

Facebook Removes News Outlets in Latest Orwellian Purge

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Over the past three years, Facebook has been removing accounts for participating in what they call “coordinated inauthentic behavior” (CIB). [According to Facebook’s head of cybersecurity](#) policy, the Orwellian term refers to when “groups of pages or people work together to mislead others about who they are or what they’re doing.” Facebook takes down accounts for CIB due to “deceptive behavior” not for sharing false information. [In the latest purge](#), Facebook removed accounts from two news outlets, SouthFront and News Front.

The two outlets have no affiliation; the only thing they share besides the word “Front” in their names is content that does not toe the Western mainstream media line. In its effort to remove CIB and limit “disinformation,” [Facebook partners with](#) the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensics Research Lab (DFRLab). The Atlantic Council is a Washington-based think-tank that receives funding from Western and Gulf State governments, defense contractors, and social media outlets. Some of its [top contributors](#) for the 2018 fiscal year include the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Embassy of the UAE to the US, the US State Department, Lockheed Martin, and Raytheon.

Facebook started releasing monthly [CIB reports in March](#) that detail the networks and accounts they take down. On May 5th, Facebook released its CIB report for [April 2020](#). The report says Facebook removed eight networks of accounts, pages, and groups engaging in CIB. *SouthFront* and *News Front* are included in the first network covered in the report. “We removed 46 Pages, 91 Facebook accounts, 2 Groups, and 1 Instagram account for violating our policy against foreign interference which is coordinated inauthentic behavior on behalf of a foreign entity,” the report reads.

Facebook claims they linked this activity to “individuals in Russia and Donbass, and two media organizations in Crimea – NewsFront and SouthFront.” In a [response to the report](#), *SouthFront* says the claim that they are based in Crimea is a “blatant lie” that they are willing to “defend in court.” *SouthFront* says the organization is made up of “an international team of independent authors and experts,” some of whom are from Russia and post-USSR states. *News Front*, on the other hand, [is based in Crimea](#), but the organization does not try to hide its pro-Russia bias.

[In a press release](#), the Atlantic Council’s DFRLab announced Facebook’s removal of the two organizations. The DFRLab refers to *News Front* and *SouthFront* as “two Crimea-based media organizations with ties to the FSB.” The FSB is a Russian security and intelligence agency, a successor to the Soviet Union’s KGB. In its [independent analysis](#) of the two outlets, the DFRLab offers little evidence to back up the claim of FSB ties. The analysis only uses a [2017 story](#) from the German outlet *Zeit*, where a former *News Front* staffer claims

the organization receives funding from the FSB. The DFRLab offers no evidence to link the FSB with *SouthFront*.

The DFRLab does not make a strong case for Facebook's removal of the news outlets. The press release says, "While the DFRLab could not corroborate Facebook's finding of CIB, it also found no evidence to contradict it."

But using Facebook's definition of CIB, the DFRLab's analysis of the two outlets does seem to contradict Facebook's findings. The pages and users analyzed do not seem to be misleading others or hiding who they are. "Most of the assets that DFRLab had access to did not hide their connection to *South Front* or *News Front*. Many of the pages wore their connections on their sleeves, naming themselves as different language versions of the websites," the analysis reads. *News Front* is an international news organization with [websites](#) in English, Russian, German, Spanish, French, and Georgian and had Facebook pages to reflect that.

The analysis finds what they call "suspicious links" between *News Front* and *ANNA News*, another pro-Russia news outlet. But those "suspicious links" are just two former *ANNA News* anchors who now work for *News Front*. Facebook removed pages dedicated to the two anchors.

The analysis goes on to address the only connection between *SouthFront* and *News Front*, and probably, the real reason why they were removed from Facebook. Both outlets share stories that go against the Western narrative. The example the analysis seems to take the greatest issue with is [stories that take into account](#) Russia's denial in the role in the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 in eastern Ukraine in 2014. The analysis also points out that *News Front* accounts shared news stories from Russian-state funded media outlets like RT and Sputnik.

Ultimately, the DFRLab does not provide any information linking *SouthFront* or *News Front*'s social media activity to the Russian government and does not give examples of the accounts intentionally hiding their identity. The best they can do is mention some connections to the Russian government the founders of *News Front* have, but it is [nothing they are trying to hide](#).

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused an increase in internet censorship. YouTube's [CEO recently said](#) they would remove any videos that go against the World Health Organization's guidelines for the virus. On top of the Facebook ban, *SouthFront*'s YouTube channel has also been removed without any explanation. Although most of *SouthFront*'s content is military analysis, some stories they published on Covid-19 were flagged as "disinformation" by a [ministry of the European Union](#). *SouthFront* [published a detailed response](#) to those accusations, pointing out that only three of the 3,000 stories they published this year were found to be "disinformation" by what they call "pro-NATO propagandists."

SouthFront posted a video [asking their readers for support](#) in the wake of the social media bans. For independent news outlets, reach on social media is vital for their survival. *SouthFront*'s Facebook page had around 100,000 subscribers, and the YouTube channel had about 170,000. *SouthFront* publishes multiple news stories each day, mostly following updates on wars in the Middle East. One of the website's best resources is its [frequently updated maps](#).

Other networks removed by Facebook in April include accounts in Iran, Georgia, Mauritania, the US, and Myanmar. Facebook claims they took down a network of accounts connected to Iran's state broadcasting company, although they provide no evidence to support the claim. Content credited to this network includes a post promoting former presidential candidate and Texas Congressman Ron Paul from 2012. Another example from 2014 is just a news story about Israeli forces preventing Palestinians from praying in al-Aqsa Mosque.

Facebook and its Western government-backed partners will continue to remove accounts each month for engaging in CIB. It will be hard to know if the connections they make to the accounts are genuine. But if the sloppy work they did on *SouthFront* and *News Front* is any indication, claims from Facebook and the Atlantic Council's DFRLab should always be met with skepticism.

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