

Meet the Nicaraguans Facebook Falsely Branded Bots and Censored Days before Elections

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Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter suspended hundreds of influential pro-Sandinista journalists and activists days before Nicaragua’s November 7 elections, falsely claiming they were government trolls. The Grayzone interviewed them to reveal the truth.

Just days before Nicaragua’s November 7 elections, top social media platforms censored top Nicaraguan news outlets and hundreds of journalists and activists who support their country’s leftist Sandinista government.

The politically motivated campaign of Silicon Valley censorship amounted to a massive purge of Sandinista supporters one week before the vote. It followed [US government attacks on the integrity of Nicaragua’s elections](#), and Washington’s insistence that it will refuse to recognize the results.

The United States sponsored a [sadistically violent coup attempt in Nicaragua](#) in 2018, which resulted in hundreds of deaths in a desperate effort to overthrow the democratically elected government of President Daniel Ortega.

Since the putsch failed, both the Donald Trump and Joe Biden administrations have [imposed several rounds of devastating sanctions on Nicaragua](#). The US [Congress plans to levy new heavy-handed sanctions against Nicaragua](#) following the November 7 elections.

Silicon Valley’s crackdown on pro-Sandinista journalists and activists was part and parcel of the US government’s political assault on Nicaragua.

Facebook and Instagram – both of which are owned by the newly rebranded Big Tech giant Meta – suspended 1,300 Nicaragua-based accounts run by pro-Sandinista media outlets, journalists, and activists in a large-scale crackdown on October 31.

Days before, Twitter did the same, purging many prominent pro-Sandinista journalists and influencers.

On November 1, Sandinista activists whose accounts were suspended by Facebook and Instagram responded by posting videos on Twitter, showing the world that they are indeed real people. But Twitter suspended their accounts as well, seeking to erase all evidence demonstrating that these Nicaraguans are not government bots or part of a coordinated inauthentic operation.

Twitter's follow-up censorship was effectively a [double-tap strike](#) on the freedom of speech of Nicaraguans, whose apparent misdeed is expressing political views that challenge Washington's objectives.

Insane! Facebook/Instagram falsely claimed left-wing Nicaraguans are govt-run bots, censoring them. So they posted videos on Twitter showing they're real. But now Twitter is suspending them too!

This is a coordinated purge of Sandinistas, days before Nicaragua's Nov. 7 election <https://t.co/sB7COoxl7Q> pic.twitter.com/E2EPVAK5tx

— Ben Norton (@BenjaminNorton) [November 1, 2021](#)

The thousands of accounts censored by Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter collectively had hundreds of thousands of followers, and represented some of the biggest and most influential media outlets and organizations in Nicaragua, a relatively small country of 6.5 million people.

US Big Tech companies suspending all of these accounts mere days before elections could have a significant, tangible impact on Nicaragua's electoral results.

The purges exclusively targeted supporters of the socialist, anti-imperialist Sandinista Front party. Zero right-wing opposition supporters in Nicaragua were impacted.

[Facebook published a report](#) on November 1 claiming the Sandinistas it censored were part of a "troll farm run by the government of Nicaragua and the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) party" that had engaged in "coordinated inauthentic behavior."

This is demonstrably false. In reality, what Facebook/Instagram did is purge most high-profile Sandinista supporters on the platforms, then try to justify it by claiming that average Sandinista activists are actually government-run bots.

Facebook implicitly admitted this fact by conceding in the report that there were "authentic accounts" purged in the massive social media crackdown. But Facebook refused to differentiate between the authentic accounts and the alleged "inauthentic" accounts, naming none and instead lumping them all together in order to justify erasing their digital existence.

TAKEDOWN BY THE NUMBERS

- *Presence on Facebook and Instagram:* 937 Facebook accounts, 140 Pages, 24 Groups and 363 Instagram accounts.
 - *Followers:* About 585,000 accounts followed one or more of these Pages, about 74,500 accounts joined one or more of these Groups and about 125,000 accounts followed one or more of these Instagram accounts.
 - *Advertising:* Around \$12,000 in spending for ads on Facebook and Instagram paid for in Nicaraguan cordoba and US dollars. That includes the entirety of historic advertising activity by both inauthentic and [authentic accounts](#) removed as part of this network.
-

Unlike Facebook's investigators, this reporter, Ben Norton, is based in Nicaragua and personally knows dozens of the Nicaraguans whose accounts were censored, and can confirm that they are indeed real people organically expressing their authentic opinions – not trolls, bots, or fake accounts.

I interviewed more than two dozen Sandinista activists whose personal accounts were suspended, and published videos of some of them below, to prove that Facebook's claims are categorically false.

Facebook's security team is run by former high-level US government officials

The Facebook report falsely depicting average Sandinista activists as government trolls was co-authored by Ben Nimmo, the leader of Meta's "Threat Intelligence Team."

