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Evaluating Platform Abortion-Related Speech Policies: Were Platforms Prepared for the Post-Dobbs Environment?

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Content warning

This report contains mentions of: abortion and miscarriage, distorted and graphic depictions of the abortion process, sex trafficking, Holocaust denial, genocide, slavery, and murder.

About this publication

In this multi-platform study, ISD evaluates the actions taken by four major social media platforms to protect their users from abortion care misinformation and the promotion of dangerous products on the platforms; explores the scale and reach of abortion-related misinformation – particularly leading up to Roe v. Wade being overturned; and identifies the strategies and platform features that allow platforms to monetize abortion-related misinformation.

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Executive Summary

On June 24 2022, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled on *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* and held that the Constitution of the United States does not confer any right to abortion. This subsequently overturned both *Roe v. Wade* (1973) and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992), two prior rulings which federally protected a person's right to choose to have an abortion in the US.

The *Dobbs* case was argued on December 1 2021, and a draft of the Court's opinion was leaked to the public on the night of May 2 2022. Since then, abortion misinformation has been rife on social media platforms. Research conducted in the aftermath of the ruling identified a range of misinformation, such as an increase in content promoting dangerous methods to obtain an abortion, and the persistence of ads promoting an unsafe abortion pill "reversal" procedure.

Misinformation about abortion and reproductive rights in general is not a new phenomenon, nor is it circumscribed to the US. Though previous research has already identified abortion misinformation in a number of languages and across different geographies both online and offline, little has been done to curb its spread. In the context of the *Dobbs* decision, social media platforms are once again in the spotlight for their moderation of, and policies around, content that relates to abortion care. Some platforms, including Facebook and Instagram, quickly announced that they had begun removing and restricting content that provides information on how to obtain abortion care amidst a simultaneous increase in abortion misinformation.

This investigation, conducted in the period November 1 2021 to June 24 2022, had three aims:

1. To evaluate the actions taken by four major social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok) to protect their users from abortion care misinformation and the promotion of dangerous products on the platforms;

2. To explore the scale and reach of abortion-related misinformation – particularly leading up to *Roe v. Wade* being overturned;

3. To identify the strategies and platform features that allow platforms to monetize abortion-related misinformation.

Key Findings

- Analysis of the community guidelines of Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok revealed that none of these platforms have comprehensive policies or community guidelines surrounding abortion misinformation. YouTube and TikTok both attempt to address promotion of harmful products and abortion misinformation, but ISD analysts identified such content on both platforms.
- Misinformation about the abortion pill and/or procedure is widespread and unchecked on all four platforms, pushing debunked claims, hyperbolic and graphic imagery, and content meant to instill uncertainty and fear about the topic of abortion.
- YouTube announced on July 20 that it would remove "content that provides instructions for unsafe abortion methods" or "promotes false claims about abortion safety." Despite this, and the recent inclusion of content that questions the safety of chemical and surgical abortion methods amongst content that violates YouTube's Community Guidelines, researchers identified several monetized videos spreading false claims about abortions that had been uploaded before *Roe* was overturned.
- Researchers also found that information labels applied to YouTube videos about abortion did not appear when accessing the videos from a non-English speaking country.
- Ads containing or leading to misinformation about abortion gained almost 29 million impressions across Instagram and Facebook in the time frame investigated.
- ISD analysts found that Meta made approximately $624,400 from Facebook and Instagram ads containing or leading to misleading content about abortion or abortion misinformation from top performing self-defined "pro-life" pages between November 1 2021 and June 24 2022.
- Content promoting abortion pill "reversal," an unscientific procedure according to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, continues to be available on Meta-owned platforms. In total, ISD analysis identified 1,138 posts promoting the "reversal" which were posted by 559 unique accounts with a combined followership of 58 million. Analysts also identified several ads promoting the procedure.
- Content making undue comparisons of abortion to tragedies or war crimes such as the Holocaust, genocide, murder and slavery was popular across all four platforms, garnering thousands of likes, views and interactions.

Glossary

Disinformation

Disinformation is false, misleading or manipulated content presented as fact, that is intended to deceive or harm.

Misinformation

Misinformation is false, misleading or manipulated content presented as fact, regardless of an intent to deceive.

Monetization

Monetization describes the process of earning revenue from content. This can take a variety of forms, including advertising revenue, merchandising, donations, subscriptions, affiliate marketing, paid promotions and sponsorship, among others.

Abortion Care

Abortion care refers to the health care people receive from medical professionals during and after an abortion procedure.

Abortion-related Speech Policies

Although the past two years have provided social media platforms with a unique learning opportunity on how to deal with a health crisis, the current response from platforms to misinformation relating to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* is insufficient. After an analysis of four platform's policies and community guidelines, ISD analysts repeatedly found both content violating the few policies the platforms had, and content spreading misinformation about abortion.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, many social media platforms took important steps to curb the spread of misinformation about the virus and subsequently about COVID-19 vaccines. Recognizing the risk of real-world harm caused by this content, Meta, YouTube, and TikTok implemented new policies to keep their community safe and informed. However, despite this increase in attention paid to medical and health-related misinformation, not enough has been done to protect users from misinformed narratives on their reproductive rights.

An overview of platform policies (table below) reveals that the current measures implemented by the platforms examined in this report fail to adequately address abortion misinformation, and do not protect users from the promotion of dangerous products meant to either cause or prevent an abortion.

Although Facebook and TikTok have policies against general misinformation which would theoretically also include abortion misinformation, Instagram's community guidelines only mention misinformation in the context of COVID-19 and fail to address other forms of false or misleading content related to health.

YouTube appeared to be more reactive, adding a clause to its misinformation policy on July 20 which bans "content that contradicts local health authorities' or WHO guidance" on the safety of "chemical and surgical abortion," and states that such content violates YouTube's Community Guidelines. The platform launched an information panel that appears against abortion-related search results and videos. While this policy is more comprehensive than the policies of the other three platforms investigated, it makes no mention of pre-existing content that promotes misleading or harmful claims about abortion care. Furthermore, the informative labels applied do not address specific misinformation or harmful claims. In fact, the informational label only provides a standard definition of abortion with a link to the National Library of Medicine.

Abortion-related Monetization Policies

As neither abortion misinformation nor dangerous products that can be used to either cause or prevent an abortion are specifically mentioned in three of the four platforms' policies and community guidelines, it is unclear whether there are any measures currently in place to prevent this content from being monetized.

A 2021 report by the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) found that Facebook and Google had been selling ads to promote the so-called abortion pill "reversal" -- an unproven and unsafe medical procedure that claims to reverse the effect of abortion pills with progesterone. A year on from the publication of the CCDH report, none of the platforms analyzed have put in place a ban on content advertising this procedure, nor on other dangerous products and remedies meant to cause or prevent an abortion.

Among the platforms analyzed, TikTok and YouTube specifically mention abortion in their policies. However, TikTok's policy refers to a ban on branded content promoting abortion products and services and therefore is not comprehensive. TikTok permits dangerous procedures meant to prevent an abortion such as abortion pill "reversal" and TikTok's misinformation policies do not address abortion misinformation specifically. YouTube's policy only bans the promotion of "alternative abortion methods" and addresses some aspects of abortion misinformation (namely, discrediting the safety of abortion), but the advertising policy makes no mention of these alternative methods nor misinformation about abortion procedures being banned from ads.

Table 1: In the table below, platform policies are given a score between 0 and 3 based on the following:

0 The policy does not exist

1 The policy exists but does not refer to abortion specifically

2 The policy exists and refers to abortion specifically, but it is not enforced (i.e., content was found where this policy was breached)

3 Existent, referring to abortion specifically, and enforced (i.e., we could not find content that breached this policy)

Policies	Facebook	Instagram	YouTube	TikTok
Does the platform have a policy on abortion misinformation?	1	0	2	1
Does the platform have a policy on dangerous products that can be used to either cause or prevent an abortion (e.g. abortion pill "reversal," natural remedies to have an abortion)?	1	0	1	1
Does the platform have policies that ban monetization of abortion mis-information?	1	1	1	1
Does the platform have policies that ban the monetization of dangerous products that can be used to either cause or prevent an abortion?	1	1	1.5	1.5

Abortion Misinformation & Harmful Narratives

ISD researchers identified several prominent narratives that gained traction across the four platforms studied between November 1 2021 and June 24 2022. While these narratives are not new and have been the subject of previous research, they continue to proliferate on the platforms and push misinformation and harmful claims about abortion. These are as follows:

1. **Promotion of the abortion pill "reversal"**

   The abortion pill "reversal" is an unscientific "treatment" which claims to be able to reverse the effects of the abortion pill. However, according to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG), the "reversal" is "not based on science and [does] not meet clinical standards." The studies promoting this "reversal" do not meet scientific standards, are unethical, and cherry pick or use anecdotal claims as evidence.

2. **Misinformation about the abortion pill and/or abortion procedures**

   Misinformation about the abortion pill and/or abortion procedures includes graphic and hyperbolic language or imagery about the pill/procedure; false information about the effects and risks of the abortion pill and the abortion procedure and how it works; and false depictions of abortion procedures.

