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United States Senate

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September 17, 2021

Susan Wojcicki
Chief Executive Officer
YouTube, LLC.
901 Cherry Avenue
San Bruno, California 94066

Dear Ms. Wojcicki:

I am writing to request information regarding YouTube'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 YouTube 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 Recent mass attacks offer equally disturbing examples of ways in which extremist violence and incitement to violence was aided and amplified by technology and social media. In 2017, violent extremists and hate groups used YouTube to share videos that glorified and encouraged the groups' violent interactions at rallies in the lead up to the Unite-the-Right rally in Charlottesville, VA, at which a neo-Nazi drove his car into a group of people, injuring nineteen and killing one woman.² In 2019, a report issued after the domestic terrorist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand that killed 51 worshippers

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/>); Ben Collins, *Instagram account connected to Gilroy shooter pushed staple of white supremacist internet forums*, NBC News (July 29, 2019) (<https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/instagram-account-connected-gilroy-shooter-pushed-staple-white-supremacist-internet-n1035926>); *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 Julia Carrie Wong, *A year after Charlottesville, why can't big tech delete white supremacists*, Guardian (July 25, 2018) (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/25/charlottesville-white-supremacists-big-tech-failure-remove>); *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>); Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Brian M. Rosenthal, *Man Charged After White Nationalist Rally in Charlottesville Ends in Deadly Violence*, New York Times (Aug. 12, 2017) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/12/us/charlottesville-protest-white-nationalist.html>).

at a mosque found that the attacker had been radicalized online, primarily through YouTube videos.³

In the lead up to the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol, rioters used social media, including YouTube to organize and promote the Stop the Steal Rally, which promoted the false narrative that President Trump won the election. Many rioters used YouTube to livestream and document their actions inside the US Capitol during the attack, and some even used the streams to communicate through chats and ask for donations.⁴ From September 1, 2020 to February 2, 2021, researchers found that 83% of engagement with the keywords “Stop the Steal” occurred on YouTube videos, which led to over 21 million views, 800 thousand likes, and 34 thousand dislikes in that time period.⁵

In addition, social media platforms, including YouTube, can rapidly spread extremist content through algorithms, which suggest content to users based on the users’ previous engagements and on what content has the greatest overall engagement on the platform.⁶ These algorithms increase user engagement, which in turn increases the amount of time users spend on the platforms and engage with high performing content. While YouTube has disputed recent reports, researchers found that in 2020, YouTube still recommended more extreme content, with approximately 60,000 users who engaged with border-line extremist content and were exposed to extremist content over an 18 month period.⁷

Many individuals receive specific advertising because of YouTube’s tools that allow advertisers to create custom audiences by targeting based on demographic, interests, keywords, and more.⁸ According to one report, YouTube relied on advertisements for a large amount of

³ Cecilia D’Anastasio, *The Christchurch Shooter and YouTube’s Radicalization Trap*, Wired (Aug. 12, 2020) (<https://www.wired.com/story/christchurch-shooter-youtube-radicalization-extremism/>).

⁴ Rebecca Heilweil and Shirin Ghaffary, *How Trump’s internet built and broadcast the Capitol insurrection*, Vox (Jan. 8, 2021) (<https://www.vox.com/recode/22221285/trump-online-capitol-riot-far-right-parler-twitter-facebook>); Julia Alexander, Jacob Kastrenakes, and Bijan Stephen, *How Facebook, Twitch, and YouTube are handling live streams of the Capitol mob attack*, Verge (Jan. 6, 2021) (<https://www.theverge.com/2021/1/6/22217421/capitol-building-trump-mob-protest-live-stream-youtube-twitch-facebook>).

⁵ Atlantic Council DFRLab, *#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities 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/>).

⁶ Kevin Roose, *The Making of a YouTube Radical*, New York Times (June 8, 2019) (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/06/08/technology/youtube-radical.html>).

⁷ *YouTube’s algorithm seems to be funneling people to alt-right videos*, MIT Technology Review (Jan. 29, 2020) (<https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/01/29/276000/a-study-of-youtube-comments-shows-how-its-turning-people-onto-the-alt-right/>).

