

Congressman Brett Guthrie
Energy and Commerce Committee
Joint Telecom and Consumer Protection and Commerce Subcommittees Hearing

“A Country in Crisis: How Disinformation Online Is Dividing the Nation”

Opening Statement
June 24, 2020

Thank you Chairman Doyle, Ranking Member Latta, Chair Schakowsky, Ranking Member McMorris Rodgers, Chairman Pallone, and Ranking Member Walden for holding this hearing.

The coronavirus outbreak has shown us the true strength of American technology. As much of our world became digital, we saw innovation across the board – from doctors switching to telehealth services, to educators teaching students from a far, to friends and family connecting online more so than ever before.

Through this explosion of innovation, we have seen the best in people – companies and individuals stepping up to adapt to our new world, and neighbors helping neighbors as we all go through this together. Sadly, it has also brought out the worst in some people. While social media and other online websites can be used to connect us with each other and to information, unfortunately, bad actors can also weaponize these same platforms to further spread disinformation, putting Americans’ health and security at risk.

Social media platforms have responded to disinformation campaigns differently—some have taken a more active approach to monitoring and removing such content, while others have allowed disinformation, misinformation, and offensive and intolerable comments to fester on their sites, unchecked. In either case, I think we can all agree that better transparency regarding how these internal guidelines are determined, as well as the mechanisms by which such content is removed and the appeals processes they have in place, is needed. We must also ensure that social media companies are applying these standards fairly, and not just labeling a differing opinion as “disinformation.”

During this public health crisis, the Federal Trade Commission has continued its work protecting consumers, providing guidance to businesses, and protecting competition in the marketplace throughout the pandemic. They have issued dozens of warnings to individuals and entities marketing therapies and products that claim to prevent or treat COVID-19. Further, they have disseminated information with consumers on how to avoid such scams and verify information they come across online, which I have shared with my constituents. This information will continue to be vital as we navigate this unprecedented time.

Looking forward, I believe that emerging technology also has the potential to be a useful tool in combatting illicit content online and putting a stop to these bad actors. That is why I recently introduced the Countering Online Harms Act,

which would direct the Federal Trade Commission to conduct a study on how artificial intelligence may be used to identify and remove harmful online content, such as disinformation campaigns, “deepfakes,” counterfeit products, and other deceptive and fraudulent content that is intended to scam or do harm. Further, my bill would require the FTC to submit a subsequent report to Congress with recommendations on how to implement solutions with AI to address those issues and recommendations for potential legislation. Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, we have tapped into America’s innovative potential to solve many of our new problems, and I hope the Countering Online Harms Act will build on this innovation to help protect American consumers as more and more of our lives are conducted online.

Thank you to all of the witnesses for your participation today, and I look forward to hearing your testimony.

Mr. Chairman, I’d like to submit for the record Ranking Member McMorris Rodgers’ opening statement.

Thank you again and I yield back.