



MEMORANDUM

September 21, 2020

To: Subcommittee on Consumer Protection and Commerce Members and Staff

Fr: Committee on Energy and Commerce Staff

Re: Hearing on “Mainstreaming Extremism: Social Media’s Role in Radicalizing America”

On **Thursday, September 24, 2020, at 11:00 a.m. via Cisco Webex online video conferencing**, the Subcommittee on Consumer Protection and Commerce will hold a hearing entitled, “Mainstreaming Extremism: Social Media’s Role in Radicalizing America.”

I. BACKGROUND

Extremism resulting in violence, terrorism, social division, and oppression is a growing problem in the United States.¹ Extremism comes in a number of different types, including religious, far-left, far-right, ethnonationalist, and other special-interests.² Extremist groups organize around a variety of ideologies within those types but share certain characteristics such as advocating illegal, violent, or other forms of extreme behavior.³

A number of recent studies found that right-wing extremism—an ideology that promotes racial or ethnic supremacy, opposes government authority, or attacks certain policies, such as abortion—has grown rapidly and poses the greatest threat of terrorism.⁴ Between 1994 and 2020, right-wing extremists were responsible for 57 percent of all attacks and plots in the United

¹ Counter Terrorism Project, *Extremism* (www.counterextremism.com/content/extremism) (accessed Sept. 17, 2020).

² *Id.*; Center for Strategies & International Studies, *The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States* (June 2020) (csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200612_Jones_DomesticTerrorism_v6.pdf).

³ Counter Terrorism Project, *Extremism* (www.counterextremism.com/content/extremism) (accessed Sept. 17, 2020).

⁴ *Id.*; Center for Strategies & International Studies, *The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States* (June 2020) (csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200612_Jones_DomesticTerrorism_v6.pdf); *All of the Extremist Killings in the US in 2018 Had Links to Right-Wing Extremism, According to New Report*, Business Insider (Aug. 5, 2019); *Attacks by White Extremists Are Growing. So Are Their Connections.*, New York Times (Apr. 3, 2019); *UN Warns Right-Wing Extremist Groups Getting Bolder, More Lethal*, VOA News (Apr. 1, 2020).

States, resulting in 335 deaths.⁵ In comparison, religious extremists—those who embrace violence to spread and support their faith-based belief system—perpetrated 15 percent of terrorist events.⁶ A quarter of terrorist incidents and 22 deaths were committed by left-wing extremists, who oppose capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism or support a decentralized political system, such as anarchism.⁷

II. EXTREMISM ON SOCIAL MEDIA

A. Exploitation of Social Media Platforms to Radicalize and Encourage Violence and Social Division

Social media platforms are key vectors for radicalization and mobilization for all forms of extremism. The ability of social media platforms to connect like-minded, but geographically distant people is a key factor in radicalization.⁸ Otherwise socially isolated individuals turn to social media for connection with others and, through algorithm-driven recommendations, find an outlet for their grievances in hate-filled, violent material and camaraderie with those who post that material.⁹ Over 70 percent of extremists used social media platforms to consume content, engage in extremist dialogues, spread extremist propaganda, and communicate with other extremists from 2011 to 2016.¹⁰ Evidence also suggests that social media has contributed to the acceleration of radicalization of extremists in the United States.¹¹

Extremists use a wide range of social media platforms, including several mainstream sites. Between 2005 and 2016, nearly two-thirds of extremists used Facebook to promote extremism, making Facebook the predominant social media platform of extremists during that time.¹² About one-third of extremists used YouTube, and nearly a quarter of extremists used Twitter.¹³ Over ten percent of extremists relied on encrypted platforms, such as Telegram, Kik, and WhatsApp.¹⁴

⁵ Center for Strategies & International Studies, *The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States* (June 2020) (csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200612_Jones_DomesticTerrorism_v6.pdf).

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Life After Hate, *What We Get Wrong About Online Radicalization* (Sept. 17, 2019) (www.lifeafterhate.org/blog/2019/9/12/what-we-get-wrong-about-online-radicalization).

⁹ *Id.*; *Isolation and Social Media Combine to Radicalize Violent Offenders*, Wall Street Journal (Aug. 5, 2019).

¹⁰ The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, *The Use of Social Media by United States Extremists* (2018) (www.start.umd.edu/publication/use-social-media-united-states-extremists).

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

Extremists often use social media to spread disinformation and propaganda to sow division and social discord.¹⁵ A primary goal of extremist groups is to move people from online talk to offline action.¹⁶ That action can take many forms, and often uses social media platforms to disseminate plans. Neo-Nazis are telling followers to deliberately infect Jews and Muslims with coronavirus.¹⁷ Reporters covering extremism, and those individuals and groups who are perceived as enemies, are targeted for harassment, doxxing (in which private information is published online as part of coordinated efforts to intimidate), and death threats.¹⁸ Social media also plays a role in documenting and glamorizing violence and can lead to similar violent attacks.¹⁹

B. Social Media's Response to Extremism

Social media sites use a combination of automated tools, content moderators, and user reports to identify extremism, remove extremist content, and block users in violation of their platform's own community guidelines.²⁰ Facebook's policies state that they remove content that expresses support or praise for groups, leaders, or individuals involved in terrorist activity, organized hate, mass murder (including attempts) or multiple murder, human trafficking, and organized violence or criminal activity.²¹ Twitter's guidelines and policies prohibit the affiliation or promotion of illicit activities of a terrorist organization or violent extremist group.²² YouTube's Community Guidelines prohibit content that promotes terrorism, such as content that

¹⁵ Mason Youngblood, *Extremist Ideology as a Complex Contagion: The Spread of Far-Right Radicalization in the United States Between 2005 and 2017*, Humanities and Social Sciences Communications (July 31, 2020); see also *Neo-Nazis Encouraging Followers to 'Deliberately Infect' Jews and Muslims with Coronavirus*, CNN (July 9, 2020).

