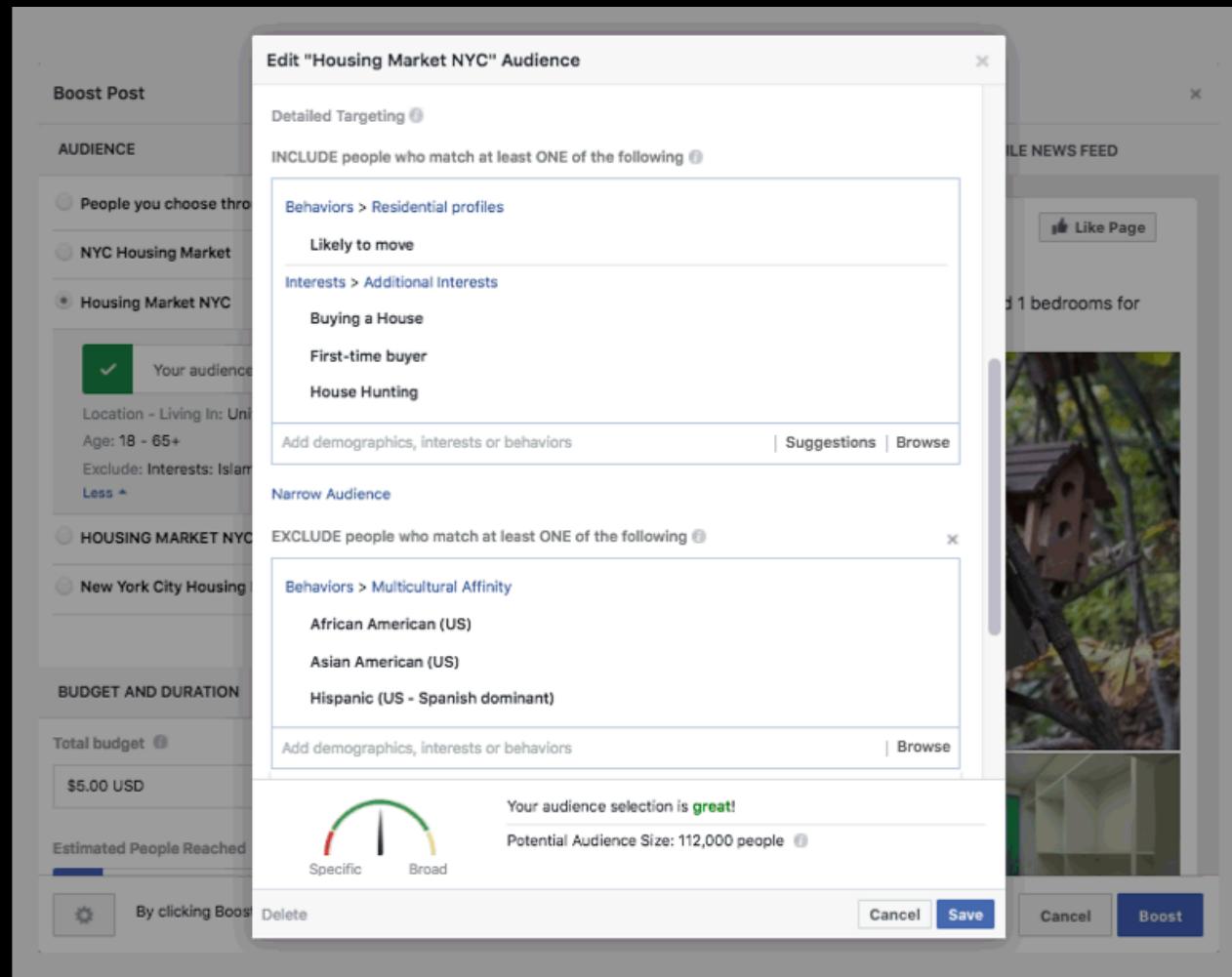
Specific Broad

Delete Cancel Save

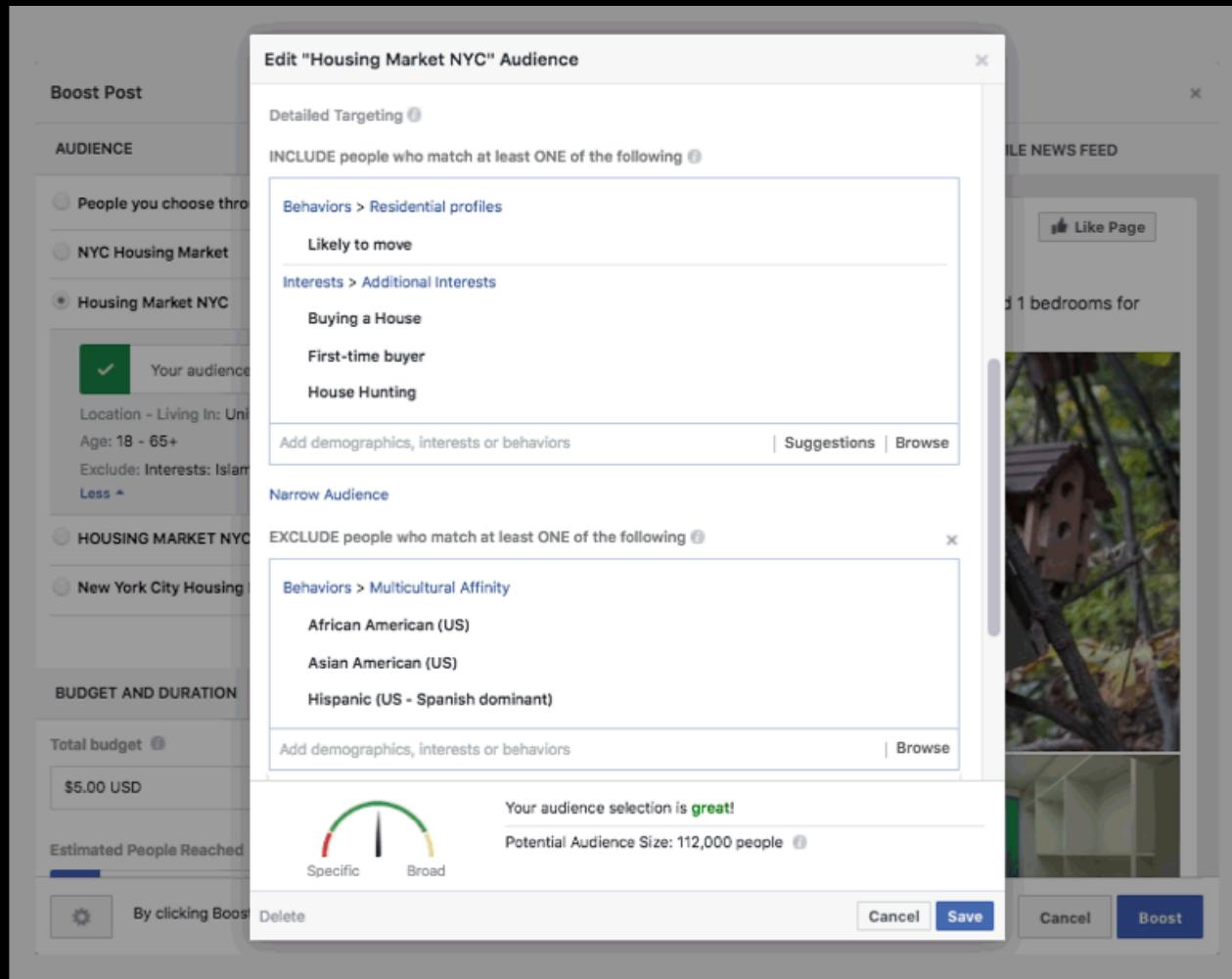
FILE NEWS FEED

Like Page

