

Facebook is obstructing our work on disinformation. Other researchers could be next | The Guardian

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Last week, Facebook disabled our personal accounts, obstructing the research we lead at New York University to study the spread of disinformation on the company's platform. The move has already compromised our work – forcing us to suspend our investigations into Facebook's role in amplifying vaccine misinformation, sowing distrust in our elections and fomenting the violent riots at the US Capitol on 6 January.

But even more important than the effect on our work is what Facebook's hostility toward outside scrutiny means for the many other researchers and journalists trying to study Facebook's effects on society. We've already heard from other researchers planning similar projects who are now pulling back. If Facebook has its way, there will be no independent research of its platform.

Our dispute with Facebook centers on a research tool called Ad Observer. Ad Observer is a web browser extension that Facebook users can choose to install to share with us limited and anonymous information about the ads that Facebook shows them. The data they share with us includes the categories advertisers chose when targeting them. Examples might be “married women” or “interested in dating” or “lives in Florida”.

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