3. **Undue comparisons of abortion to tragedies and/or war crimes**

   Claims that abortion "dismembers," "murders," or "kills" an embryo or fetus were the most prevalent across platforms, particularly Facebook. However, analysts also observed content making comparisons of abortion to subjects such as genocide, slavery, and the Holocaust. None of the platforms have a policy on how to handle and confront this content – except for some policies about removing Holocaust denialism/distortion – making the comparisons easy to reshare without any sort of moderation.

Facebook

Using Beam, an award-winning disinformation detection and investigation capability built through a partnership between ISD and CASM Technology, ISD retrieved all public posts on Facebook featuring the three narratives mentioned above.

- Promotion of the abortion pill "reversal": In total ISD analysis identified **1,138 posts promoting the abortion pill "reversal" which were posted by 559 unique public groups and pages with a combined followership of 58 million.**
- Misinformation about the abortion pill and/or abortion procedures: ISD found 12,569 posts that contained abortion misinformation that portrayed the procedure as unsafe and dangerous, and made claims about the potential side effects of abortion incorrectly citing risks of cancer and infertility. These posts were published by **8,336 unique public groups and pages with a combined followership of 1.4 billion.**
- Comparisons of abortion to tragedies and/or war crimes: ISD found 36,932 public posts published by **15,423 public groups and pages with a combined followership of 2.3 billion** making these comparisons, making it the leading narrative on Facebook.

Posts containing misinformation about the abortion pill and/or procedure often used graphic imagery to create threatening and false depictions of what the procedure can look like. In no instance did analysts observe an informational or moderation label added to these types of posts.

In the post below from Live Action, a self-defined "pro-life" non-profit organization, the caption claims that the abortion pill is "deadly" and dangerous. The video in the post misrepresents dilation and evacuation abortions (D&E) by using graphics that make them seem more shocking than they actually are. This post received over 6.2k interactions, with 1.6k of those being shares across the platform.

Figure 1: A graphic video from Live Action falsely portraying D&E abortions.

Another post (to the right) from Students for Life of America, a self-defined "pro-life" advocacy organization, refers to medication abortion as "chemical abortion" (language that is deemed "biased" by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists) and claims it may cause "future infertility." This claim has been debunked multiple times by health professionals and reinforces negative and untrue beliefs about the abortion pill and procedure.

The highest proportion of posts in the dataset were harmful narratives about abortion which included equating abortion to murder; using graphic language to describe abortion (e.g. describing the procedure as "dismembering the baby"); and making comparisons of abortions to slavery, genocide, and the Holocaust. While Facebook has a policy against "denying or distorting information about the Holocaust," there are no policies addressing these comparisons and the sub-narratives they push.

Posts using graphic language to describe abortions and referring to abortion as murder were the most common among the harmful narratives identified. In total, 31,868 posts were part of this category and together they obtained 4.7 million interactions.

Figure 2: A post featuring posters with several misleading claims about medication abortion.

An analysis of the volume of posts over time that propagated this narrative reveals two major spikes of activity on April 10 and May 3. These dates correspond with a murder charge being dropped against a Texas woman for a "self-induced abortion," and the date on which the draft SCOTUS opinion was leaked to the public.

Meanwhile, 5,160 posts total made comparisons of abortion to genocide, slavery, and the Holocaust. While these posts were less common than posts using graphic language to describe abortions or equating abortion to murder, they peaked in engagement on April 11, when a popular YouTube channel released a documentary on abortion and compared it to the Holocaust, and on May 4, the day following most coverage of the leak (*Politico* first broke the story on the night of May 2).

Figure 3: The graph below shows the volume over time of posts comparing abortion and murder, and posts containing graphic language to describe abortion procedures.

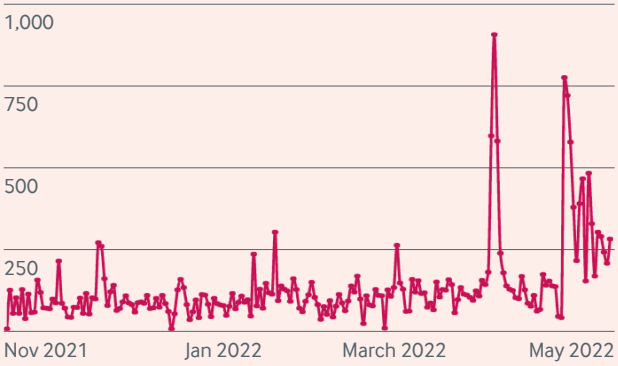


Figure 4: The graph below shows the volume of posts drawing comparisons between the Holocaust, genocide, slavery, and abortion in the United States from November 2021 to June 2022.

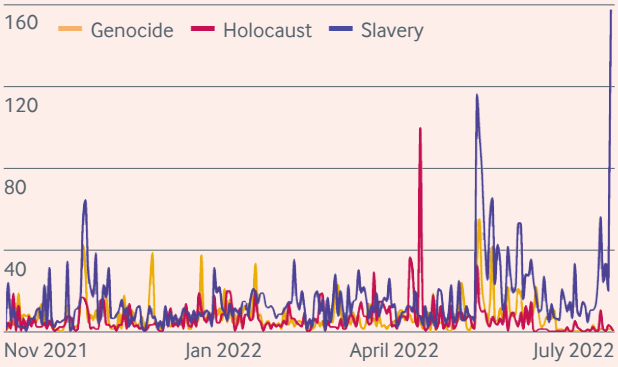


Figure 5: The figure below shows one of the top posts drawing comparisons between slavery and abortion.

ISD identified 3,628 posts comparing abortion with slavery, which received a total of 386.6k interactions in the designated time period. Posts claimed that the act of not calling an embryo or fetus a 'real person' is the same as the dehumanization of enslaved people during the Atlantic slave trade. Many posts, including the one in Figure 5, used memes or quotes to draw these comparisons. The peaks of these posts were on December 11 and on May 3, when the draft opinion was leaked to the public.

Comparisons of abortion to genocide were also popular on the platform in the designated time period, with public figures and political representatives such as Marjorie Taylor-Greene, Kaitlyn Bennett and Franklin Graham calling abortion a "genocide." 1,798 posts echoing similar sentiments received a total of 178k interactions. The peak of these posts was on May 4 2022 and on November 30 2021 – the day before *Dobbs* was argued before the Supreme Court.

A substantial number of posts also compared abortion to the Holocaust. 1,552 posts received a total of over 133k interactions on Facebook from November 1 2021 to June 25 2022. The top three posts received 24k interactions, with each post claiming abortion is the same "atrocity" as the Holocaust.

Content that denies or distorts information about the Holocaust is considered a severe form of hate speech by Facebook, but the platform fails to clarify what content "distorting information" looks like. This enables users to continue to make comparisons of abortions to war crimes.

Figure 6: A post from Kaitlyn Bennett, an American gun rights activist, with over 16K reactions, draws comparisons between genocide and abortion.

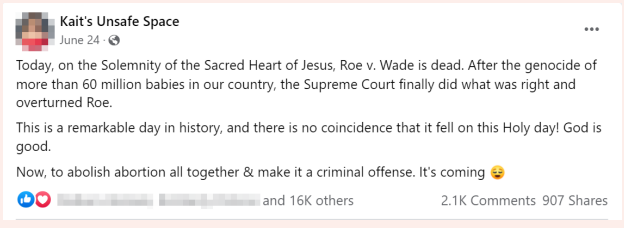
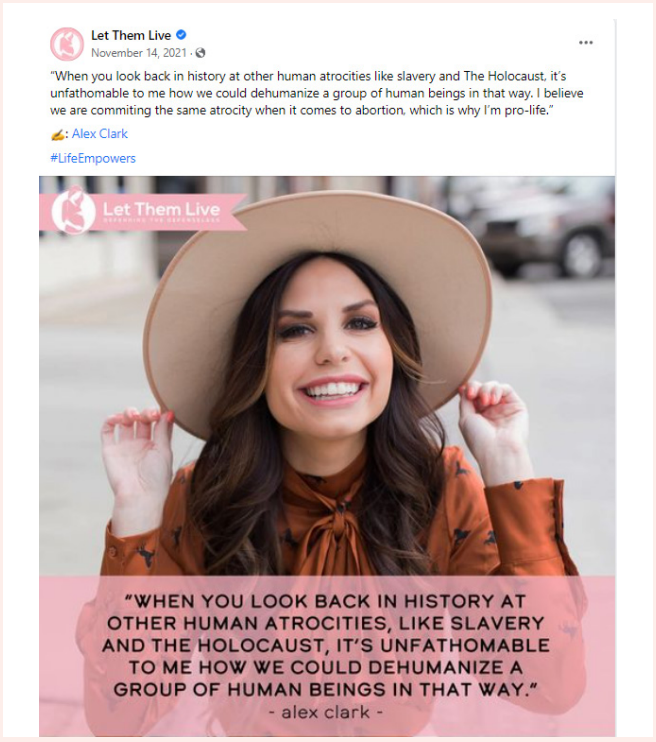
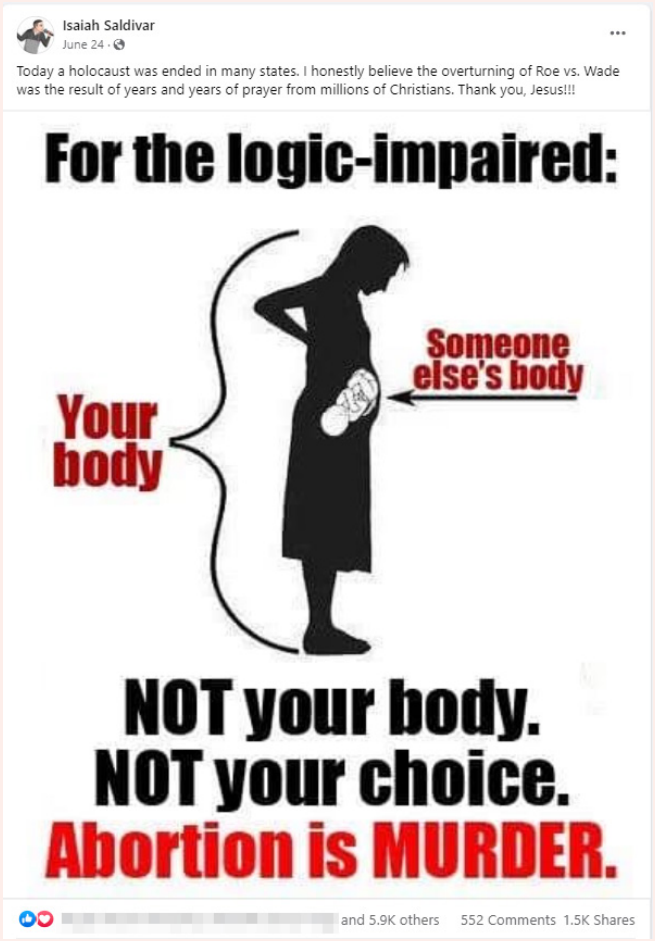


