United States Senate

December 21, 2021

Mark Zuckerberg
Chief Executive Officer
Meta, Inc.
1 Hacker Way
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg:

We write to express concern regarding Meta's role in responding to the rise of online election-related misinformation and disinformation in the United States and the accompanying rise in divisive, hateful, and violent online activity that undermines confidence in the integrity of our elections. The false claim that the 2020 presidential election was stolen fueled a violent and deadly insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6th. The misinformation and disinformation that led to insurrection as well as planning for the insurrection took place largely on online platforms, including Facebook.

In particular, recent reports based on documents released by Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen as well as Ms. Haugen's testimony before the Senate Commerce Committee indicate that the company prematurely terminated misinformation and disinformation safeguards that were put in place in advance of the 2020 election. This action allowed misinformation, disinformation, and violent rhetoric to return to the platform immediately following Election Day and in the lead-up to the January 6th insurrection.

According to those documents, safeguards implemented by Facebook during the run-up to the 2020 election included measures to ban or remove hateful or violent content, prevent the growth and spread of groups or content that "delegitimized" the 2020 election, and reduce the spread of hate speech. Even with these measures in place, reports state that "nearly a quarter of Facebook users reported seeing hate speech ahead of the election and that more than half reported seeing content that made them wary of discussing political issues in public." While efforts to delegitimize election results and undermine our democracy continued and even intensified following Election Day, reports indicate that Facebook turned off election-related safeguards because the company was concerned that they could be limiting the growth of the platform.

The controls demonstrate that Facebook clearly knew that its platform could be used to sow and promote discord, division, and incendiary content. Facebook took some steps after the election to fight disinformation, including banning a group called "Stop the Steal" that promoted the lie that the 2020 election had been stolen. Despite this action, according to reporting based on the whistleblower documents, other groups promoting the false claim that the election had been

stolen proliferated, successfully evading Facebook's controls and stoking the anger that led to the January 6th insurrection. [1]

Facebook also began dialing back its misinformation and disinformation safeguards shortly after the election. The company also disbanded its Civic Integrity Team, which had been formed to combat misinformation and disinformation on Facebook, and reportedly distributed its members to other parts of the company. Since January 6th, Facebook has disavowed any responsibility for the insurrection and declined to implement a recommendation from its own Oversight Board to conduct an internal study of the platform's role in the insurrection.

At the same time, the spread of misinformation and disinformation about the election resulted in an unprecedented rise of violent threats against election officials, workers, and volunteers. Driven by election disinformation, Facebook users sent hate speech, death threats, and bomb threats to those responsible for administering elections. [2] According to a recent study, one in three local election officials now feel unsafe because of threats made to other election officials for doing their jobs.

In light of these reports and in order protect the integrity of our elections from misinformation, disinformation, and threats of violence, we request that you respond to the following questions by January 7, 2022:

1. Why did Facebook disable controls after the election – including algorithmic controls to help stop the spread of disinformation and controls to limit the growth of groups that spread disinformation about the election results?

2. Why did Facebook disband its Civic Integrity Team as a standalone unit and disburse its employees to other teams? When was the decision to disband the team made and who made that decision?

3. What department or division of Meta is currently responsible for overseeing efforts to prevent the spread of election-related misinformation, disinformation, and violent rhetoric for Meta-owned platforms? How many full-time employees does this department or division have that are dedicated to tracking and countering election-related threats, including in non-election years?

4. Who is the senior-most Meta employee that directly oversees that department or division's efforts?

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[1] Jack Brewster, "Facebook Banned 'Stop the Steal' – Then Other Groups Popped Up in Its Place," Forbes, Nov. 6, 2020: https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackbrewster/2020/11/06/facebook-banned-stop-the-steal-then-other-groups-popped-up-in-its-place.

[2] Linda So and Jason Szep, "U.S. Election Workers Get Little Help from Law Enforcement as Terror Threats Mount," Reuters, Sept. 8, 2021: https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-election-threats-law-enforcement/.

5. What steps is Meta taking to ensure that Facebook users cannot evade the company's safeguards to continue promoting claims that undermine election integrity and serve to intimidate voters and election workers?

6. How many times in the last year has Facebook proactively forwarded information concerning threats to election workers or election officials to relevant law enforcement organizations?

7. What steps is Meta taking now to protect the integrity of future elections from the spread of misinformation and disinformation, as well as to address violent threats against election officials and workers?

While we acknowledge the efforts Facebook took to prevent the spread of election-related misinformation and disinformation, violent rhetoric, and harassment prior to the 2020 elections, it clearly was not enough to prevent lies about the election from taking root on the platform and fueling violence against our democracy. We look forward to hearing more about how Meta will do better for its users and for our democracy.

Sincerely,

Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator
Chairwoman, Committee on
Rules and Administration

Jack Reed
United States Senator
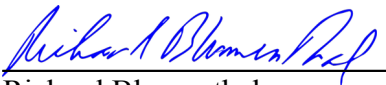
Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator

Sherrod Brown
United States Senator

Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator
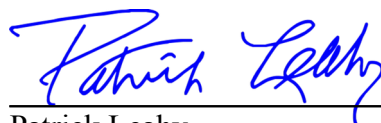
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