⁸ YouTube Help Center, *About targeting for video campaigns* (accessed Aug. 26, 2021) (<https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/2454017?hl=en>).

funding, and in 2019, earned almost \$20 billion in revenue through advertising.⁹ YouTube’s advertising practices raise concerns about placement of advertisements next to extremist content. In 2017, many companies that previously advertised on YouTube reportedly left the platform over concerns that their businesses may be associated with extremist content viewed on YouTube. A recent investigative review found that YouTube allowed a large amount of well-known extremist terms, such as racial epithets and phrases associated with domestic extremist groups, to target advertisements. Researchers using YouTube’s portal that allows advertisers to place their ads on the platform found that YouTube’s “brand safety” controls blocked only a fraction of the hate and extremist terms it was designed to block.¹⁰

Under current law, with some exceptions, online service platforms are generally protected from legal liability resulting from user-generated content.¹¹ As a private company, YouTube generally has the right to decide, through policies and user guidelines, what is and what is not allowed on its website. Using that right, YouTube has established policies that prohibit content that would promote or incite extremist violence on their platforms.¹² However, in the aftermath of January 6 and other recent domestic extremist events, questions remain about the effectiveness of these policies and YouTube’s willingness and ability to enforce them.¹³

I appreciate that YouTube has taken actions in response to the increased use of social media platforms to promote domestic extremist violence, including the formation of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) and the Tech Against Terrorism alliance.¹⁴ I also recognize that YouTube has taken steps to remove militia groups and extremist leaders from the platform, including, according to YouTube, removing “more than 13,000 channels and 72,000

⁹ Leon Yin and Aaron Sankin, *How We Discovered Google’s Hate Blocklist for Ad Placements on YouTube*, TheMarkup (Apr. 8, 2021) (<https://themarkup.org/google-the-giant/2021/04/08/how-we-discovered-googles-hate-blocklist-for-ad-placements-on-youtube>).

¹⁰ Leon Yin and Aaron Sankin, *How We Discovered Google’s Hate Blocklist for Ad Placements on YouTube*, TheMarkup (Apr. 8, 2021) (<https://themarkup.org/google-the-giant/2021/04/08/how-we-discovered-googles-hate-blocklist-for-ad-placements-on-youtube>).

¹¹ 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).

¹² Google, *YouTube Help, YouTube Policies* (https://support.google.com/youtube/topic/2803176?hl=en&ref_topic=6151248).

¹³ *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).

¹⁴ 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/>).

videos for violating its violent extremist policy” in the fourth quarter of 2020.¹⁵ I also recognize that YouTube has strengthened its policies on hate speech.¹⁶ However, despite these policies, concern remains regarding the amount of extremist content that remains prevalent on YouTube.¹⁷

In light of recurring concerns about advertising and content policies related to domestic extremist threats and to better understand what YouTube 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. YouTube’s guidelines and parameters for determining how content violates YouTube’s violent or dangerous content policies, including without limitation its groups and events policies, as well as information on how YouTube’s artificial intelligence (AI) moderation software finds such content.
2. Information identifying YouTube’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 violent or dangerous content 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 YouTube’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 YouTube’s, 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. YouTube’s guidelines and parameters for recommending content, including without limitation a description of how their algorithms identify and decide how to recommend content.
6. YouTube’s guidelines and parameters for targeted advertising, including without limitation a description of how their algorithms identify advertisements’ intended targets.

¹⁵ Jodie Fleischer, *Social Media Platforms Aren’t Doing Enough to Police Domestic Extremists, Report Finds*, NBC Washington (Apr. 19, 2021) (<https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/social-media-platforms-arent-doing-enough-to-police-domestic-extremists-report-finds/2645456/>).

¹⁶ Cecilia D’Anastasio, *The Christchurch Shooter and YouTube’s Radicalization Trap*, Wired (Aug. 12, 2020) (<https://www.wired.com/story/christchurch-shooter-youtube-radicalization-extremism/>).

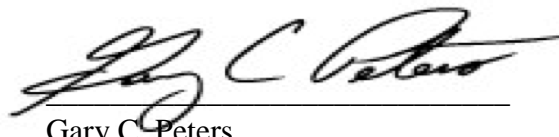
¹⁷ Annie Y. Chen, et al, *Exposure to Alternative & Extremist Content on YouTube*, Anti-Defamation League (Feb. 2021) (<https://www.adl.org/resources/reports/exposure-to-alternative-extremist-content-on-youtube>)

7. YouTube's guidelines and procedures in place to ensure that the advertising parameters in question 5 align with YouTube's policies on violent or dangerous content.
8. A description of YouTube's actions to ensure its terms of service and targeted advertising policies are enforced.

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."¹⁸

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,



Gary C. Peters
Chairman

¹⁸ S. Rule XXV, S. Res. 70 (117th Congress).