1 bedrooms for



Case #1: Discriminatory Housing Ads



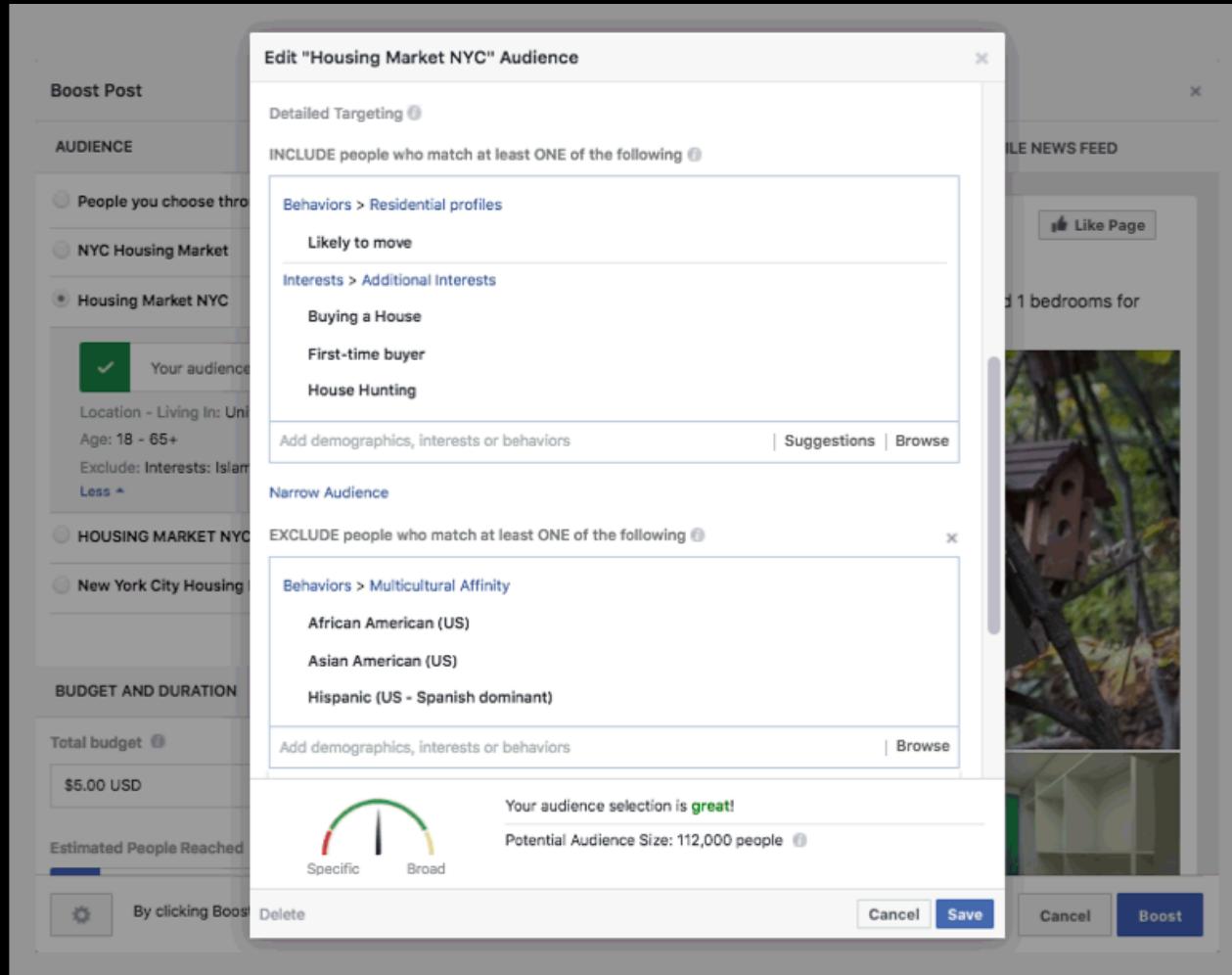
Discussion

Who is responsible for the discriminatory ads?

A) The users who posted them.

B) Facebook and the users.

Case #1: Discriminatory Housing Ads



Discussion

Who is responsible for the discriminatory ads?

