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LETTER FOR THE RECORD

SUBMITTED BY
HUMANE SOCIETY LEGISLATIVE FUND

**HEARING ON "MAINSTREAMING EXTREMISM: SOCIAL MEDIA'S ROLE IN RADICALIZING
AMERICA"**

TO THE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE, SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSUMER
PROTECTION AND COMMERCE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SEPTEMBER 24, 2020



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The Honorable Jan Schakowsky
Subcommittee Chairwoman
Committee on Energy And Commerce
U.S. House of Representatives

The Honorable Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Subcommittee Ranking Member
Committee on Energy And Commerce
U.S. House of Representatives

September 24, 2020

Thank you Chairwoman Schakowsky, Ranking Member McMorris Rodgers, and the other distinguished members of the House Subcommittee on Consumer Protection and Commerce for holding the hearing titled, “Mainstreaming Extremism: Social Media’s Role in Radicalizing America.” While you consider the role of social media in facilitating extremism and violence, we urge you to also consider the significant part that online wildlife trafficking and animal abuse content plays in facilitating extremism, violence, and terrorism.

Online illicit trade in wildlife and their parts funds extremist groups

Over the last decade, we have seen a surge in traffickers engaged in the illegal online sale and purchase of protected wildlife species. This is because the internet increases accessibility to clients, and provides marketing/payment tools and private communication applications that make it easier to avoid law enforcement.¹ It is well known that some militant and terrorist organizations and extremist groups are sourcing significant financing from the illegal trade in wildlife and their parts. A few examples of groups known or suspected of doing so include the Lord’s Resistance Army, the Janjaweed Arab militia of Sudan,² Al Qaeda-affiliated al-Shabab in Somalia, Boko Haram

¹ Dan Stiles, “Concern over Social Media Trafficking of Great Apes,” SWARA, July-September 2017, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e3a7fb845f8c668df48d437/t/5e60c587d2194734b1e5094b/1583400346595/Social_media_trafficking_of_great_apes.pdf

² Brian Christy, “How Killing Elephants Finances Terror in Africa,” National Geographic, September 2015, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/tracking-ivory/article.html>; Paula Kahumbu and Andrew Halliday, “Case Proven: Ivory Trafficking Funds Terrorism,” Guardian, August 30, 2015; Aislinn Laing, “LRA Warlord Joseph Kony Uses Ivory Trade to Buy Arms, Daily Telegraph, January 12, 2016; and Louisa Lombard, “Ivory Wars,” New York Times, September 20, 2012. Jeffrey Gettleman, “Africa’s Elephants Are Being Slaughtered in a Poaching Frenzy,” New York Times, September 3, 2012; and Michael Marshall, “Elephant Ivory Could Be Bankrolling Terrorist Groups,” New Scientist, October 2, 2013. Oftentimes, West Africans call Janjaweed any Muslim outsiders or any outsiders.)Natascha White, “The ‘White Gold of Jihad’: Violence, Legitimation and Contestation in Anti-Poaching Strategies,” Journal of Political Ecology, 21, 2014: 452-74.



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in Nigeria,³ the Muslim Seleka rebels in the Central African Republic, and RENAMO (Resistência Nacional Moçambicana).⁴

Social media and other online platforms are expanding access to revenue for these groups and—because of platform algorithms that present users with personalized experiences reflecting their interests—connecting illicit actors to each other and to markets faster than ever. Thus, the internet is facilitating the continual expansion and profitability of networked groups engaging in these illegal activities.⁵ Further, this trend likely results in new connections between groups merely engaged in illicit activity and those employing violence to realize extremist or radical aims. Closed and secret groups on platforms such as on Facebook and anonymous author avatars provide insulated environments for transnational criminals to connect, advertise, and move material with less fear of being caught. As many as 25% of profiles are avatars,⁶ enabling criminals to hide in plain sight.⁷

In light of these activities, Facebook and Instagram banned the sale of all animals in 2017.⁸ However, groups and individuals continue to advertise live wildlife and their parts on these platforms. Research conducted by the Alliance to Combat Crime Online has shown that 70 percent of the known annual illegal cheetah trade takes place on Facebook and Instagram.⁹ Ivory and rhino horn are sold using code words in closed groups.¹⁰ Similar findings have been made on other online platforms such as Alibaba, Taobao, Google, Baidu, and others.¹¹

Unfortunately, website operators have not dedicated the necessary resources to curtail these illegal activities or assist law enforcement effort to shut them down.