Figure 7: The posts below draw comparisons between the Holocaust and abortion and have been shared widely by users across the platform.





Instagram

Using Beam, ISD analysts retrieved all the public posts on Instagram including the same narratives listed in the previous section:

- Promotion of the abortion pill "reversal": ISD identified 52 public posts promoting the abortion pill "reversal"; these posts were published by 27 unique accounts with a total followership of 1.3 million.
- Misinformation about the abortion pill and/or procedures: 2,115 public posts included harmful narratives about abortion. Comparisons between abortion and murder, and/or use of graphic language, were found in 1,731 posts.
- Comparisons of abortion to tragedies and/or war crimes: 278 posts compared slavery and abortion, 105 compared genocide and abortion, and 57 compared abortion and the Holocaust.

Similar to the results from the Facebook analysis, the biggest spike of posts containing harmful narratives about abortion care occurred on May 4, the day following most coverage of the SCOTUS leak. The second biggest spike in posts was on June 24, when *Roe v. Wade* was overturned.

Instagram's community guidelines are less comprehensive than Facebook's. Whilst they link to Facebook's community standards when mentioning the removal of hate speech, Instagram does not have a separate page or more comprehensive blog post for Instagram's users, who are typically younger than Facebook's users. Analysts did identify some labeled Instagram content posted after June 24, but the labelling was sporadic and often inaccurate, with a post about the HPV vaccine being labeled with a COVID-19 vaccine information label.

ISD analysts observed several posts with over 2k likes that, similar to posts on Facebook, claim abortion "kill[s] children" and make comparisons of abortion to tragedies and/or war crimes. These posts came from verified political figures such as Donald Trump Jr. or "pro-life" pages such as Let Them Live.

Misinformation about abortion and content misrepresenting abortion risks was also widespread on

Figure 8: Volume over time of posts containing harmful narratives about abortion on Instagram.

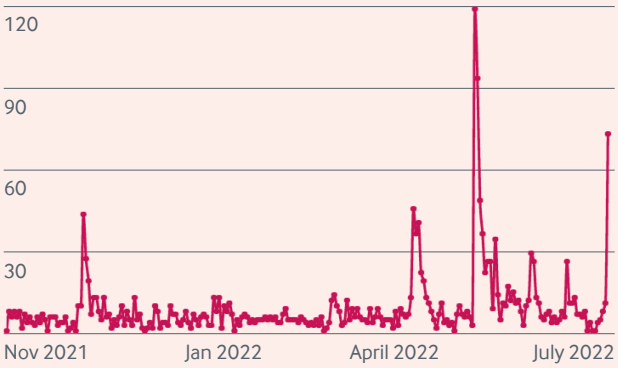


Figure 9: A post from Let Them Live equating the Atlantic slave trade and the Holocaust to abortion.

Figure 10: An Instagram post making false claims about Planned Parenthood and equating the Ku Klux Klan's crimes to abortion.

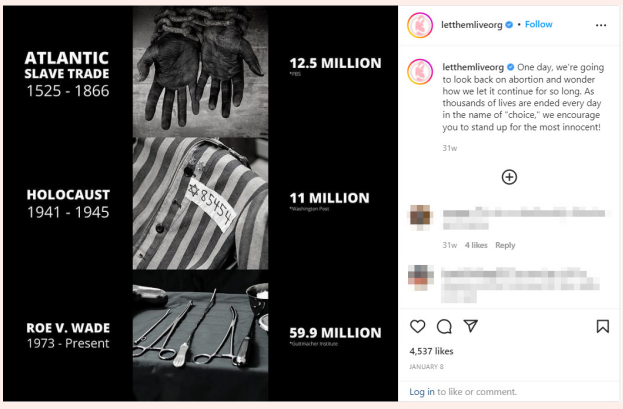


Figure 12: A post by Donald Trump Jr, claiming abortion kills children, received 149k interactions.

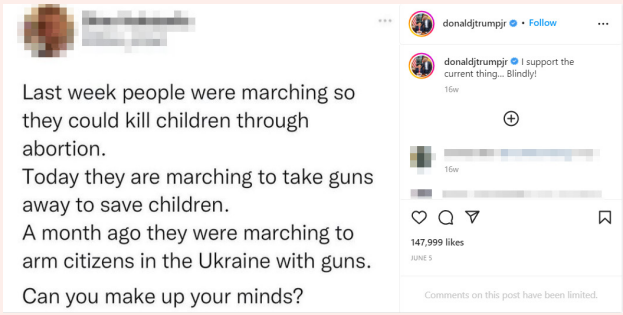


Figure 13: A post by Live Action claims that Planned Parenthood pushes "promiscuity and contraception"

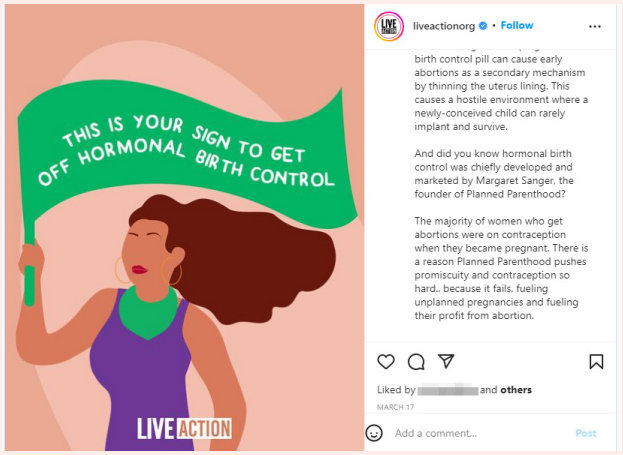


Figure 14: A post which received 883 interactions misrepresents abortion risks.

Instagram. The most popular accounts spreading this content were Live Action (with over 500k followers), Lila Rose[1] (with over 190k followers), and Students for Life of America (with over 160k followers). Among the content that received most engagement from these accounts, a post by Live Action includes claims that Planned Parenthood "pushes promiscuity and contraception... because it fails, fueling unplanned pregnancies and fueling their profit from abortion." The post received 15k interactions.

Other popular posts published by Students for Life of America incorrectly state that "having 1 abortion increases your risk for breast cancer by 44%"; call doctors who perform abortions "dangerous killers in our communities"; and misrepresent risks connected to hormonal birth controls, abortion pills, and the abortion procedure.[2]

YouTube

ISD analysts manually identified a sample of 81 YouTube channels that contain abortion misinformation, misleading content, or that promote unsafe procedures and that remain accessible after the announcement of YouTube's new policy on content related to abortion. The main narratives observed throughout the sample were the promotion of the abortion pill "reversal" and framing the abortion pill as unsafe. Analysts also identified comparisons of abortion to tragedies and war crimes. Qualitative analysis of the sample of accounts is summarized below.