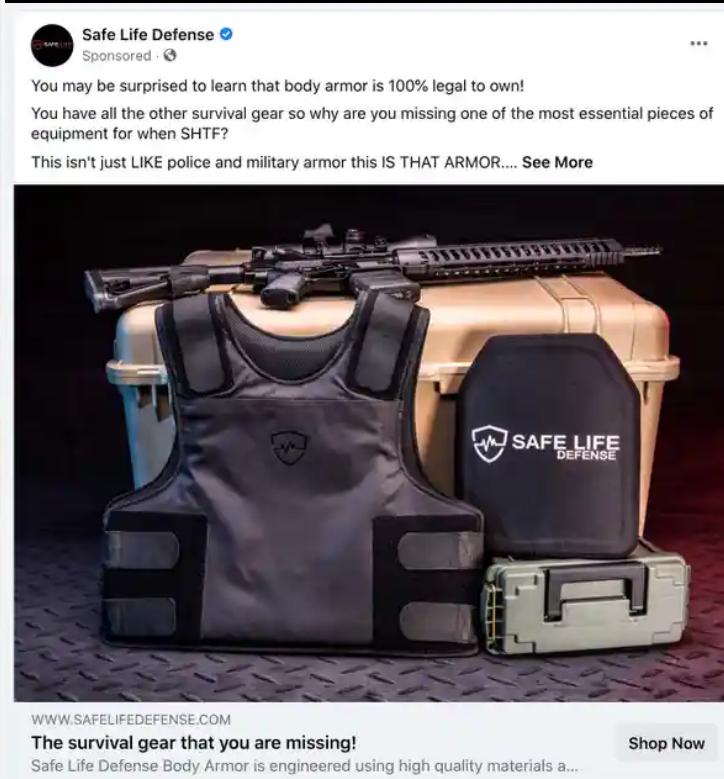
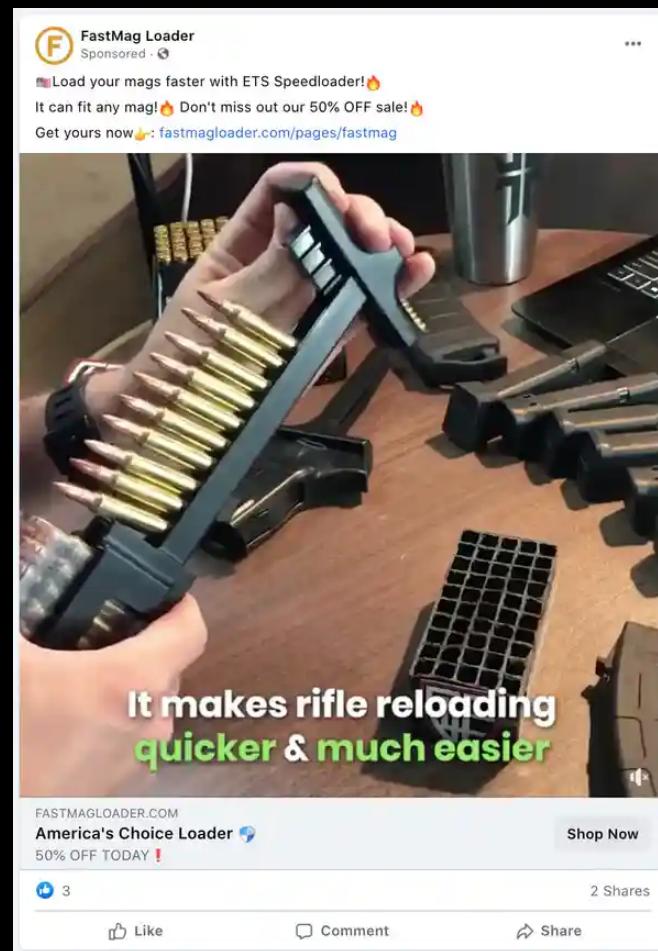
A) The users who posted them.

B) Facebook and the users.

Bonus question: did Facebook *cause* any single person to post a discriminatory ad?

Another example

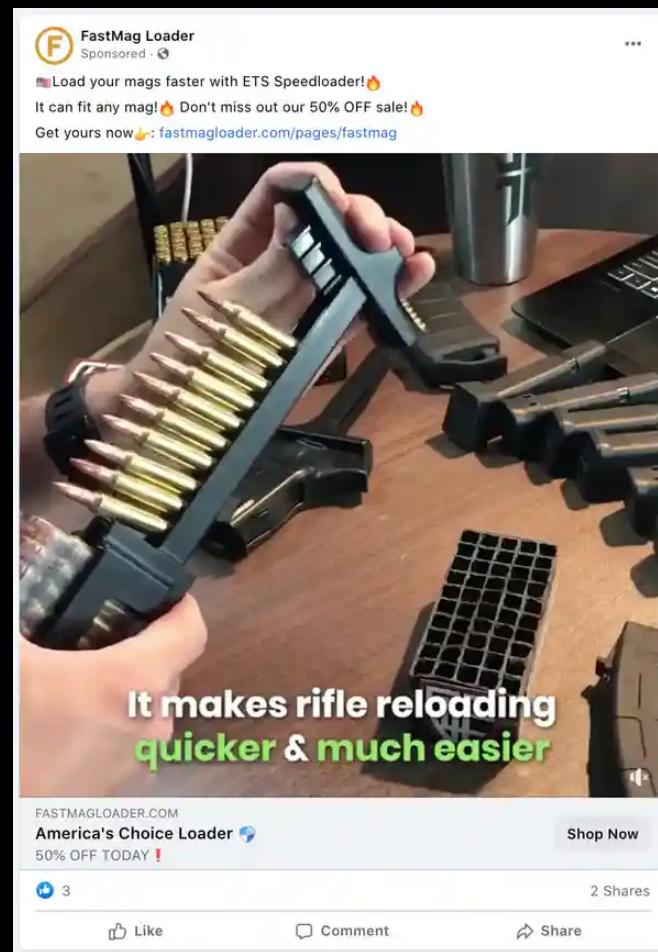
In the days leading to the storming of the capitol, Facebook users active on ‘Stop the Steal’ heavily targeted with military gear ads.