[The Grayzone has exposed Nimmo](#) as a former press officer for the US-led NATO military alliance and paid consultant to an actual covert troll farm: the [Integrity Initiative](#), which was established in secret by British military officers to run anti-Russian influence operations through Western media.

Nimmo has served as [head of investigations](#) at Graphika, another information warfare initiative that was set up with funding from the US Defense Department's Minerva Institute, and operates with support from the Pentagon's top-secret Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA).

Grants & Public Institutions

Graphika partners with leading research institutions to advance our capabilities while informing public discourse on the flow of influence and information within large-scale social networks.



From Graphika's website

Nimmo, who is also a senior fellow at the Western government-funded Atlantic Council, meddled in Britain's 2020 election by smearing leftist Labour Party leader [Jeremy Corbyn as the vessel for a supposed Russian active measures](#) operation.

The latest Nimmo-engineered pseudo-scandal highlights Facebook's role as an imperial information weapon whose security team has been essentially farmed out of the US government.

The head of security policy at Facebook, Nathaniel Gleicher, promoted Nimmo's report, echoing his false claims.

Before moving to Facebook, Gleicher was director for cybersecurity policy at the White House National Security Council. He also worked at the US Department of Justice.

Gleicher clarified that when Facebook accused Nicaragua of running a supposed “troll farm,” it “means that the op is relying on fake accounts to manipulate & deceive their audience.”

According to this definition, Facebook’s report is completely wrong. Many of the accounts it suspended were run by everyday Nicaraguans, and The Grayzone has interviewed them and posted videos below.

1/ Today we shared the removal of a domestic CIB network in Nicaragua that was run by the government of Nicaragua and the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) party. <https://t.co/505nHhgIjV>

— Nathaniel Gleicher (@ngleicher) [November 1, 2021](#)

Facebook’s “director of threat disruption,” David Agranovich, also shared Nimmo’s false report.

Like Gleicher, Agranovich worked at the US government before moving to Facebook, serving as director of intelligence for the White House National Security Council.

1/ Today we shared our latest monthly CIB report, which includes a deep-dive into a network in Nicaragua that was run by the government of Nicaragua and the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) party. <https://t.co/2S36MInjeh>

— David Agranovich (@DavidAgranovich) [November 1, 2021](#)

Both of these US National Security Council veterans actively promoted Facebook’s coordinated purge of pro-Sandinista Nicaraguans.

Facebook basically merged with the US government.

Head of security policy at FB, Nathaniel Gleicher [@ngleicher](#), was director for cybersecurity policy at the White House National Security Council. Before that he worked at the DOJ.

No wonder they are banning Sandinista supporters pic.twitter.com/vXsDgJH1rr

— Ben Norton (@BenjaminNorton) [November 1, 2021](#)

The Grayzone contacted Facebook with a request for comment. The head of security communications, Margarita Z. Franklin, replied without any comment, simply linking to Nimmo’s report.

When The Grayzone followed up and asked Franklin about Facebook suspending many real-life Nicaraguans who support their government but are very much not bots, she did not respond.

Meet the Nicaraguans censored by Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter

The Grayzone spoke with more than two dozen living, breathing Sandinista activists, whom this reporter knows and has met in person, and who were purged in the social media crackdown.

Many said this was the second or third time their accounts had been censored. Several had their Facebook and Twitter accounts removed during a [violent US-backed right-wing coup attempt in 2018](#).

Multiple activists said they are afraid Washington will sponsor another coup attempt or destabilization operations following Nicaragua's November 7 elections, and because they were banned on social media, the Sandinista supporters will be unable to inform the outside world about what is actually happening in their country.

Ligia Sevilla

Here is Nicaraguan Sandinista activist Ligia Sevilla [@ligiasevilla](#), who was censored by Facebook [@Meta](#) falsely claimed she's a "fake account," part of a government-run "troll farm"

Will Facebook retract its false claims and restore her account? [@benimmo@DavidAgranovich@olgs7](#) <https://t.co/mDx9QvvtIU>
[pic.twitter.com/wpykMeFon7](https://t.co/mDx9QvvtIU)

— Ben Norton (@BenjaminNorton) [November 1, 2021](#)

Sandinista influencer Ligia Sevilla, who had more than 5,500 followers on her personal [Instagram](#) account, which was suspended along with her Facebook profile, proclaimed, "I'm not a bot; I'm not a troll. And my social media accounts were censored. Maybe Facebook doesn't allow us to be Sandinistas?"

After [Sevilla shared this video](#) to verify her authenticity, Twitter suspended her account as well – a sign of a coordinated censorship campaign targeting Sandinistas on social media.

