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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
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September 17, 2021

Jack Dorsey
Chief Executive Officer
Twitter
1355 Market Street, Suite 900
San Francisco, CA 94103

Dear Mr. Dorsey:

I am writing to request information regarding Twitter's policies on monitoring and removing extremist and conspiracy content that advocates violence, its actions to address the increase in use of its platforms to promote acts of domestic terrorism and violent extremism, and its use of targeted advertising to reach individuals and groups that engage in these activities.

In recent years, domestic extremist groups' use of Twitter and other social media platforms for communication, organizing, and planning purposes has expanded. Over time, this has included dissemination of digital manifestos, manuscripts, or magazines, participation in online forums, and posting or streaming videos of violent acts.¹ Twitter was central to the spread of Q-Anon conspiracy theories, including the 2017 conspiracy that falsely alleged that Democratic officials were linked to a human trafficking and child sex ring out of a pizzeria in Washington, DC.² This led to an armed man storming a pizza place in Washington, D.C. in December 2016.³ In just over a 30 day period, 1.4 million tweets shared by more than 250,000 accounts spread the dangerous conspiracy theory.⁴

In 2018, researchers found dramatic increases in anti-Semitic attacks on social media, particularly on Twitter, despite Twitter's attempt to control hate speech by purging fake twitter

¹ Robert O'Harrow Jr., Andrew Ba Tran, and Derek Hawkins, *The rise of domestic extremism in America*, Washington Post (Apr. 12, 2021) (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2021/domestic-terrorism-data/>); *Racist, Violent, Unpunished: A White Hate Group's Campaign of Menace*, ProPublica (Oct. 19, 2019) (<https://www.propublica.org/article/white-hate-group-campaign-of-menace-rise-above-movement>).

² Amanda Robb, *Anatomy of a Fake News Scandal*, Rolling Stone (Nov. 16, 2017) (<https://www.rollingstone.com/feature/anatomy-of-a-fake-news-scandal-125877/>).

³ Amanda Robb, *Anatomy of a Fake News Scandal*, Rolling Stone (Nov. 16, 2017) (<https://www.rollingstone.com/feature/anatomy-of-a-fake-news-scandal-125877/>).

⁴ Amanda Robb, *Anatomy of a Fake News Scandal*, Rolling Stone (Nov. 16, 2017) (<https://www.rollingstone.com/feature/anatomy-of-a-fake-news-scandal-125877/>).

accounts.⁵ On October 27, 2018, a man opened fire into the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, just mere days after researchers warned of a rise in anti-Semitic attacks online and the man retweeted several anti-Semitic posts.⁶ Recent mass attacks are equally disturbing examples of ways in which extremist violence and incitement to violence was amplified by technology and social media. In 2019, the perpetrator in El Paso, Texas announced his plans for an imminent attack in a manifesto posted online just before the attacks, while the perpetrator in Dayton, Ohio posted regularly about his violent intentions.⁷

Online platforms continue to be used to fundraise, recruit, organize, train, and plan for acts of domestic terrorism. In the lead up to the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol, rioters used social media, including Twitter, to spread the false idea of a rigged 2020 election.⁸ For example, individuals tweeted about the “Kraken” conspiracy, which references an effort by former President Trump’s legal team to claim massive election fraud. This hashtag was tweeted over one million times before January 6. Similarly, a separate false conspiracy that claims widespread voter fraud and the historical reference to the beginning of a civil war, was used over 30,000 times in a few short days in late December.⁹ During the attack on the Capitol, tweets mentioning civil war drastically increased and rioters posted about their experiences from their accounts.¹⁰

Many individuals and groups affiliated with militia groups can receive specific advertising because of Twitter’s tools that allow advertisers to create custom audiences by targeting based on demographic, audience, and more. Twitter’s practice of allowing advertisers

⁵ David Ingram, *Attacks on Jewish people rising on Instagram and Twitter, researchers say*, NBC News (Oct. 27, 2018) (<https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/attacks-jewish-people-rising-instagram-twitter-researchers-say-n925086>).