Abortion pill "reversal" and misinformation about the abortion pill and procedure

Videos promoting abortion pill "reversal" remain easily accessible on YouTube; the most viewed video result for the search term "abortion pill reversal" is an EWTN (Eternal World Television Network, a global Catholic television network) video featuring a 2018 study advocating for the safety of the "reversal" and advertising an abortion "reversal" hotline and website under the headline "Regret taking the abortion pill?" The video was viewed 89.3k times between April 13 2018 and August 30 2022. However, the 2018 study referenced in the video was conducted without

[1]Lila Rose is the founder and president of Live Action.

[2]These posts are not screenshotted or linked in this report due to their false claims. More information about these claims can be found here.

a randomized control group, while another study conducted soon after in 2019 was canceled over safety concerns, after three women were hospitalized for "severe vaginal bleeding."

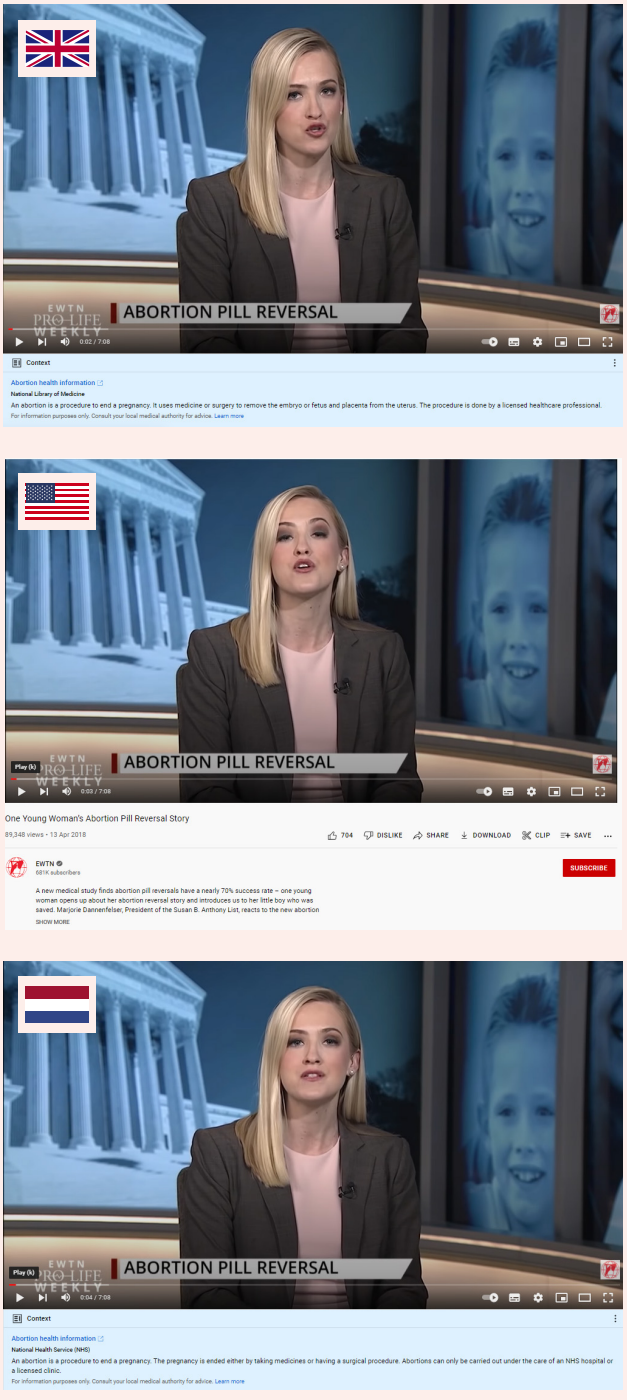
When accessed from the UK and the US, the video features an informational label providing a definition of an abortion (see Figure 15 above) and linking to the website of the NHS and Medline respectively. However, no label is shown when the video is accessed from the Netherlands, highlighting inconsistencies in the application of content labels across different countries.

In the UK and the US, the informational label included reads: "An abortion is a procedure to end a pregnancy. It uses medicine or surgery to remove the embryo or fetus and placenta from the uterus. The procedure is done by a licensed healthcare professional." The label defines abortion, making no reference to the abortion "reversal" pill or the lack of scientific evidence in the study referenced. This definition alone is unlikely to aid an individual seeking to reverse an abortion or considering using abortion pill "reversal" methods.

The fifth most viewed video under the search term "abortion pill reversal" is by Focus on the Family, a 501(c)(3) "global Christian ministry" headquartered in Colorado. The video is titled "The Truth About the Abortion Pill." It refers to medication abortion as "chemical" abortion -- a term often used by "pro-life" activists to focus on the chemical nature of the pill rather than its safe and medical attributes -- and makes insufficiently evidenced claims that "a lot of people have regrets, and they regret taking the abortion pill." The video states "don't take the pill" and promotes the abortion pill "reversal" network. As of October 5 2022, the video had amassed over 52k views since it was uploaded on June 5 2021.

Another video by Focus on the Family promoting abortion "reversal" received over 1.3m views since it was posted on June 21 2022. It also states that undertaking a medication abortion is "the wrong decision." The same label defining abortion is provided with both videos, with no mention of the safety of medication abortion or the harms of abortion "reversal" claims. A search for "abortion pill" also returned more than 25 videos promoting the abortion pill "reversal" and framing abortion as a decision that is widely regretted.

Figure 15: A video promoting the abortion pill "reversal" includes an informational label below the video which provides a definition of an abortion. The three screenshots above are taken when the video is accessed from the UK (top screenshot), the US (middle) and the Netherlands (bottom). Notably, no informational label appears when accessing the video from the Netherlands.



Focus on the Family's videos include ads, indicating that profit is being made from misleading and harmful claims about abortion. The verified channel has 308k subscribers. At least 16 videos across our sample of 81 YouTube channels were running ads; these channels represent a combined subscriber count of over 9.59m as of October 5 2022.

Comparisons of abortion to tragedies and/or war crimes

Within our sample of accounts identified through keyword searches, analysts observed numerous videos comparing abortion to the Holocaust, genocide, and slavery. Many of these posts remain accessible, and informational labels are not applied consistently across them.

A widely criticized video posted on April 9 by the LaBrant family, YouTubers with 13.1 million subscribers, remains the 12th most viewed result under the search term "abortion." The video compares abortion to the Holocaust and was allegedly made in partnership with the "pro-life" organization Live Action, so far amassing over 4.5 million views. While YouTube has added the same informational label as the one from the EWTN video above, the platform -- which promised in 2019 to remove content denying the Holocaust took place -- does not direct users to credible information about the Holocaust.

The third most viewed search result under "abortion" is a YouTube Short posted by Ben Shapiro, a right-wing pundit and media figure, which compares abortion to slavery, deeming it a "moral sin." The Short received 16 million views in the ten months since it was posted. Other top-viewed videos returned by keyword searches (full keyword list included in the appendix) feature claims including: abortion is "Black genocide" and "[Kills] More Blacks Than the Police" (150.5k views); Rep. Madison Cawthorn calling abortion "genocide" on the House of Representatives floor (99.7k views); "Why the Most Dangerous Place for African Americans is the Womb," from EWTN (43.9k views); and Focus on the Family incorrectly calling abortion "the leading cause of death amongst Black people in the US" (15.5k views).[3]

[3]The CDC states that heart disease, cancer, and COVID-19 are the leading causes of death in the US Black population

Informational labels were not consistently applied to videos making comparisons between abortion and mass tragedies, despite their significant reach and potential to influence audiences through factually inaccurate and potentially harmful messages. When an informational label was applied, it only included a definition of abortion and links to external sources, none of which address comparisons of abortion to mass tragedies.

TikTok

Analysts observed several misleading or harmful narratives about abortion on TikTok surrounding the SCOTUS opinion leak. In partnership with ViralMoment, a premium TikTok intelligence tool, ISD analyzed a sample of 2,000 TikTok videos collated using key hashtag analysis (hashtag list available in the methodology section below) and compiled into a ViralMoment dashboard. A significant spike in discussion on TikTok was observed on May 4. Between November 1 2021 through May 2 2022, the number of videos posted that used one or more of these key hashtags averaged one to ten per day, however, 127 videos were uploaded on May 4 alone.

During this May 4 spike in conversation in the dataset, #roevwadehasgottogo garnered the most engagement and it was mentioned 7k times within the sample of TikTok videos. Hashtags #overturnroevwade, #antiabortion, and #abortionismurder were also frequently observed in this conversation; these were mentioned 4k, 3k, and 2k times respectively. Three hashtags in our analysis comparatively underperformed: #abortionkills, #banabortion, and #endabortion were mentioned only 238, 247, and 434 times respectively.

A smaller spike in mentions of our key hashtags was observed on June 24, the day that the Supreme Court decision on *Roe v. Wade* was released, with 91 mentions. Neither spike was sustained for long, with mentions dropping back into the range of 20-30 per day by July 1.

Two accounts drove the May 4 conversation in the dashboard: @equalrightsinstitute (15.1k followers) and a conservative Christian podcaster with 12.3k followers. Equal Rights Institute, a "pro-life" advocacy group, equates efforts to regulate the purchase of an AR15 to efforts to ban abortion, and claims that abortion restrictions benefit women (using #prolifeisprowomen). The second account highlighted as driving May 4

conversation in the dashboard uses Bible passages to bolster claims against abortions. A July post by the account states "abortion is modern day child sacrifice. Prove me wrong," and uses Bible verses to justify this claim. Their videos typically receive tens of thousands of views.

