Did Trump incite the riots?
Only with the help of Big Tech
Campaigning group SumOfUs has reviewed dozens of social media accounts, pages, and groups, as well as far-right disinformation websites, and has found several key incidents that highlight how Trump used social media to rally his base in support of the events that took place on January 6, and how the power of Trump’s tweets and retweets - sometimes of obscure pro-Trump accounts - escalated to the use of violence.

From the evidence, it is clear that while Trump lit the match that set this violent far-right movement ablaze, it was tech companies that provided the platforms for organizing — and their policies, algorithms, and tools directly fueled it.

The briefing reveals how tech platforms responded, and how the measures they took came up massively short in preventing the escalation of violence. It also highlights how ad tech platforms like Google and Amazon are profiting off of disinformation websites — which are in turn amplified on Facebook and continue to circulate in far-right extremist networks.

In addition to holding Donald Trump to account for his role in the insurrection, SumOfUs urges lawmakers to launch an official investigation into the role tech companies played in aiding and abetting the insurrection, as well as the role Facebook’s algorithmic amplification played in boosting electoral disinformation.
Trump: the Internet’s firehose of disinformation

Responsibility for content casting skepticism about the election lies first and foremost with Donald Trump.

Early in the spring, roughly 200 days before the election, Trump tweeted that mail-in ballots are rampant with fraud. In response, Factcheck.org, the US Government’s Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, and many other experts began to strongly denounce all claims of fraud.

This tweet from April 14 was retweeted more than 51,000 times and received more than 200,000 likes. Beyond Twitter, a look at CrowdTangle shows that cross-platform sharing of this tweet alone had a potential reach of over 1.5 million accounts on Facebook, and about half a million accounts on Reddit.

1 April 14 tweet about election fraud. Original tweet link, also archived here
Just over a month later, on May 24, Trump tweeted\(^2\) that the Democrats were attempting to rig the election. This claim was fact-checked as false by multiple sources.

In response to this and other tweets at around the same time, Twitter began adding warning labels to Trump’s tweets about mail-in ballots. It was too little, too late to stop the firehose of disinformation — that May 24 tweet was retweeted at least 27,000 times, and received at least 87,000 likes.

Facebook’s response to Trump’s posts was even weaker. The platform allowed the content to circulate freely, sowing doubt in the reliability of the US election. It wasn’t until the end of June that Facebook finally decided to add warning labels on misleading information about the election and harmful content. Nevertheless, as of February 2021, SumOfUs discovered multiple posts\(^3\) that continue to remain up without a fact-check label.

Trump continued to peddle the blatantly false claim about the election being rigged by Democrats. By November 5, this piece of disinformation reached an online climax: a Facebook group with the title “Stop the Steal” began to go viral, growing to over 300,000 members within hours.

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\(^2\) May 24th tweet about Democrats rigging the election. [Original tweet link](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1264534970191077112), and also archived [here](https).

\(^3\) Facebook [posts](https://www.facebook.com) claiming [election fraud](https) without any fact-check labels remain up. Archived [here](https://www.facebook.com) and [here](https://www.facebook.com).
Facebook responded by removing the Facebook group and banning certain hashtags, but its response was ineffective. In the wake of the original takedown of Stop the Steal, several other groups grew up to replace it — some even reaching nearly 100,000 members.

Between January 1, 2020 and January 7, 2021 Trump used the word ‘rig’ or ‘rigged’ 103 times and the word ‘fraud’, 165 times to refer to the US Elections

Posts on Facebook about Trump’s tweets regarding election fraud remain up on Facebook without any fact-check label, as of February 3, 2021.
Facebook’s whack-a-mole approach to content moderation allowed these groups to continue to exist and grow — even using their group recommendations to help boost membership and reach.

While Facebook claims to have turned off group recommendations for political content, an investigation by TheMarkup shows that political group recommendations have continued to take place, and in fact, half of the groups recommended to Trump voters after the election were political. So, despite Facebook’s actions, it was the company’s algorithms that directly enabled these groups to flourish online — bringing together the very community that would later support and organize the insurrection.

On December 16, Ali Alexander, an outspoken Trump supporter with 219,000 followers on Twitter, tweeted about rallies to ‘stop the steal’. Three days later, Trump jumped on the bandwagon, and tweeted that it was “Statistically impossible to have lost the 2020 Election. Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!”