Franklin Ruiz

And here is Nicaraguan Sandinista activist Franklin Ruiz G. [@ElChequelito](#), whose personal account was censored by Facebook, which falsely claimed he is a government-run bot/troll.

Still no comment on this political censorship by [@Meta@benimmo@DavidAgranovich](#) [@ngleicher@olgs7](#)
[pic.twitter.com/KTthCikmgi](https://t.co/mDx9QvvtIU)

— Ben Norton (@BenjaminNorton) [November 1, 2021](#)

Sandinista activist [Franklin Ruiz](#), whose personal Facebook page was suspended, published a video message as well: "I want to tell you that we are human beings; we are people who, on Facebook, are defending our revolution, defending our country. We are not bots, as Facebook says, or programmed trolls."

After Ruiz shared this [video on Twitter](#), the platform purged him too.

Hayler Gaitán

There are so many Sandinista activists in Nicaragua who were falsely labeled "bots" and censored by Facebook. Here is popular communicator Hayler Gaitán [@QueNotaHayler](#), who is not a troll. [@Meta](#) still won't comment on its false claims [@DavidAgranovich@olgs7@benimmo@ngleicher](#) [pic.twitter.com/rG3iB9ba2S](#)

— Ben Norton (@BenjaminNorton) [November 1, 2021](#)

[Hayler Gaitán](#), another Sandinista activist censored by Facebook, published a video explaining, "'I am a young communicator. I am not a troll, as Facebook says, or a bot.'

"I am a young communicator who shares information about the good progress in Nicaragua," he continued. "We enjoy free healthcare, free education, and other programs that benefit the Nicaraguan people, and that we have been building throughout our history. And they have wanted to take that from us, but they will never be able to."

After Gaitán posted this video on Twitter, it [suspended his account](#) as well.

Darling Huete

This is a Nicaraguan journalist, Darling Huete [@DarlingHHuete](#), who was falsely dubbed a "government-run troll" by Facebook and had her personal account suspended. [@Meta](#) refuses to comment on this clearly outrageous censorship scandal [@benimmo@DavidAgranovich@ngleicher@olgs7](#) [pic.twitter.com/nyjswj01Fb](#)

— Ben Norton (@BenjaminNorton) [November 1, 2021](#)

Darling Huete is a Nicaraguan journalist whose personal Facebook account was also censored.

"I'm here to tell you that Facebook censored my account, according to it because my account is a troll account or fake account, something that is not true. My account has been active for more than seven years," she said in a video she posted on Twitter.

"This is clearly political censorship, because I support the government of Nicaragua, so they have decided that my opinion, or my way of thinking, is not appropriate according to the absurd policies of Facebook," Huete lamented.

After Huete shared this video, [Twitter deleted her account](#), too.

Huete told The Grayzone this is the second time her Facebook and Twitter accounts were suspended. The first time was during the violent US-backed right-wing coup attempt in Nicaragua in 2018.

Daniela Cienfuegos

This is another Nicaraguan Sandinista supporter, Daniela Cienfuegos [@dani100sweet](#), an activist in the Red de Jóvenes Comunicadores, which Facebook/Instagram suspended and falsely claimed is a gov't bot farm.

Any comment from [@Meta?](#)[@benimmo](#)[@DavidAgranovich](#) [@ngleicher@olgs7pic.twitter.com/md32dU6WZp](#)

— Ben Norton (@BenjaminNorton) [November 1, 2021](#)

Daniela Cienfuegos, an activist with the pro-Sandinista Red de Jóvenes Comunicadores (Network of Youth Communicators), posted a video on Twitter saying, “I wanted to tell you that, no, we are not trolls. We are people who dedicate ourselves to communicate from the trenches, to inform the Nicaraguan people, and on the international stage.”

After Cienfuegos published this, [Twitter deleted her account](#) as well.

Facebook, Instagram, Twitter censor top pro-Sandinista Nicaraguan journalists and media outlets

The above are just a small sample of Nicaraguans who were falsely smeared as “government-run trolls” by Facebook and erased from social media.

But it wasn’t just individual Nicaraguans who were censored. Major Nicaraguan media outlets that provide a pro-Sandinista perspective were also removed.

On the night of October 31, Facebook removed 140 pages and 24 groups, 100% of which were pro-Sandinista. Among those deleted were:

- official [Sandinista newspaper Barricada](#), which had more than 65,000 followers
- popular youth-run left-wing [media outlet Redvolución](#), which had more than 81,000 followers
- the [Red de Jóvenes Comunicadores](#), or Young Communicators Network, which brings together journalists and media activists from the Sandinista Youth social movement, and which had more than 71,000 followers
- and the individual profiles of dozens of Nicaraguan journalists, activists, and influencers.