One user with 14.7k followers created the most videos in the dataset and used #prolifeprowoman, promoted claims of abortion regret, framed pro-choice men as "blatant misogynists," and equated euthanizing a child over one year old to abortion. They also claimed that pro-choice narratives are ableist since they prioritize the rights of the "fully functional" pregnant person over the "less developed" fetus. Their videos regularly receive thousands of views.

Analysts observed intentionally misspelled words in posts featuring text overlaying videos, likely intended to avoid content moderation efforts. "Segg trafficking" was used in place of 'sex trafficking', while "k:ll babies" and "mvrd3r" were used in a post equating abortion to killing children. The tactic of intentionally obscuring certain words is an established practice used by many online communities that are cognizant of content moderation techniques.

Outside of this 2,000-video sample dataset, analysts also identified users and videos spreading misinformation about the abortion pill (medication abortion) and/or abortion procedures. For example, an influencer with 112k followers posted a video with a screenshot of guns rights activist and Representative Lauren Boebert's tweet, claiming "the Left thinks misgendering someone is a more heinous crime than dismembering and murdering a baby" (16.2k likes, 92k views). The use of the words "dismembering" and "murdering" is unscientific and proliferates fear and harmful information about abortions. Another video posted on May 4 by a user with over 18k followers claims it is a "sin" to not call out the "genocide" of abortion, and makes comparisons of abortion to slavery in the United States.

Live Action, with a verified TikTok profile and 523.4k followers, also promotes harmful narratives through its videos and profile. Live Action's TikTok bio features a Linktree with links to the "abortion pill reversal network." Their Linktree also includes a YouTube video

Figure 16: The figure below shows the volume over time of videos posted on TikTok with the hashtags #roevwadehasgottogo, #overturnroevwade, #antiabortion, #abortionkills, #banabortion, #endabortion, and #prolife from November 1 2021 to July 1 2022.

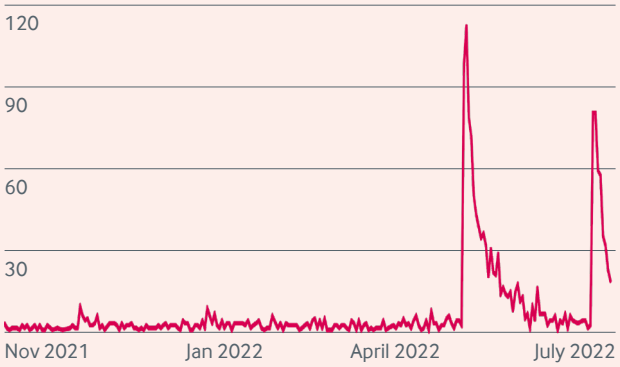
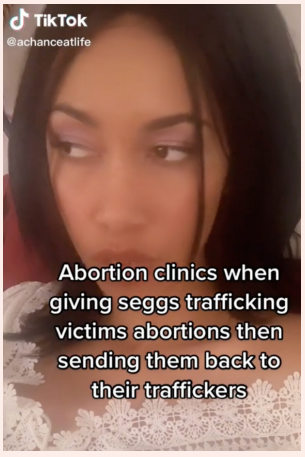


Figure 17: Left, a screenshot of a TikTok from @achanceatlife intentionally misspelling the word "sex." Right, a screenshot from a user intentionally misspelling the word "murder" and "killing"



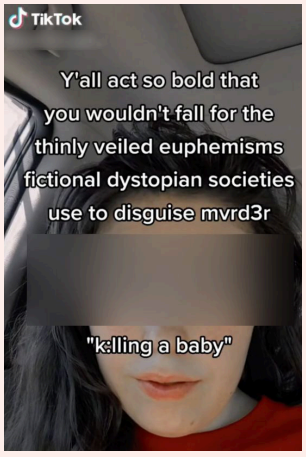
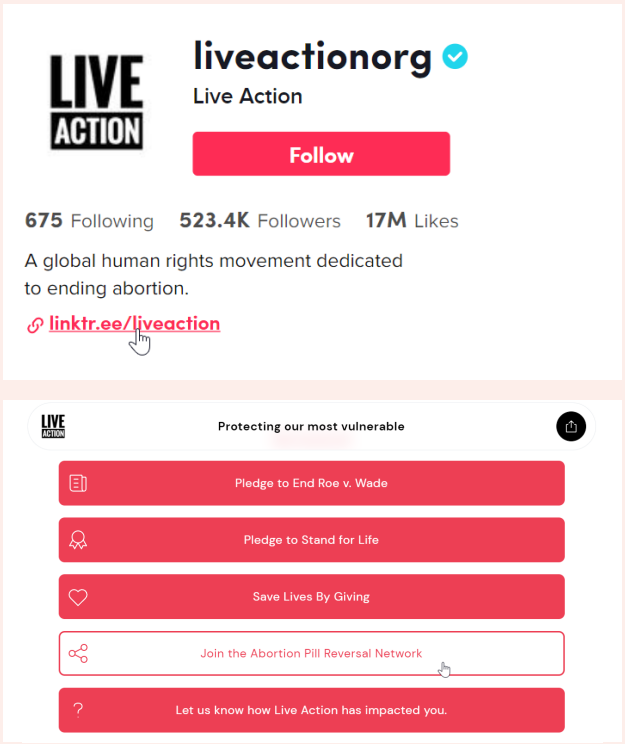


Figure 18: Screenshots of Live Action's TikTok account, which links to websites like the "abortion pill reversal network" and abortionpillkills.com



which promotes unfounded claims that medication abortion is unsafe, linking to "abortionpillkills.com" in the video description. Links to "pro-life" merchandise and books are also included in Live Action's Linktree, including shirts and books sold directly by the organization. According to the organization's Instagram, it was "completely" banned from advertising on TikTok on August 4 2022.

Monetization of Abortion Misinformation

Facebook & Instagram

As a result of Facebook and Instagram's lack of policy surrounding abortion-related content, ISD was able to surface thousands of ads running on these platforms that contained or led to misinformation about abortion.

Using CrowdTangle, a public insight tool owned by Meta, ISD analysts identified the three top performing "pro-life" pages on Facebook and Instagram – that is, pages that had the most growth and interaction rate from November 1 2021 to June 24 2022. Analysts found that across 3,785 ads from these three pages – Live Action, Students for Life of America, and Lila Rose – 2,998 contained or led to misleading content or abortion-related misinformation.

In Live Action's ads, researchers found that 81% either contained or led to misleading content or abortion-related misinformation, and the organization spent approximately $793k on all advertisements between November 1 2021 and June 24 2022. Students for Life of America and Lila Rose spent $66.5k and $84.7k respectively. The combined followership of these pages stands at 4.6 million Facebook users and 878k Instagram users, but the reach of their ads was substantially higher.

Figure 19: The graph below shows the total ad count from three "pro-life" pages containing misinformation from November 1 2021 to June 24 2022.

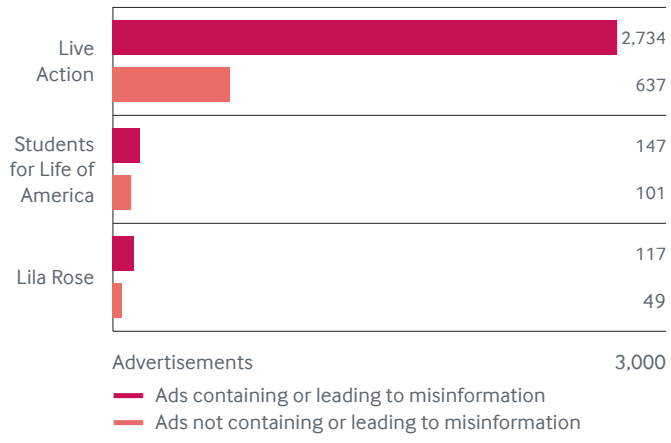


Figure 20: The figure below shows the money spent on Facebook and Instagram ads by three prominent "pro-life" pages and the volume of ads containing misinformation.

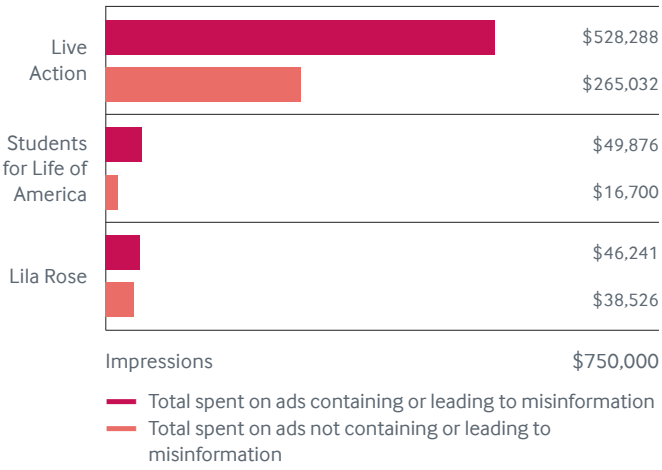
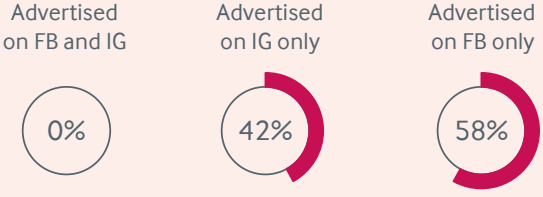


Figure 21: A breakdown of what platforms top performing "pro-life" pages advertised on.