Another example

In the days leading to the storming of the capitol, Facebook users active on ‘Stop the Steal’ heavily targeted with military gear ads.

Maybe Facebook didn’t *cause* insurrectionists to gear up, but it did something that would foreseeably lead to that happening.



Responsibility Take Two

Someone is responsible for a bad outcome if

- (i) they caused it

or

- (ii) they did something that foreseeably would lead to other people causing that bad outcome.

Responsibility Take Two

Housing Example

Facebook is responsible for the discriminatory ads because it did something—it introduced discriminatory options—that foreseeably would lead to users posting discriminatory ads.

3. Omissions

So far, we've seen that Facebook can be responsible for *introducing* features onto its platform (discriminatory options, military gear ads) that have harmful effects via the actions of other people.

But what about the consequences of user behavior that Facebook merely *allows* to happen? Is Facebook responsible for that too?

2019

- Ocasio-Cortez: Would I be able to run advertisements on Facebook targeting Republicans in primaries saying that they voted for the Green New Deal?
- Zuckerberg: I think probably.
- Ocasio-Cortez: Do you see a potential problem here with a complete lack of fact-checking on political advertisements?
- Zuckerberg: Well, Congresswoman, I think lying is bad, and I think if you were to run an ad that had a lie in it, that would be bad. That's different from it being, in our position, the right thing to do to prevent your constituents or people in an election from seeing that you had lied.

2019

- Zuckerberg's stance in 2019 seems to be that Facebook is *not* responsible for the bad things it merely *allows* other people (including politicians) to do.
- If politicians use their speech to lie, then they are responsible for lying, and for the bad consequences of their lying, not Facebook.

2021: COVID-19 Misinformation

Earlier this month, Facebook took down the Robert Kennedy Jr.'s Instagram account for violation of its COVID-19 misinformation policy.

By the time his account was suspended, Kennedy had amassed 800,000 followers.

2021: COVID-19 Misinformation

Suppose Kennedy Jr. convinced 500,000 people not to get a vaccine.

Discussion

Is Facebook responsible, at least in part, for the bad outcome that there are 500,000 people out there who will not get vaccinated?

Responsibility Take Three

Someone is responsible for a bad outcome if

- (i) they caused it
- (ii) they did something that foreseeably would lead to other people causing that bad outcome.
- (iii) they allowed other people to do something that foreseeably would cause that bad outcome

4. Passing the Buck

Zuckerberg: “Maybe there are some calls that just aren’t good for the company to make by itself”

Enter: the Facebook Oversight Board.

The Oversight Board

A group of roughly forty experts in “free expression and governance”

Board members paid by an independent trust set up by Facebook

Reviews important or emblematic decisions made by Facebook

The Oversight Board

Two recent examples:

- i. The Oversight Board *reversed* Facebook's decision to remove content displaying nudity (uncovered female nipples as part of a breast cancer awareness post).
- ii. And *upheld* Facebook's decision to remove a post containing a demeaning slur to describe Azerbaijanis.

Facebook and its Oversight Board

It's a complicated relationship:

- A) The board is independent, but its mandate is to uphold or revise decisions in accordance with *Facebook's stated values*.
- B) Facebook says that the board's decision will be binding, but they not legally obligated, or otherwise compelled, to do what the board says.

The Oversight Board and Responsibility

The biggest case up ahead: whether to uphold or reverse the suspension of Donald Trump's account.

One issue: whether Trump's account should be suspended or reinstated.

A separate issue: who is responsible for the consequences of the Oversight Board's decisions?

The Oversight Board and Responsibility

Do you agree or disagree with the following claim? In defending your position, be sure to use at least one notion discussed in this module.

If the Oversight Board upholds, or reverses, Facebook's original decision to suspend Trump's account, Facebook will bear no responsibility for the consequences of that decision.

Some guiding questions

1. Is the Oversight Board an *intervening agent* relative to Facebook?
2. Is the Oversight Board's impact on the platform something that Facebook *allows* to happen?

Summary

What we've achieved today:

1. We considered some key notions in the philosophy of responsibility (causation, intervening agents, omissions)
2. We applied those notions to harms Facebook might be responsible for
3. We looked at Facebook's novel attempt to change the responsibility landscape via the creation of an oversight board

One Final Request

Please fill out a brief survey about this module!

<https://forms.gle/VmGcpVgYiUzWggveA>

(Link will also be in the chat)