At the exact same time as the Facebook purge, its sister platform Instagram took down many of the same pages:

- [Barricada](#), which had more than 9,500 followers
- [Redvolución](#), which had more than 22,700 followers,
- [Red de Jóvenes Comunicadores](#), which had more than 12,600 followers
- and, once again, the personal pages of dozens of Nicaraguan journalists, activists, and influencers.

Instagram also suspended the account of the fashion organization [Nicaragua Diseña](#), which is very popular in Nicaragua, and had more than 42,700 followers.

Unlike the other purged accounts, [Nicaragua Diseña](#) is decidedly not a political organization. It is run by Camila Ortega, a daughter of the president, but Nicaragua Diseña intentionally

goes out of its way to avoid politics, trying to bring together opposition supporters and Sandinistas in apolitical cultural events.

Just a few days before the coordinated Facebook-Instagram purge, Twitter also removed the accounts of the most prominent pro-Sandinista journalists and influencers on the platform.

On October 28, Twitter suspended the accounts of media activists [@ElCuervoNica](#), [@FloryCantoX](#), [@TPU19J](#), [@Jay_Clandestino](#), and numerous others. Together, these pro-Sandinista communicators had tens of thousands of followers.

Many of them, such as [@CuervoNica](#) and [@FloryCantoR](#), had been censored before. This was the second or third account they had created, only to be censored for their political views.

Twitter's politically motivated censorship is again targeting Latin American leftists:

Influential Nicaraguan Sandinista supporters [@ElCuervoNica](#) and [@FloryCantoX](#) were suspended

This is the SECOND time the US government thought police at Twitter suspended [@FloryCantoR](#)'s account pic.twitter.com/xlZJWVO9vt

— Ben Norton (@BenjaminNorton) [October 29, 2021](#)

Silicon Valley's censorship of Nicaragua always goes in one direction: It is leftist, anti-imperialist supporters of the Sandinista government who are censored, while right-wing opposition activists, many of whom are funded by the US government, are verified and promoted by the social media monopolies.

Numerous Nicaraguan journalists whose individual social media accounts were suspended told The Grayzone they were upset and angry, as they had spent countless hours of work over years building their pages, doing journalism, and sharing information. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter deleted all of that labor in mere seconds.

Some said they fear this censorship will also harm them financially, as they had relied on their social media accounts as a source of income.

In addition to clearly infringing on their rights to freedom of the press and freedom of expression, the latest wave of Silicon Valley censorship has done concrete economic damage to working-class Nicaraguans who had relied on Facebook and Instagram to run small businesses. Several of those affected told The Grayzone they are now locked out of the Facebook and Instagram pages they had used to sell products like food, clothing, or homemade jewelry.

This Silicon Valley censorship thus not only greatly hinders these working-class Nicaraguans' ability to do their work as journalists, given social media is an integral part of contemporary journalism, but also deprived them of extra sources of income they had relied on to support their families.

Given the US government's hyperbolic claims of Russian meddling in its 2016 presidential

election, the social media purge it has inspired in Nicaragua is stained with irony. After years of investigations, and billions of dollars spent, the only ostensible evidence Washington found of Russian interference was some Facebook posts, including [absurd humorous memes](#).

If these alleged Russian Facebook memes constitute a [Pearl Harbor-style attack](#) on North American democracy, as top US government officials have claimed, then what does it mean for Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to censor highly influential pro-Sandinista media outlets, journalists, and activists mere days before Nicaragua's elections?

Aaron Mate discusses Russian troll farms' dangerous Jesus masturbation memes that allegedly won Donald Trump the election. Full ep <https://t.co/0izDspjRxX> @aaronjmate @mtaibbi #UsefulIdiotsPod @RollingStone @RSPolitics #russiagate pic.twitter.com/XG2cH6NZ8F

— Katie Halper (@kthalps) [May 18, 2020](#)

Besides meddling in foreign elections, North American social media monopolies have systematically and repeatedly [censored journalists, politicians, and activists in numerous countries targeted by Washington for regime change](#), such as Venezuela, Iran, Syria, Russia, and China. On numerous occasions, these Silicon Valley companies have admitted such purges were carried out at the request of the US government.

The Grayzone has documented the many ways in which these Big Tech giants [collaborate with Western governments](#), while [promoting US state media](#) and silencing people in countries that Washington has deemed its adversaries.

For their part, the Nicaraguans censored by Facebook and Twitter have vowed to continue their work.

Redvolución wrote that it will keep struggling in the “digital trenches” to “defend the revolution.”

Quenri Madrigal, a prominent Sandinista activist and social media influencer, commented, “We have already witnessed the forms of online censorship targeting other countries, like Cuba, Venezuela, Russia, and Iran. There is a tyranny of transnational technology and social media corporations. They are instruments that don't belong to the peoples.”

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