⁶ *Deadly Shooting at Pittsburgh Synagogue*, Anti-Defamation League (Oct. 27, 2021) (<https://www.adl.org/blog/deadly-shooting-at-pittsburgh-synagogue>).

⁷ *Minutes Before El Paso Killing, Hate-Filled Manifesto Appears Online*, The New York Times (Aug. 3, 2019) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/03/us/patrick-crusius-el-paso-shooter-manifesto.html>); and see Paul Murphy, Konstantin Toropin, Drew Griffin, Scott Bronstein, Eric Levenson, *Dayton shooter had an obsession with violence and mass shootings, police say*, CNN (Aug. 7, 2019) (<https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/05/us/connor-betts-dayton-shooting-profile/index.html>).

⁸ Shayan Sardarizadeh and Jessica Lussenhop, *The 65 days that led to chaos at the Capitol*, BBC (Jan. 10, 2021) (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-55592332>).

⁹ Shayan Sardarizadeh and Jessica Lussenhop, *The 65 days that led to chaos at the Capitol*, BBC (Jan. 10, 2021) (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-55592332>). While it is difficult to distinguish the instances in these one million times where the hashtag has been used to debunk the theory, the sheer number of tweets indicates the widespread nature of the conspiracy.

¹⁰ Rebecca Heilweil and Shirin Ghaffary, *How Trump’s internet build and broadcast the Capitol insurrection*, Vox (Jan. 8, 2021) (<https://www.vox.com/recode/22221285/trump-online-capitol-riot-far-right-parler-twitter-facebook>); Atlantic Council DFRLab, *#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection*, Just Security (Feb. 10, 2021) (<https://www.justsecurity.org/74622/stopthesteal-timeline-of-social-media-and-extremist-activities-leading-to-1-6-insurrection/>).

to target by keywords presents a specific concern that the targeting could lead to abuse.¹¹ For example, Twitter has been found to allow targeting based on the phrases “white supremacists” and “neo-Nazi.”¹²

In addition, social media platforms rapidly spread extremist content through their algorithms, which suggest content to users based on the users’ previous engagements and on what content has the greatest overall engagement on the platform. Some reports have found that Twitter’s algorithm to increase user engagement ultimately amplifies extremist content as well.¹³

Under current law, with some exceptions, online service platforms are generally protected from legal liability resulting from user-generated content.¹⁴ As a private company, Twitter generally has the right to decide, through policies and user guidelines, what is and what is not allowed on its website. Using that right, Twitter has established policies that prohibit content that would promote or incite extremist violence on their platforms.¹⁵ However, in the aftermath of January 6 and other recent domestic extremist events, questions remain about the effectiveness of these policies and Twitter’s willingness and ability to enforce them.¹⁶

I appreciate that Twitter has taken actions in response to the increased use of social media platforms to promote domestic extremist violence, including forming the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) and the Tech Against Terrorism alliance.¹⁷ I also recognize that Twitter has taken steps to remove content related to the January 6 attack on the Capitol. However, in the wake of the January 6 attack, concerns still exist over the prevalence of content promoting domestic extremist violence on Twitter.¹⁸

¹¹ Miranda Wei, et al, *What Twitter Knows: Characterizing Ad Targeting Practices, User Perceptions, and Ad Explanations Through Users’ Own Twitter Data*, USENIX Security Symposium (Aug. 12-14, 2020) (<https://www.usenix.org/system/files/sec20-wei.pdf>); Twitter, *Twitter Ads targeting* (accessed on Aug. 25, 2021) (<https://business.twitter.com/en/advertising/targeting.html>).

¹² Joe Tidy, *Twitter apologises for letting ads target neo-Nazis and bigots*, BBC (Jan. 16, 2020) (<https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-51112238>).

