

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 21, 2021

Mr. Mark Zuckerberg, Chairman and CEO
Facebook, Inc.
1 Hacker Way
Menlo Park, California 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg,

On Wednesday, January 6th the United States Capitol was attacked by a violent, insurrectionist mob radicalized in part in a digital echo chamber that your company designed, built, and maintained. Perhaps no single entity is more responsible for the spread of dangerous conspiracy theories at scale or for inflaming anti-government grievance than the one that you started and that you oversee today as Chairman and Chief Executive Officer.

We recognize the recent steps Facebook has taken to crack down on harmful accounts such as those related to QAnon, by removing specific posts that incite violence and banning specific users. But content moderation on a service with more than 2.7 billion monthly users is a whack-a-mole answer to a systemic problem, one that is rooted in the very design of Facebook.

The fundamental problem is that Facebook, like other social media platforms, sorts and presents information to users by feeding them the content most likely to reinforce their existing political biases, especially those rooted in anger, anxiety, and fear. The algorithms Facebook uses to maximize user engagement on its platform undermine our shared sense of objective reality, intensify fringe political beliefs, facilitate connections between extremist users, and, tragically, lead some of them to commit real-world physical violence, such as what we experienced firsthand on January 6th.

Facebook has known about the dangers of its algorithmic recommendation engine for years. An internal company presentation from 2018 found that “64% of all extremist group joins are due to our recommendation tools...[o]ur recommendation systems grow the problem.”¹ The presentation further noted that “[o]ur algorithms exploit the human brain’s attraction to divisiveness.”² Facebook executives reportedly blocked efforts at the time to address the issues raised in the presentation.³ We are left to wonder, sadly, whether we would be in a different place today if these warnings had been fully heeded.

¹ Horwitz, Jeff and Deepa Seetharaman, “Facebook Executives Shut Down Efforts to Make the Site Less Divisive.” *The Wall Street Journal*. May 26, 2020. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-it-encourages-division-top-executives-nixed-solutions-11590507499>.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

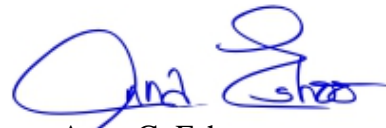
Facebook has shown that it is capable of dampening the harmful effects of its product, when it wants to. For example, last year, Facebook briefly tested a new machine-learning algorithm that demoted posts its users would deem “bad for the world.”⁴ It scrapped the algorithm, when it became clear that it meant users were spending less time on the site.⁵ (The company instead approved a less effective algorithm that didn’t reduce time spent among users.⁶) Further, before the 2020 elections, Facebook stopped recommending that users join political and social issue groups, a tacit acknowledgement that its recommendation system can be harmful.⁷ Again, this change was temporary. Finally, ahead of the U.S. Senate elections in Georgia, Facebook turned off a safeguard it had in place to limit the spread of election-related misinformation. Not surprisingly, the result was a spike in partisan political content and a decline in authoritative news sources in users’ newsfeeds.⁸

It is our hope that Facebook will immediately make permanent and universal these and other changes to its recommendation system which have been implemented temporarily or on a trial basis in the past, and that you begin a fundamental reexamination of maximizing user engagement as the basis for algorithmic sorting and recommendation.

Sincerely,



Tom Malinowski
Member of Congress



Anna G. Eshoo
Member of Congress

⁴ Roose, Kevin; Isaac, Mike; Frenkel, Sheera, “Facebook Struggles to Balance Civility and Growth.” *The New York Times*. November 24, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/24/technology/facebook-election-misinformation.html>

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Mac, Ryan and Craig Silverman, “Facebook Quietly Suspended Political Group Recommendations Ahead of the US Presidential Election.” *Buzzfeed News*. October 30, 2020. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanmac/facebook-suspended-group-recommendations-election>

⁸ Faife, Corin, “In Georgia, Facebook’s Changes Brought Back a Partisan News Feed.” *The Markup*. January 5, 2021. <https://themarkup.org/citizen-browser/2021/01/05/in-georgia-facebooks-changes-brought-back-a-partisan-news-feed>

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