Live action ads containing or leading to misinformation, by platform

Students for Life of America ads containing or leading to misinformation, by platform

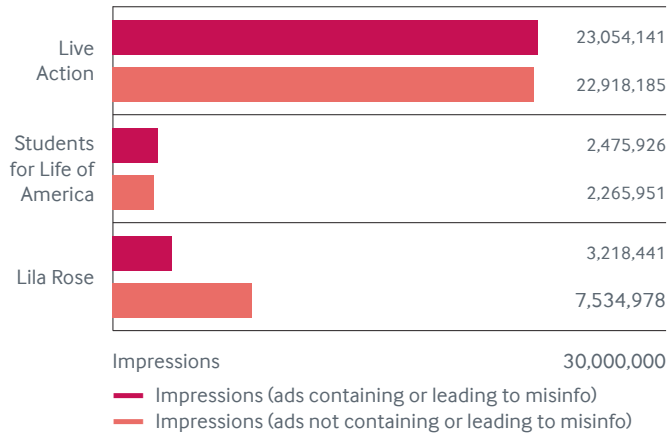
Lila Rose ads containing or leading to misinformation, by platform



When creating ads targeting audiences on Meta platforms, pages also have the option to select the platform on which to roll out their ad campaign. Further analysis of Facebook Ad Library data found that the three pages had different campaign strategies. For example, Students for Life of America, which targets high school and college students, rolled out 92% of ad campaigns on *both* Facebook and Instagram, and 8% on Instagram *only* – but none of their ad campaigns were rolled out on Facebook only. However, Live Action, with over 3 million followers on their Facebook page – making them the most followed "pro-life" page on Facebook – rolled out 57% of their ad campaigns on Facebook only.

The share of impressions between ads containing or leading to misinformation and not containing or leading to misinformation were more balanced for Live Action and Students for Life of America, with an almost 50/50 split. While Lila Rose spent more on ads containing or leading to misinformation, they were not as successful: the ads not containing or leading to misinformation had higher impressions. In total, ads containing or leading to misinformation had almost 29 million impressions across Facebook and Instagram.

Figure 22: The figure below shows the total number of impressions on ads run by three prominent "pro-life" pages on Facebook and Instagram from November 1 2021 to June 24 2022.



Case Studies

Researchers identified key examples of Facebook's inconsistent ad moderation and the tactics employed by pages to evade fact-checking and removal of their content. For example, on August 11 2021, Facebook took down an ad from Live Action because it violated Meta's advertising policies. However, on December 14 2021, Live Action launched 11 ads with the exact same text and link, but covering the original ad image with a "sensitive content" warning, imitating those imposed by the platform. Live Action spent between $15k - $20k on these 11 ads, and earned between 450k - 500k impressions.

In September 2021, the Center for Countering Digital Hate found that Meta had received up to $140,667 from advertisements on abortion pill "reversal" since January 2020. ISD researchers continued to find ads promoting this "treatment" on Facebook, including ads linking directly to "the abortion pill reversal network." A series of ads promoting Students for Life of America's "National Pro-Life Summit" linked to their sponsorship page, which again featured the "reversal" network, although the page itself does not run any ads.

Additionally, numerous ads from Live Action and Students for Life frame abortion as unsafe, using hyperbolic language to exaggerate or mislead users on what happens during the procedure. The language in these ads strays from medical terminology, instead using words like "kill," "starve," "murder," etc. According to data from the Facebook Ad Library, the ads featured below target users on Instagram who identify as women from 18-24 years old in states such as Texas and California. None of these ads have been removed or labeled with an informational panel directing users to legitimate sources of information by the platform.

Figure 23: An ad, already pixelated by Live Action, taken down by Facebook for violating Meta advertising policies (top). The same ad reposted on Facebook four months later with a self-made "sensitive content" warning (bottom).

Figure 24: Facebook ads blatantly (top) and subtly (bottom) promoting the abortion pill "reversal" network.

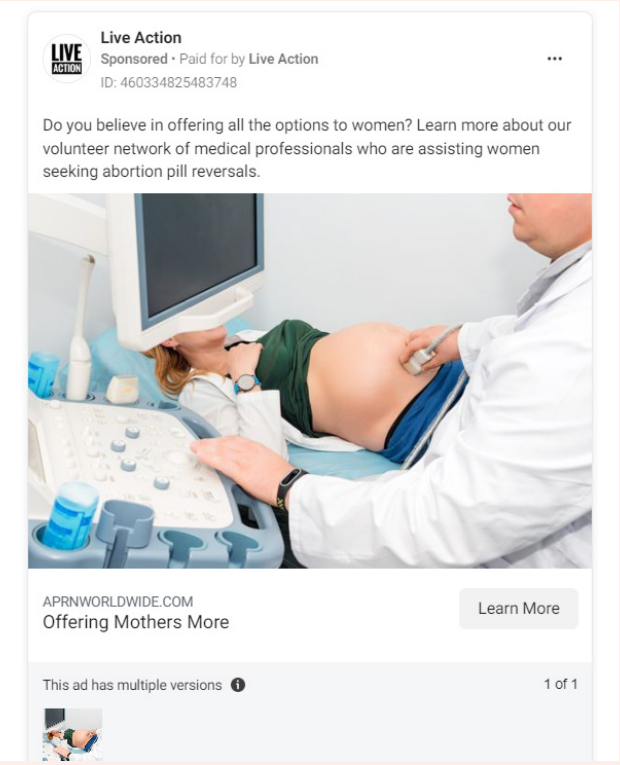


Figure 25: According to the Facebook Ad Library, these ads, which claim that safe abortion "doesn't exist" and abortion pills "are not safe," target 18- to 24-year-old users on Instagram.

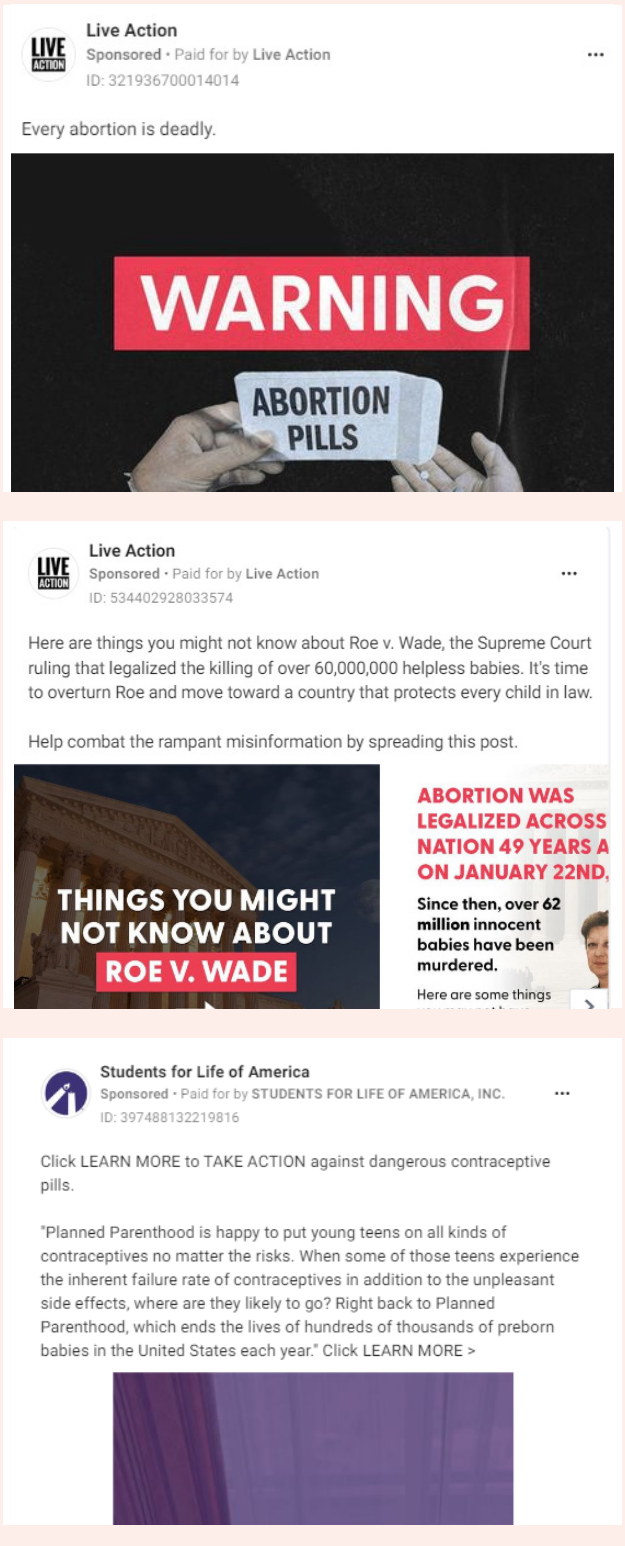
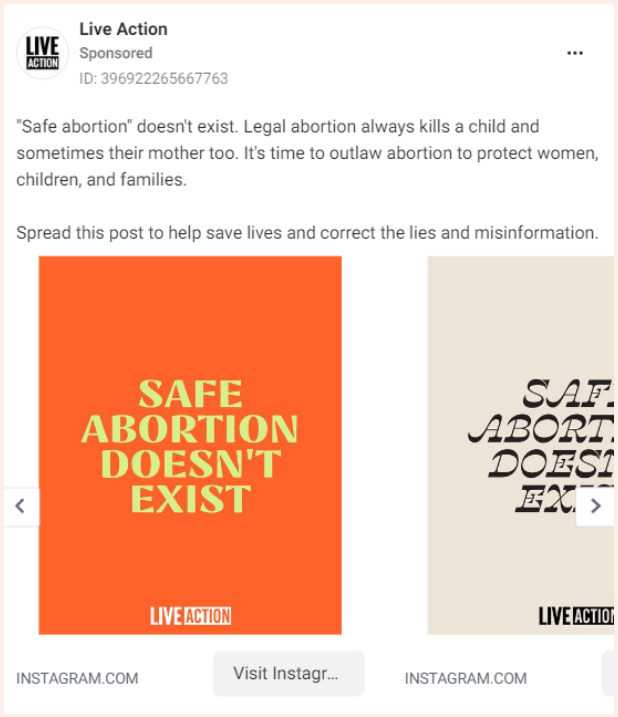


