House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Consumer Protection and Commerce
Hearing on "Mainstreaming Extremism: Social Media's Role in Radicalizing America"
Statement for the Record: Congressman Tom Malinowski
September 23, 2020

In 2015, a gunman killed nine Black parishioners at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC—one of the deadliest attacks at a house of worship in U.S. history.[1] Federal prosecutors say he "self-radicalized" online, consuming content that led him to believe "that violent action is necessary to fight for white people and achieve white supremacy..."[2]

In 2018, a gunman killed 11 Jewish worshippers at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburg, PA—the deadliest attack against Jews on U.S. soil.[3] He left a long trail of racist, anti-Semitic posts on a fringe social network, calling Jews "the children of Satan" and telling his online followers hours before the attack, "[s]crew your optics, I'm going in."[4]

And in 2019, a gunman killed 23 people at a Walmart in El Paso, TX—the deadliest attack targeting Latinos in U.S history.[5] His manifesto posted to 8chan referenced conspiracies related to the "great replacement" of whites and other racist tropes that continue to circulate on more mainstream social media sites today.

These attacks happened in different places, the perpetrators favored different platforms, and the victims were targeted for different, bigoted reasons—but each of them shows how extremist content consumed online can enable real-world, offline violence.

The algorithmic amplification of hateful, divisive, and conspiratorial content threatens the safety of Americans and the integrity of our democratic system. Despite the industry's repeated claims that it is addressing the problem with the urgency it demands, its recommendation tools continue to push harmful, radicalizing content to users. I have seen it first-hand. Earlier this summer, my office ran a simple, 10-minute experiment in which we enabled a VPN, downloaded a new browser, and created a Facebook account to see if – and how quickly – white supremacist content would be recommended to the account after it joined a small handful groups related to Alex Jones, QAnon, and other alt-right, conspiracy-oriented topics. The recommendations came immediately, including for groups or pages named, "Proud to be a White American," "Alt-Right Memes for Alt-White Teens," "White genocide," "George Soros the

---

[1] Bailey, Sarah Pulliam. "The Charleston Shooting Is the Largest Mass Shooting in a House of Worship since 1991." The Washington Post. June 18, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/06/18/the-charleston-shooting-is-the-largest-mass-shooting-in-a-house-of-worship-since-1991/.

[2] Berman, Mark. "Prosecutors Say Dylann Roof 'self-radicalized' Online, Wrote Another Manifesto in Jail." The Washington Post. August 22, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2016/08/22/prosecutors-say-accused-charleston-church-gunman-self-radicalized-online/.

[3] "Deadly Shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue." Anti-Defamation League. https://www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/deadly-shooting-at-the-tree-of-life-synagogue.

[4] "Tree of Life Shooting Revives "Optics" Debate Among White Supremacists." Anti-Defamation League. November 06, 2018. https://www.adl.org/blog/tree-of-life-shooting-revives-optics-debate-among-white-supremacists.

[5] Murphy, Heather. "El Paso Shooting Suspect Indicted on Capital Murder Charge." The New York Times. September 12, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/12/us/el-paso-suspect-capital-murder.html.

Cockroach King," "Proud White Man," and "The Extinction of the White Race." (See Appendix for examples.)

Facebook has known about the dangers of its 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."[6] The presentation further noted that "[o]ur algorithms exploit the human brain's attraction to divisiveness," something that early Facebook employees have admitted was intentional and central to the core design of the product.[7] Facebook executives reportedly blocked efforts at the time to address the issues raised in the internal presentation.[8]

When Facebook *does* take some sort of action, it is often too little and too late. In August 2020, when Facebook removed several hundred groups and pages tied to QAnon, millions of Americans had already been exposed to the dangerous theories it promotes; the FBI had already sounded the alarm about how it likely motivates domestic extremists to commit violent acts; and the conspiracy had already undermined trust in America's democratic institutions and deepened our nation's political polarization.

The industry has shown time and again that it is not up to the task of regulating itself, perhaps in part because there are few financial incentives for it to do so—or at least few financial consequences for it *not* doing so. Over the past five years, as harmful content flourished on Facebook and dangerous recommendations proliferated on YouTube, the stock prices for Facebook and for YouTube's parent company more than doubled.

The harms posed by the largest social media platforms are serious enough to warrant revisiting Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which prevents them from being held legally responsible for content that their users post (with some limited exceptions). The law has been an important, necessary tool to enable the internet to grow and thrive—but is not sacrosanct, and we as policymakers should not treat it as such, particularly as it relates to content amplified by companies' own algorithms. The law should be amended to incentivize the largest platforms to develop and deploy more responsible algorithms and hold them liable if they don't, while respecting Constitutionally protected free expression.

Ultimately, we should not tolerate platforms' business models that intentionally exploit primal human emotions – rage, fear, anxiety – to maximize engagement and the time we spend on their sites. If left unaddressed, we will continue to see the degradation of our democracy, the basic social ties that bind us together as Americans, and the existence of a shared sense of objective reality about our country and the world around us. The stakes could not be higher.

---

[6] 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.
[7] Lanier, Jaron. Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now. New York, NY: Picador, 2018.
[8] 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.

Appendix: Screenshots showing examples of recommendations served by Facebook in June 2020.