

Opening Statement of Republican Leader Greg Walden
Joint Hearing: Subcommittees on Communications and Technology and Consumer
Protection and Commerce
“A Country in Crisis: How Disinformation Online is Dividing the Nation.”
June 24, 2020

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I welcome and thank all our witnesses for joining us today to discuss online misinformation.

The internet is both a tool for good and evil. It allows Americans to work and learn from home; gives us unlimited access to information; helps connect us to our loved ones; and strengthens our economy. The United States is a global leader in innovation and home to the most advanced technology companies in the world.

The internet has also empowered bad actors to promote online scams, post harmful and offensive content, and globally disseminate disinformation for free. Often, social media posts have become a cancer on civility, literally destroying reputations and lives with one click. It’s revolting to see what some people post online—something I can tell you from personal experience in this public position.

But we all know, it’s hard to regulate speech, especially in a democracy and with the protections we’re afforded under the First Amendment. We also know there are boundaries and limits. But over the course of our history, we’ve never had so much power to regulate speech

concentrated to so few in the private sector, and with the broad immunity protection they have under Section 230.

As we battle COVID-19, access to factual information is more important now than ever. However, we still see misinformation spread on platforms. I know the Trump Administration has aggressively gone after bad actors, but as soon as you take down one site or profile, another pops up. It's a global battle.

We are in the midst of a national fight for equality and justice. At the same time, we see bigots post unacceptable, racist, and offensive comments online. These comments have no place in our society.

Congress expects internet companies to monitor their platforms and take down false, misleading, and harmful content. That's why Congress enacted section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which provides liability protection to companies that take down content on their platforms.

Last fall, this committee held a hearing re-examine section 230. I said then and will say again: many concerns can be addressed if these companies simply do what they say they will do: enforce their terms of service. However, recent actions taken by these companies trouble me.

Twitter recently enacted new policies that seemingly target President Trump; meanwhile tweets that actually advocate violence are not flagged. Questions remain about who makes these decisions.

Google took action against *the Federalist* for allegedly violating Google's ad policy on comment sections, not for the content of its articles as *NBC* initially claimed. Significant questions persist as to whether Google followed their procedures and notified *the Federalist* directly. Moreover, why was this publication targeted and not others?

I think I can speak for everyone on this committee when I say that we do not support harmful or racist rhetoric or disinformation online. We expect these companies to do their best to flag or remove offensive and misleading content. But we also expect these immensely powerful platforms to follow their own processes for notifying users when they have potentially violated those policies, and to enforce policies equitably - but that does not appear to have happened of late.

That is why I have prepared legislation that will mandate more transparency from online platforms about their content practices. This would require these companies to file reports with the FTC so it is clear whether they are complying with their own terms of service, and to bring transparency to their appeal process.

I hope this can be bipartisan legislation. This is a straightforward bill that only impacts companies with revenues over \$1 billion - so I hardly think it will crash the Internet.

I realize that given a mix of human review and artificial intelligence, these platforms are not always going to get it right - but they absolutely must be more transparent.

Mr. Chairman, we politely asked Google to testify today. The response we got in return said it all. Their presence before this committee is LONG overdue. If they won't come voluntarily, perhaps it is time, Mr. Chairman, we compel their attendance.

The power to regulate speech in America is cloaked more and more in secret algorithms and centralized in the hands of a powerful few in the private sector. We've never needed transparency and accountability more. Freedom-loving Americans have far too much at stake for us to let internet companies go unchecked.

Thank you and I yield back.