

The role of the Oversight Board in reviewing Meta's data access policies

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Independent research on Meta's products is **essential to reliable public oversight of the company**¹. For example, last year, researchers at NYU found that Facebook's public archive of posts from the January 6th insurrection was missing large amounts of data². In 2018, an investigation by *New York Times* journalists intercepted backend computer transmissions from the Facebook app and determined that it was secretly sharing data on users and their friends with device manufacturers³. A group of academics assessed the impact of Instagram's moderation of pro-eating disorder hashtags and found that their interventions to reduce these hashtags were in fact nudging users to make the hashtags more toxic and more extreme⁴.

But **Meta has made public-interest independent research nearly impossible** through their restrictive data access policies and retaliation against independent researchers⁵⁻⁷.

There are numerous examples of studies on other platforms which exposed harms occurring on or caused by a platform, or which tested interventions for change on the platform which could never be replicated on Facebook or Instagram. Researchers, journalists, and citizen scientists have audited Airbnb's algorithm for racial discrimination⁸, examined whether YouTube's algorithm promotes extremism⁹, and tested whether encouraging Reddit users to factcheck posts can influence its algorithm to promote more truthful information¹⁰. **None of these studies are possible on Meta's platforms despite the clear value they provide to the public, governance entities and Meta itself.**

As we consider why independent researcher access is important, we need to be clear about what we mean by access, including who gets access and what kinds of data they get access to. Many proposals offer a simplistic answer: only academics and only quantitative, observational data. **We think this is dangerous.** Narrowing access to academics would exclude many individuals and organizations who have done some of the most widely cited monitoring of Facebook. Any policy for independent access must be determined by the needs of research, **not research skewed by access.**

How the Oversight Board can help:

- The Board should take up the issue of independent research access in a future PAO.
- The Board could review Meta's current policies regarding external data access and determine whether they meet the company's stated mission and values.
- The Board should consult experts who are currently denied access to researching Facebook to learn what kinds of access they need in their research.
- The Board could make specific recommendations to Meta about how to better implement data access, including establishing processes for determining who gets access and when their access should be revoked, who is responsible for managing this system, and what ethical procedures independent researchers must follow in order to ensure the safety and privacy of users.

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