



## While Facebook works to create an oversight board, industry experts formed their own

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Some of Facebook's most vocal critics are tired of waiting for its independent oversight board — so they're starting their own.

A group of about 25 experts from academia, civil rights, politics and journalism announced Friday that they have formed a group to analyze and critique Facebook's content moderation decisions, policies and other platform issues in the run-up to the presidential election and beyond.

The group, which calls itself the Real Facebook Oversight Board, plans to hold its first meeting via Facebook Live on Oct. 1. It will be hosted by Recode founder Kara Swisher, a New York Times contributing opinion writer.

Facebook is still working on creating its own oversight board, first described in April 2018 by CEO Mark Zuckerberg as an independent "Supreme Court" for content moderation decisions. Facebook's board won't launch in time to make any decisions during the presidential race. Its panel of 20 experts is scheduled to start reviewing cases in October, but it will have up to 90 days to make decisions.

The new board started by the critics is a project developed by The Citizens, a U.K.-based advocacy group founded by Guardian and Observer journalist Carole Cadwalladr, whose [March 2018 investigation into Facebook's data sharing practices](#) made Cambridge Analytica a household name.

"This is an emergency response," Cadwalladr said. "We know there are going to be a series of incidents leading up to the election and beyond in which Facebook is crucial. This is a real-time response from an authoritative group of experts to counter the spin Facebook is putting out."

The launch comes as Facebook braces for a challenging few weeks policing its platform ahead of the November election [following months of criticism from civil rights groups](#). The company has already rolled out several changes to clamp down on voter misinformation, including posts that try to dissuade people from voting and, after the election, attempts by candidates to claim false victories. However, critics fear that Facebook will [amplify misinformation in a way that could suppress voters](#) and influence the election's outcome, and they have called for more [oversight of the company's content moderation decisions](#).

Cadwalladr sees the board as a "brain trust" that brings together experts to scrutinize Facebook's decisions in a public forum. Unlike the company's effort, however, none of the Real Facebook Oversight Board's decisions will be binding on Facebook.

The board is made up of about 25 experts, among them Shoshana Zuboff, author of "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power"; Maria Ressa, a co-founder of the Filipino independent news site Rappler; Rashad Robinson, president of the civil rights nonprofit Color of Change; Derrick Johnson, president of the NAACP; Reed Galen, a co-founder of the conservative anti-Trump super PAC The Lincoln Project; Ruha Benjamin, an associate professor of African American studies at Princeton University; Marietje Schaake, a Dutch politician who is international policy director at Stanford University's Cyber Policy Center; Toomas Hendrik Ilves, the former president of Estonia; Safiya Noble, an associate professor of information studies and African American studies at UCLA; Damian Collins, a member of the British Parliament; tech investor Roger McNamee, a frequent Facebook critic; and ex-CIA officer Yael Eisenstat, former head of election integrity operations for political ads at Facebook.

The newly formed board will scrutinize a broader range of issues in weekly public Zoom meetings. They include political advertising, networks of bot activity, the organization of "militias" through events pages, the dissemination of QAnon conspiracy theories through groups and the algorithmic amplification of disinformation.

Facebook, however, isn't welcoming the outside board.

When the company learned of it, a representative tracked down the people at the philanthropic investment firm Omidyar Network who had funded The Citizens to express the company's disappointment, said two people familiar with the situation who spoke on condition of anonymity to describe private matters.

Those people said Brent Harris, Facebook's director of governance and global affairs, contacted three people involved in funding the project to tell them that they were undermining the company's own effort and playing into the hands of conservative critics of its planned board, including some people in Facebook's Washington, D.C., policy unit, who want to see the effort fail.

Facebook spokesman Jeffrey Gelman confirmed that the calls took place, but he described them as an appeal to investors that "we are ultimately working toward the same goal."

Gelman said Harris denied having mentioned the policy unit in the calls.

Facebook's own Oversight Board has already faced criticism from right-wing media outlets, including Breitbart, which said it was run by "anti-Trump" progressives, and from the Free Speech Alliance, a coalition of more than 60 conservative organizations, which said when the board members were announced in May that it was "terrifying to imagine how a powerful, leftist group like this might view and control conservative speech." It was also targeted by the progressive advocacy group Accountable Tech, which in June ran a campaign questioning the board's scope and power

Facebook has stood by its oversight board, which was set up as a separate company: Oversight Board LLC.

"We ran a yearlong global consultation to set up the Oversight Board as a long-lasting institution that will provide binding, independent oversight over some of our hardest content decisions," Gelman said. "The members were selected for their deep experience in a diverse range of issues. This new effort is mostly longtime critics creating a new channel for existing criticisms."

The Citizens previously crowdfunded a similar project in the United Kingdom: an independent science advisory group as an alternative to the U.K. government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, which faced intense criticism for not being transparent about the advice it was giving to policymakers.

"It's good to have an alternative point of view, and we hope that the Real Facebook Oversight Board will strengthen the hand of Facebook's actual oversight board and push them to do more," said Martin Tisné, managing director of Luminare, the Omidyar Network spinoff that is funding The Citizens.

A member of Facebook's planned oversight board, Alan Rusbridger, former editor of The Guardian, agreed.

"The more the merrier," he said. "If they can do things that shine a light on things Facebook shouldn't be doing or wishes that it wasn't doing or could do better, and we are doing the same thing, then that can only be good."

Kate Klonick, an assistant professor at the St. John's University School of Law, who has published research on Facebook's planned oversight board, said describing The Citizens' project as the "Real Facebook Oversight Board" was misleading, as it wouldn't hear users' claims or appeals but would instead be a provocative project to raise awareness about the "lack of accountability the public has with Facebook and other major platforms."

She said that the board planned by the company was "really shaping up to be a very independent and robust initiative" and that it had selected people who have taken the responsibility "extremely seriously."

Members of the company's board include Jamal Greene, a professor at Columbia Law School; Evelyn Aswad, a law professor at the University of Oklahoma; Pamela Karlan, a Stanford Law School professor; Michael McConnell, a constitutional law professor at Stanford Law School; and John Samples, vice president of the Cato Institute.

"The fact that the board is taking such a thoughtful approach to heavy issues really is a good sign for users of platforms and the whole world," Klonick said. "There is a group of experts doing that now, so it's not going to be a bunch of people in Silicon Valley scrambling to figure out the right moves on policy."

Facebook's board will be restricted in scope at its launch, reviewing only content that Facebook has already taken down, rather than deliberating over controversial content the company decided to leave up — for example, President Donald Trump's "when the looting starts the shooting starts" post, which some readers interpreted as a call for violence against the American people.