Meta and TikTok let harmful content rise after evidence showed it drove engagement, say whistleblowers

Marianna Spring, social media and disinformation correspondent | Mike Wendling

Social media giants made decisions which allowed more harmful content on people's feeds after internal research showed it was being amplified by their algorithms, whistleblowers have told the BBC.

More than a dozen whistleblowers and insiders have laid bare the companies' internal battles between safety teams and those responsible for growth, engagement and the bottom line.

An engineer at Meta, which owns Facebook and Instagram, described how he had been told by senior managers to allow more harmful content in users' feeds to include messages and conspiracy theories - in case it tends to compete with TikTok.

A TikTok employee said the firm had allowed more harmful content to be recommended to users in the pursuit of growth, after it was found that "outrage" was driving positive actions such as content sharing, politicians were accused of not prioritising flattering videos.

Both companies say they decide to "maintain a strong relationship" with political figures to protect freedom of expression, and because of the value to users. But TikTok's owner, ByteDance, has denied it operates to the CPC.

Meta, which owns Facebook, Instagram, Threads and WhatsApp, denies the allegations, offers a long list of how the industry responded following the regulator's growth of TikTok, and says it has "strong incentives" to make its platforms safe and to protect the interests of its users, including teenagers.

A senior Meta researcher, Matt Motyl, said the company's competitor in TikTok, ByteDance, was "very, very, very" in the minds of senior executives when they made the choices Facebook was aware of problems caused by the algorithm.

The algorithm efficiently content connects a "pitch that maximizes profits at the expense of users and society's well-being" and "the harmful content that results from those algorithmic choices does not appear to be aligned with our mission" to bring the world closer together and make it more open, he said.

A staff Facebook, Gen Z-focused team in the office handling teen safety issues feel they had "zero traction" on a long.

In response to the whistleblowers' claims, Meta said: "Any suggestion that we deliberately amplify harmful content for financial gain is wrong." TikTok said these allegations were "absurd" and "baseless" and referred to technology that prioritised harmful content from our being viewed.

The company estimated in 150 staff to grow Meta, while safety teams were reduced by 20%, according to a report by the whistleblower, Sarah Wynn-Williams, who worked at the company, another former senior Meta employee said.

Motyl joins the BBC dozens of other whistleblowers as "high-level research documents" were released to the public, including a Facebook employee who has revealed that the company Instagram was aware of problems caused by the algorithm.

The algorithm efficient