

**Committee on Energy and Commerce**

**Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery  
of  
Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr.**

***Hearing on “Disinformation Nation: Social Media’s Role in Promoting Extremism and  
Misinformation”***

**March 25, 2021**

We are here today because the spread of disinformation and extremism has been growing online, particularly on social media, where there are little to no guardrails in place to stop it. And unfortunately, this disinformation and extremism doesn’t just stay online. It has real world, often dangerous and even violent consequences. The time has come to hold online platforms accountable for their part in the rise of disinformation and extremism.

According to a survey conducted by Pew earlier this month, 30 percent of Americans are still hesitant or simply do not want to take the COVID-19 vaccine. On January 6, our Nation’s Capitol was violently attacked. This month, Homeland Security Secretary Mayorkas identified domestic violent extremism as the “greatest threat” to the United States. And crimes against Asian Americans have risen by nearly 150 percent since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Each of these controversies and crimes have been accelerated and amplified on social media platforms through misinformation campaigns, the spread of hate speech, and the proliferation of conspiracy theories.

Five years ago, during the 2016 Presidential elections, Facebook, Google, and Twitter were warned about – but simply ignored – their platforms’ role in spreading disinformation. Since then, the warnings have continued, but the problem has only gotten worse. Only after public outrage and pressure, did these companies make inadequate attempts to appease critics and lawmakers. But despite the public rebuke, Wall Street continued to reward the companies’ strategy to promote misinformation and disinformation by driving their stock prices even higher.

And now, despite repeated promises to seriously tackle this crisis, Facebook, Google, and Twitter instead routinely make minor changes to their policies in response to the public relations crisis of the day. They will change some underlying internal policy that may or may not be related to the problem. But that’s it. The underlying problem remains.

It is now painfully clear that neither the market nor public pressure will force these social media companies to take the aggressive action they need to take to eliminate disinformation and extremism from their platforms. And, therefore, it is time for Congress and this Committee to legislate and realign these companies’ incentives to effectively deal with disinformation and extremism.

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Today, our laws give these companies, and their leaders, a blank check to do nothing. Rather than limit the spread of disinformation, Facebook, Google, and Twitter have created business models that exploit the human brain's preference for divisive content to get Americans hooked on their platform, at the expense of the public interest. It isn't just that social media companies are allowing disinformation to spread – it's that, in many cases, they are actively amplifying and spreading it themselves. Fines, to the extent they are levied at all, have simply become the cost of doing business.

The dirty truth is that they are relying on algorithms to purposefully promote conspiratorial, divisive, or extremist content so they can rake in the ad dollars. This is because the more outrageous and extremist the content, the more engagement and views these companies get from their users. More views equal more money.

It's crucial to understand that these companies aren't just mere bystanders – they are playing an active role in the meteoric rise of disinformation and extremism.

So when a company is actually promoting this harmful content, I question whether existing liability protections should apply.

Members on this Committee have suggested legislative solutions and introduced bills. The Committee is going to consider all these options so that we can finally align the interests of these companies with the interests of the public and hold the platforms, and their CEOs, accountable when they stray.

That is why you are here today, Mr. Zuckerberg, Mr. Pichai, and Mr. Dorsey. You have failed to meaningfully change after your platforms played a role in fomenting insurrection, in abetting the spread of COVID-19, and trampling Americans civil rights.

And while it may be true that some bad actors will shout fire in a crowded theater, by promoting harmful content, your platforms are handing them a megaphone to be heard in every theater across the country and the world. Your business model itself has become the problem.

The time for self-regulation is over. It is time we legislate to hold you accountable. With that, I yield back.