¹³ Oliver Darcy, *How Twitter’s algorithm is amplifying extreme political rhetoric*, CNN (Mar. 22, 2021) (<https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/22/tech/twitter-algorithm-political-rhetoric/index.html>).

¹⁴ The Communications Decency Act of 1996, as amended (47 U.S.C. §§ 223, 230). *See also*, Congressional Research Service, *How Broad a Shield? A Brief Overview of Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act* (LSB10082) (Feb. 21, 2018).

¹⁵ Twitter, *Help Center, Rules and Policies* (<https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies>).

¹⁶ *See* Digital Citizens Alliance and Coalition for a Safer Web, *The Domestic Extremist Next Door* (Apr. 2021) (https://www.digitalcitizensalliance.org/clientuploads/directory/Reports/DCA_The_Domestic_Extremist_Next_Door.pdf).

¹⁷ Adi Robertson, *Tech company anti-terrorism initiative will increase its focus on far-right groups*, Verge (July 26, 2021) (<https://www.theverge.com/2021/7/26/22594067/gifct-facebook-twitter-youtube-microsoft-far-right-terrorism-manifestos-banned>); Tech Against Terrorism, Partners (accessed on Aug. 25, 2021) (<https://www.techagainstterrorism.org/>).

¹⁸ Michael Edison Hayden, *‘We Make Mistakes’: Twitter’s Embrace of the Extreme Far Right*, Southern Poverty Law Center (July 7, 2021) (<https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2021/07/07/we-make-mistakes-twitters->

In light of recurring concerns about advertising and content policies related to continuing domestic extremist threats and to better understand what Twitter is doing to address the proliferation of domestic extremism online, for the period dating from January 1, 2019 to present, I respectfully request that you provide the following documents and information:

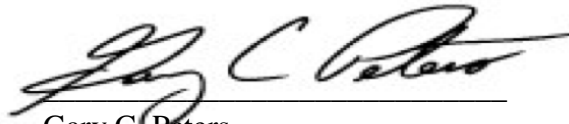
1. Twitter's guidelines and parameters for determining how content violates Twitter's hateful conduct policies, including without limitation its groups and events policies, as well as information on how Twitter's artificial intelligence (AI) moderation software finds such content.
2. Information identifying Twitter's terms of service and what actions have been taken to enforce and comply with these terms of service, including without limitation, policies for removal of content in violation of its hateful conduct policies.
3. Information on the content covered by the guidelines and policies referenced in question 1, including content related to the promotion, recruitment, and advocacy of events leading to the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol that was removed from Twitter's platforms in the three months preceding the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol.
4. Strategies and actions, planned or taken, by Twitter, in coordination with federal, state, local, and tribal governments and agencies to detect and prevent extremist violence online, including without limitation, in relation to the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol.
5. Twitter's guidelines and parameters for recommending content, including without limitation a description of how their algorithms identify and decide how to recommend content.
6. Twitter's guidelines and parameters for targeted advertising, including without limitation a description of how their algorithms identify advertisements' intended targets.
7. Twitter's guidelines and procedures in place to ensure that the advertising parameters in question 5 align with Twitter's policies on hateful conduct.
8. A description of Twitter's actions to ensure its terms of service and targeted advertising policies are enforced.

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The Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs is authorized by Rule XXV of the Standing Rules of the Senate and Section 12(e) of S. Res. 70 (117th Congress) to investigate the “efficiency, economy, and effectiveness of all agencies and departments of the Government” and “processes as tested against the requirements imposed by the rapidly mounting complexity of national security problems... [and] legislative and other proposals to improve these methods, processes, and relationships.”¹⁹

Please provide these documents and information as soon as possible, but no later than October 4, 2021. Thank you for your prompt attention and cooperation in this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gary C. Peters", written over a horizontal line.

Gary C. Peters
Chairman

¹⁹ S. Rule XXV, S. Res. 70 (117th Congress).