Figure 26: According to the Facebook Ad Library, this particular ad from Students for Life of America targeted women between 25 to 34 years old in Texas.

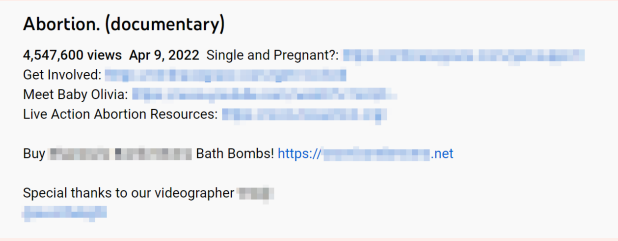


YouTube

ISD analyzed the three most recent videos posted by channels flagged as containing harmful or misleading content on abortion to see if they ran ads. Of the 81 channels identified, 16 were found to be running ads, and thus monetized. While analysts were unable to calculate the exact revenue brought in by ads on flagged channels' videos due to transparency limitations on YouTube, the total subscriber count of flagged channels that contained monetized content was 9.59m.

Tracking monetization on YouTube is further complicated by the inclusion of third-party links in post descriptions, as well as general transparency limitations on when and whether a channel has been demonetized. For example, the LaBrant Family "documentary" on abortion that makes comparisons of abortion to the Holocaust was allegedly demonetized shortly after it was posted. However, links promoting various products and organizations that assisted in the creation of the video remain accessible, indicating a degree of monetization continues by virtue of the video remaining accessible on YouTube.

Figure 27: The LaBrant Family Abortion "documentary" remains accessible and promotes links to merchandise and partner organizations, who may then profit from such promotion.



YouTube does not have a monetization policy specifically tailored to misleading or harmful content about abortion. However, the monetization of channels running videos with harmful or misleading content generally violates YouTube's Community Guidelines, specifically its misinformation policy (which includes content that frames medication and surgical abortion as unsafe) and its external links policies, which the platform requires monetized channels uphold.

TikTok

While harmful and misleading content on abortion was observed by analysts on TikTok, whether this content is monetized on TikTok is not as easily measured as it is on other platforms. The majority of TikTok influencers monetize their content by accessing the TikTok Creator Fund, partnering with brands, and holding monetized livestreams, but users can also monetize their content through the promotion of merchandise or services.

For example, TikTok account @achanceatlife (138.2k followers) ranked third in terms of share of conversations against abortions in the ViralMoment TikTok dataset and garnered over 4 million likes. The account advertises its "Pro-Life Clothing" brand merchandise, featuring t-shirts and sweaters priced as high as $45 printed with statements including "abortion is murder," "1/3 of our generation is missing," and "50% of Black babies are killed in the womb." This content was also shared on AChanceAtLife's Instagram (2.4k followers); a 2021 video post featuring a "50% of Black babies are killed in the womb" sweater garnered 276 views and remains accessible. The account's top performing TikTok videos have between 300K-600K views. The account also posts videos on abortion regret, claims questioning the safety of abortion, and claims that abortion clinics support sex trafficking.

Figure 28: Merchandise from @achanceatlife on TikTok, containing misleading claims about abortion.

Conclusion

This report provides an evaluation of the abortion-related speech policies by major online platforms. Each platform took a different approach – or no approach at all – to addressing abortion misinformation, and, as demonstrated by the scorecard at the beginning of the report, each platform has gaps in its policy. While comprehensive policies are important in establishing fact-based information ecosystems, regular evasion of policies by online actors also requires platforms to conduct constant moderation efforts to maintain truly comprehensive coverage.

When it comes to public and reproductive health, the stakes could not be higher. Significant strides were taken in limiting false and misleading content in relation to COVID-19 by multiple social media platforms over the course of 2020 and 2021. However, there are still significant failures in other areas of health content. The lack of policy consistency across platforms allows disinformation actors to pivot in their strategies to disseminate harmful and misleading content about abortion to huge audiences. Bad actors exploit gaps in policy and become more resilient in doing so, which is why social media companies have to close these gaps and agree on uniform ways to regulate their platforms. While it may be difficult to eliminate harmful content entirely, it can be pushed to the fringes, demonetized, and be removed from recommendations systems.

The findings presented in this report also emphasize how similar abortion misinformation and harmful narratives exist and spread across multiple platforms. For example, screenshots and recordings of the LaBrant family's YouTube video on abortion – which makes comparisons of abortion to the Holocaust and graphically depicts abortion procedures – can be found on TikTok, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram. Even though YouTube allegedly demonetized the video and the LaBrant account turned off the comments, by leaving the video up, it has reached a large audience through posts or videos both critiquing and praising the LaBrant family. Given that these platforms attract audiences of different ages, the lack of a coordinated response to content containing misinformation about abortion risks younger audiences on newer platforms becoming exposed to this content.

This report also highlights inconsistencies in transnational moderation of abortion content, despite significant strides taken in limiting false and misleading content in relation to COVID-19 by multiple social media platforms. While analysts found that an English-language EWTN video promoting the abortion pill "reversal" lacked an informational label when viewed from the Netherlands, it also did not include such a label when viewed from Ireland, an English-speaking country. Similarly, analysts also identified posts in Irish "pro-life" groups promoting the abortion pill "reversal," demonstrating that such content can easily become influential in other markets. Abortion misinformation is a transnational problem and must be approached holistically by platforms.

The cross-border spread of dis- and misinformation is not new, nor is it specific to the topic of reproductive rights. Previous ISD research during the 2022 French elections identified how disinformation about Dominion Voting machines in US online spaces seeped into French channels on Telegram, Facebook, and Twitter. It is possible that the lack of moderation in original posts from the US about voting machines directly impacted the French information ecosystem, and potentially also trust in voting systems. With the 2022 US midterms fast approaching, it is clear that social media platforms are lacking both thorough dis- and misinformation policies and effective methods through which they can detect and mitigate the cross-platform spread of such content.

Finally, our investigation has shown that both the accounts spreading false and misleading content in the wake of the overturn of *Roe v Wade*, and the platforms hosting this content, profit financially from the content. Regulators must push for more transparency when it comes to platforms profiting from the spread of misinformation, and stricter policies about what content can be monetized and how. In a time of uncertainty and confusion, platforms have the duty to protect and prevent the spread of abortion misinformation – especially when it can risk access to correct information and potentially put a user's health at risk.

Methodology

Facebook & Instagram Monetization

Using CrowdTangle, an analytics tool developed by Meta, ISD researchers identified the five top performing[4] self-defined "pro-life" pages on Facebook in the past months: Live Action, Lila Rose, LifeNews.com, Abby Johnson, and Students for Life of America. All of these pages except for LifeNews.com and Abby Johnson have been running ads on both Instagram and Facebook (though Abby Johnson ran one ad in 2021).

Using the Facebook Ad Library, researchers then sorted ads from these pages running from November 1 2021 (a month before the *Dobbs* case was argued before SCOTUS) and June 24 2022, coding each ad for whether it contained or led to misleading, outdated content about abortion procedures, or abortion-related misinformation. To ensure each ad was thoroughly checked, researchers clicked through the ads, scrolled through each website it may have led to, and fact-checked any claims made in the ad or on the website linking to it. Third-party fact-check sites (i.e. PolitiFact), official government health agencies, and news articles quoting reputable sources from the healthcare industry were used to fact-check claims made by the ads or by the content linked in the ads. In total, 3,785 ads were checked.