While Trump did not directly specify what would happen at the “wild” protest, he subsequently retweeted the organizers of the riot on multiple occasions.

4 Michael Coudrey quotes Ali Alexander’s tweet detailing upcoming protest locations. Original tweet link, and also archived here. Donald Trump’s tweet on December 19, 2020 with original tweet, and also archived here.

5 This contains a selection of archived tweets showing Trump’s retweets of the riot organizers. More tweets can be found here.
occasions, including Amy Kremer, a popular Trump supporter who posted a video about receiving “tactical training” two days before Trump tweeted about the “wild” protest. Kremer’s tweets remain up.⁶

Trump supporters — a mother/daughter duo — announcing their “tactical training” ahead of the riots. Trump has retweeted Amy Kremer 11 times, and tweeted about the “wild” protest 2 days after this was posted.

Trump retweets organizers of the riots

* Tweets claiming to receive tactical training ahead of the riot. Archived [here](#).
Soon after, websites promoting the riots began to pop up, citing Trump’s call to action as a motivation. SumOfUs found at least 12 riot-organizing websites specifically referencing Trump’s December 19 tweet.

A right-wing militia organization called ‘Oath Keepers’ also insinuated on their website that there could be violence by claiming to provide “multiple security teams” acting as “boots on the ground” to protect Trump supporters at the rally.

Trump made no moves to denounce, condemn or dissociate himself from these organizers. In fact, President Trump’s retweeting of organizers like Alexander Ali, Amy Kremer, and Jennifer Lynn Lawrence gave these organizers more legitimacy in the pro-Trump community, each receiving thousands of retweets from Trump followers and inevitably elevating them in the platforms’ algorithms.

Alexander Ali, a Trump supporter who has been retweeted by the former President, claiming “I am willing to give my life for this fight.”

Alexander Ali insinuating there will be violence if organizers are arrested.

Trump’s tweet inspired the name of this website

Kyle Jane Kremer and Jennifer Lawrence all thanked and celebrated Donald Trump for his retweets.
In response to the violence on January 6, Trump tweeted (and then deleted): “These are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide election victory is so unceremoniously & viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly & unfairly treated for so long. Go home with love & in peace. Remember this day forever!”

Before the tweet was deleted, it had been shared 27 times on Facebook by accounts with huge followings, driving up the Facebook reach of that content to 763,779 — while on Reddit, it had potential of reaching 2,575,566 people.

° Tweets claiming to receive tactical training ahead of the riot. Archived here.
Two days after the insurrection, and after 4 years of Donald Trump berated Americans with harmful lies — Twitter finally banned Trump, and Facebook soon followed. Trump truly is America's firehose of disinformation — the platforms saw a 73% decrease in election misinformation after the companies took action.

After the insurrection, SumOfUs docked a boat outside Jack Dorsey’s home in San Francisco urging the CEO to ban Trump. Photo credit: SumOfUs/Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call/Business Insider
Though Facebook took action by censoring some election disinformation - like removing the biggest Stop the Steal group, adding labels to some election-related disinformation, and eventually banning Trump - various websites echoing Trump’s false claims and pushing other harmful disinformation narratives and conspiracy theories remain in circulation on Facebook and Twitter.

A Facebook post by a popular Trump supporter with over 51,000 followers links to 12 election fraud articles on websites deemed untrustworthy by the nonpartisan independent news monitor NewsGuard. As of February 3, 2021, this post remains up without any fact-checking labels and has received roughly 21,000 engagements by Facebook users.

Facebook post linking to 12 disinformation articles about election fraud. Despite numerous fact-checking organizations debunking these claims, the post remains up without any fact-check labels.
On January 4, two days before the riots, a pro-Trump fake news website, Pnntly.com, published an article stating that the US military was asking Trump to invoke the Insurrection Act. The logic behind this piece of fake news was that carrying out an insurrection would enable Trump to take control of the White House with the military’s help. This idea began to circulate on various other disinformation sites and platforms. According to CrowdTangle data, these stories have a potential reach of at least 1.5 million people across platforms, and continue to circulate on Facebook without any fact-check labels.