¹⁶ See note 8.

¹⁷ *Neo-Nazis Encouraging Followers to 'Deliberately Infect' Jews and Muslims with Coronavirus*, CNN (July 9, 2020).

¹⁸ *Doxxing, Assault, Death Threats: The New Dangers Facing US Journalists Covering Extremism*, The Guardian (June 14, 2018); *How Right-Wing Extremists Stalk, Dox, and Harass their Enemies*, The Intercept (Sept. 6, 2017).

¹⁹ See note 8; Robert M. Bond, PhD and Brad J. Bushman, PhD, *The Contagious Spread of Violence Among US Adolescents Through Social Networks*, Am Journal of Public Health (Feb. 2017).

²⁰ Bharath Ganesh and Jonathan Bright, *Countering Extremists on Social Media: Challenges for Strategic Communication and Content Moderation*, Policy & Internet (Mar. 16, 2020) (onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/poi3.236); Hamidreza Alvari et al., *Detection of Violent Extremists in Social Media*, IEEE Conference on Data Intelligence and Security (2019).

²¹ Facebook, *Community Standards* (www.facebook.com/communitystandards/dangerous_individuals_organizations) (accessed Sept. 16, 2020).

²² Twitter, *Terrorism and Violent Extremism Policy* (Mar. 2019) (help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/violent-groups).

glorifies terrorist acts or incites violence.²³ Other sites, such as Gab, Telegraph, and 8chan, have more permissive content moderation policies.²⁴

Content moderation efforts tend to focus on the threat posed by religious extremists and lack consistent enforcement. Observers have noted that social media platforms appear to focus content moderation efforts on Islamist extremists rather than a broader swath of ideologies driving extremism.²⁵

Several high-profile extremist attacks have exposed gaps in content moderation policies and enforcement. On March 15, 2019, a white supremacist massacred 51 worshipers and injured 40 more at two mosques in New Zealand.²⁶ The extremist livestreamed his attack on Facebook, which was posted for nearly a half-hour, which was viewed thousands of times before being removed.²⁷ On August 3, 2019, a gunman targeting “Mexicans” killed over 20 people and injured several others in a mass shooting at an El Paso shopping center.²⁸ The shooter was indoctrinated into racist theories—including the Great Replacement Theory—on websites like 8chan, where the shooter posted a manifesto proclaiming that his actions were in defense of his country from cultural and ethnic replacement.²⁹ The extremist responsible for the death of 11 worshipers at a synagogue in Pittsburg on November 4, 2018, frequently threatened Jewish groups online and posted immigration conspiracy theories on the social network site Gab.³⁰

III. WITNESSES

The following witnesses have been invited to testify:

Marc Ginsberg
President
Coalition for a Safer Web

²³ Google, *Transparency Report* (transparencyreport.google.com/youtube-policy/featured-policies/violent-extremism?hl=en) (accessed Sept. 16, 2020).

²⁴ Anti-Defamation League, *Telegram: The Latest Safe Haven for White Supremacists* (Dec. 2, 2019) (www.adl.org/blog/telegram-the-latest-safe-haven-for-white-supremacists); Anti-Defamation League, *Gab and 8chan: Home to Terrorist Plots Hiding in Plain Sight* (www.adl.org/resources/reports/gab-and-8chan-home-to-terrorist-plots-hiding-in-plain-sight) (accessed Sept. 16, 2020).

²⁵ *Why do Facebook and Twitter’s Anti-Extremist Guidelines Allow Right-Wingers More Freedom than Islamists?*, Washington Post (Aug. 1, 2019).

²⁶ *New Zealand Massacre Sentencing: What to Expect*, New York Times (Aug. 23, 2020).

²⁷ *No One Who Watched New Zealand Shooter’s Video Live Reported it to Facebook, Company Says*, Washington Post (Mar. 19, 2019).

²⁸ *As His Environment Changed, Suspect in El Paso Shooting Learned to Hate*, Washington Post (Aug. 9, 2019).

²⁹ *Id.*; The Bridge Initiative, *The Manifesto of the El Paso Terrorist* (Aug. 26, 2019) (bridge.georgetown.edu/research/the-manifesto-of-the-el-paso-terrorist/).

³⁰ *Pittsburg Synagogue Shooting Suspect Threatened Jewish Groups, Pushed Migrant Caravan Conspiracies*, NBC News (Oct. 27, 2018).

Tim Kendall

Chief Executive Officer
Moment

Taylor Dumpson

Hate Crime Survivor and Cyber-Harassment Target

John Donahue

Fellow
Rutgers University Miler Center for Community Protection and Resiliency
Former Chief of Strategic Initiatives
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