Given that the Facebook Ad Library gives high and low estimates of money spent on an ad and the impressions it received, the median was calculated for each total. The full range of numbers is included in the Appendix.

Example of Facebook Ad Library Methodology

In the ad below, researchers did not identify any visible misinformation. However, the ad urges users to "check out the videos" to "equip" them with responses to "pro-abortion arguments." Upon clicking on the 'Learn More' button, the user is led to a YouTube playlist featuring several videos with titles such as: "Abortion is NEVER medically necessary" or "Planned Parenthood Is Sexting Your Kids" – both claims are harmful and spread disinformation. Therefore, ISD researchers flagged the ad since it led users to misleading information.

Figure 29: Examples of harmful and misleading claims made by Students for Life America.

Facebook & Instagram narratives

Using Beam, an award-winning disinformation detection and investigation capability built through a partnership between ISD and CASM Technology, ISD researchers conducted three Boolean searches to collect all Facebook and Instagram public posts published between November 1 2021 and June 25 2022 that included the following content: 1. Promotion of the abortion pill "reversal," 2. Misinformation about the abortion procedure and the abortion pill and 3. Comparisons between abortion and genocide, slavery, the Holocaust, murder, and content that used graphic language to

[4] "Top performing" is a metric used by CrowdTangle that encompasses both interaction rate and growth in followers

describe the abortion procedure. The results were then manually analysed in order to remove irrelevant results and filtered for keywords that would yield a high number of posts that did not fall under the categories of interest.

It is important to note that not all of the posts retrieved from Beam compare abortion to the Holocaust, genocide, and slavery. A small number of posts use both words in a longer caption, or denounce actors using those comparisons. Additionally, researchers removed any searches mentioning Margaret Atwood when searching for comparisons between abortion and slavery, as the author made a statement claiming forced pregnancy was slavery which substantially skewed the Beam results. Beam does not collect posts from private profiles and groups, meaning the data does not completely reflect the conversations happening on the platform.

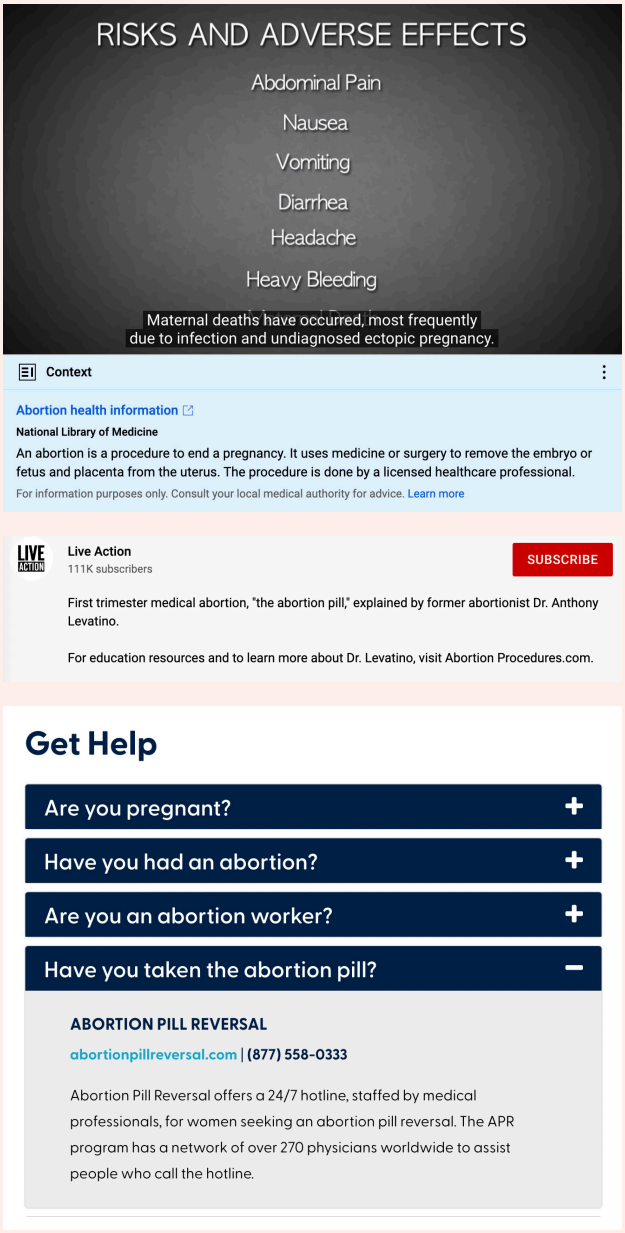
YouTube

ISD identified a sample of 81 YouTube channels that promote harmful or misleading claims about abortion or that promote the previously mentioned "abortion pill reversals." Analysts used a set of keywords (see full keywords list in the appendix), reviewed videos returned, and sorted videos by views to find the most-viewed results potentially containing harmful or misleading claims about abortion. Analysts then screened videos across these channels for false or misleading claims and noted whether their content was monetized. In order to establish whether a channel was monetized, analysts scanned the three most recent videos for each channel to identify whether they were running ads at the time of research. 16 out of the 81 YouTube channels sampled were found to be running ads.

Example of YouTube Methodology

An unfiltered search for the keyword "abortion pill" returned a set of mostly informational videos on medication abortion. Analysts then filtered results by view count to target videos that had reached the largest audiences. The sixth most viewed video returned was by Live Action, and is framed as an informational video describing the process of taking medication abortion, narrated by Dr. Anthony Levatino. However, the video uses misleading language such as "child" in reference to a fetus; highlights only the potentially negative consequences of medication abortion; and concludes with the narrator, Dr. Levatino, stating that "killing a baby at any stage of pregnancy, for any reason, is wrong." The video's description also links to a website which promotes "abortionpillreversal.com." ISD researchers flagged the video for containing harmful or misleading information on abortion due to its misleading portrayal of abortion and its promotion of the abortion pill "reversal."

Figure 30:
Example of the failures of YouTube's informational label.



Following YouTube's latest statements on monitoring for abortion-related content, an informational label does appear below the video, linking to National Library of Medicine resources on abortion. However, the label merely defines abortion and makes no effort to dispel the misleading and potentially harmful content of the video itself, or its written description, and the linked resources make no mention of the abortion pill "reversal."

TikTok

In partnership with ViralMoment, a premium TikTok intelligence tool, ISD researchers analyzed a sample of 2,000 TikTok videos compiled using key hashtag searches. The TikTok analysis used the hashtags: #roevwadehasgottogo, #overturnroevwade, #antiabortion, #abortionkills, #banabortion, and #prolife. The ViralMoment tool pulled the top liked videos from the aforementioned hashtags, regardless of date posted. The tool uses AI and computer vision to read data points including but not limited to:

- Hashtags
- Transcript
- Text on screen/text in video (e.g. a protest sign or an on-screen caption)
- Images and objects (e.g. a cat, or an airplane)
- Captions
- Engagement data (likes, comments, views, shares)
- Username and basic account info (number of followers, etc.)
- Additional video information (duration, date posted)

This data is then made searchable and reportable. No account is created and no algorithm bias is introduced.

Appendix

YouTube Keywords

- Abortion
- Chemical abortion
- Abortion pill
- Medication abortion
- Abortion reversal
- Abortion reversal pill

YouTube Keywords

- Abortion pill reversal
- Abortion is murder
- Abortion is genocide
- Abortion causes breast cancer
- The truth about abortion
- The truth about the abortion pill

Facebook Ad Library – Full numbers

	Live Action	Students for Life of America	Lila Rose
Ads containing or leading to misinformation	2,734	147	117
Ads not containing or leading to misinformation	637	101	49
Total ads	3,371	248	166

	Live Action	Students for Life of America	Lila Rose
Total $ spent high	$1,007,339	$84,051	$71,300
Total $ spent low	$579,300	$49,100	$98,233
$ spent HIGH on Ads containing or leading to misinformation	$690,076	$61,552	$54,682
$ spent LOW on Ads containing or leading to misinformation	$366,500	$38,200	$37,800
$ spent HIGH Ads not containing or leading to misinformation	$317,263	$22,499	$43,551
$ spent LOW on Ads containing or leading to misinformation	$212,800	$10,900	$33,500

	Live Action	Students for Life of America	Lila Rose
Impressions high on Ads containing or leading to misinformation	24,358,281	2,742,852	3,518,882
Impressions low on Ads containing or leading to misinformation	21,750,000	2,209,000	2,918,000
Impressions HIGH Ads not containing or leading to misinformation	24,880,369	2,483,901	8,108,955
Impressions size LOW on Ads not containing or leading to misinformation	20,956,000	2,048,000	6,961,000
Total audience size high	49,238,650	5,226,753	11,627,837
Total audience size low	42,706,000	4,257,000	9,879,000

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