Facebook not effectively removing election disinformation websites, or at least flagging posts for false claims, is not the only “takedown loophole”. Many Trump supporters sidestepped Facebook’s moderation of “Stop the Steal” by changing their group names to things like “Stop the Fraud” and “Stop the Rigged Election”. As mentioned previously, Facebook failed to remove these groups effectively, and despite claiming to have turned off group recommendations, research from The Markup shows that political group recommendations were still being shown to at least a quarter of Trump supporters.

Additionally, while posts using #StopTheSteal have been removed from the search feature, posts with the same type of “Stop the Steal” content are searchable through other similar trending hashtags like #DoNotCertify. SumOfUs found several #DoNotCertify posts which have remained visible and searchable on Facebook, even as some of them include the #StopTheSteal hashtag. Many of these posts call on “patriots” to be “prepared to die” for their country — insinuating that January 6 would be a violent insurrection.
Another example of a disinformation site, National Pulse\(^{14}\), circulating election disinformation on Facebook. CrowdTangle data shows these articles potentially reached a network of 1.8 million people across platforms.

A #StopTheSteal post\(^{15}\) remains searchable via #DoNotCertify as of February 3, 2021.

\(^{14}\) The National Pulse live link [here](#). Archived [here](#).

\(^{15}\) Post made with live link [here](#). Archived [here](#).
After a video showing the rioters surging on the Capitol, a Parler user with the username ‘Linwood’ responded with, “They let them in. Get the firing squads ready. Pence goes FIRST.” CrowdTangle data shows that Linwood’s Parler account at the time had a reach of 3,887,045 on Facebook alone.

More examples of posts using the #StoptheSteal hashtag, which can still be found via search for other hashtags like #DoNotCertify, highlighting how Facebook’s whack-a-mole approach to content moderation is failing.

After Facebook began to take action against Stop the Steal, Trump supporters started to flock to a different social media platform, Parler, and many began advocating for violence before and during the riot on January 6.
Parler user Linwood called for violence on the morning of January 6, and had a potential reach of nearly 4 million on Facebook
In addition to Facebook, “Ad Tech” platforms like Google and Amazon continue to fuel the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories by allowing websites to monetize their content through advertisements. The Global Disinformation Index has documented hundreds of examples of unsuspecting brands appearing next to content promoting covid conspiracies, election fraud, and riot disinformation.

Ads for brands like New Balance, Warby Parker, Bloomberg, and Reuters can be seen on websites peddling election disinformation.

SumOfUs and allies have raised this issue with Google on multiple occasions, and even proposed a short-term fix to allow advertisers to opt out of advertising on websites that have been flagged for disinformation by independent, non-partisan groups — but Google continues to allow both these websites and itself to profit off harmful content that resulted in a violent insurrection on the Capitol.

It is estimated that Google similarly earned $19 million from Covid disinformation, and nearly 200 sites spreading electoral disinformation make over $1 million in ad revenue each month. Google accounts for 71 percent of all advertising dollars placed on the 200 disinformation sites.

Both Google and Amazon have joined dozens of corporations in suspending donations to lawmakers who voted against President Biden’s certification, yet both ad tech platforms continue to fuel and profit off the very disinformation they claim to be fighting against.
Donald Trump launched and sustained a movement that resulted in a violent insurrection. He did this with a steady stream of disinformation that reached millions of people online, and amplified the calls of others doing the same.

However, this was facilitated and indeed made possible in its entirety by tech companies and their failure to properly moderate their platforms as well as their algorithmic amplification of extreme content to millions of people.

Facebook, one of the largest and most powerful companies in the world, is still not able to place fact-check labels on blatant election disinformaton receiving high engagement from users — even after four years of this kind of material being posted by Trump and his supporters. While it managed to remove a large “Stop the Steal” group, it failed to prevent related groups from emerging, and failed to effectively turn off political group recommendations despite publicly claiming to do so. And ad tech platforms like Google and Amazon are directly complicit by profiting from, and funding this harmful content.

Facebook, Twitter, Google, Amazon, and other platforms should be investigated and held to account for their role in propagating disinformation and calls to violence that culminated in the violent attack on the US Capitol on January 6. The failure to do so will ensure that the tech world learns nothing from its complicity and mistakes.