³ Sen. Ashish Kumar, “Terrorists slaughter African elephants, use ivory to finance operations,” Washington Times, November 2013, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/nov/13/terrorists-slaughter-african-elephants-use-ivoryt/?page=all>.

⁴ Robin Thomas Naylor, “Patriots and Profiteers: Economic Warfare, Sanctions, Embargo Busting, and Their Human Cost” (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1999) 178.

⁵ Dan Stiles, “Holding social media companies accountable for facilitating illegal wildlife trade,” Mongabay, October 2019, <https://news.mongabay.com/2019/10/holding-social-media-companies-accountable-for-facilitating-illegal-wildlife-trade-commentary>.

⁶ Janet Burns, “How Many Social Media Users Are Real People?” June, 2018, <https://gizmodo.com/how-many-social-media-users-are-real-people-1826447042>.

⁷ Dan Stiles, “Holding social media companies accountable for facilitating illegal wildlife trade.”

⁸ Facebook, “Commerce Policies,” https://www.facebook.com/policies/commerce?_rdc=1&_rdr.

⁹ Gretchen Peters, “Time To Reform CDA230: Testimony to the House Subcommittee on Communication and Technology and the Subcommittee on Consumer Protection and Commerce,” October 2019, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/IF/IF16/20191016/110075/HHRG-116-IF16-Wstate-PetersG-20191016.pdf>.

¹⁰ Zoë Schlanger, “The ivory trade is alive and well, thanks to Facebook,” QUARTZ, April 2018, <https://qz.com/1250260/the-ivory-trade-appears-to-be-alive-and-well-thanks-to-facebook>.

¹¹ Dan Stiles, “Holding social media companies accountable for facilitating illegal wildlife trade.”



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Without funding from the exploitation of wildlife and the ability to use online platforms, extremist groups would be further limited in the breadth of their operations and the scope of their impact. Importantly, it would also diminish their recruitment capabilities.

We urge the committee to take into consideration the impacts that the online trade in protected wildlife species has on funding and facilitating violence and terrorism.

Online activity involving animal abuses creates communities of interest around violence

The proliferating online distribution, purchase, and sale of videos and other online content depicting bestiality and extreme acts of violence towards animals also plays a significant role in how radical, extreme, or terrorist groups form, recruit, and turn discussion into action. Law enforcement officials have identified a strong link between violence towards animals and violence towards humans. By engaging in consuming or posting animal abuse material, these community members also demonstrate a predisposition towards violence.

“Animal crush” videos are an apt example of online illegal animal cruelty content around which people form communities of violence. Animal crush videos depict the slow, cruel killing of animals, such as puppies, kittens, mice, bunnies, goats, and others. The killing is often done by provocatively-dressed women wearing high heels who grind the animals to death with their feet or who use other objects to torture the animals for people who derive sexual or other gratification from watching them. Supreme Court Justice Alito has described “animal crushing” behavior as “horrific,” “depraved,” and having “no social value.”¹² With the passage of the Animal Crush Video Prohibition Act in 2010 and the Preventing Animal Cruelty and Torture (PACT) Act last year, it is illegal to distribute such videos or conduct the acts of animal cruelty therein.

Despite this strong legal action, websites and social media platforms continue to create virtual places for people to go to watch acts of violence against animals, such as animal crush videos and other material in violation of these laws, the Animal Welfare Act, and other animal protection laws. They allow people with a predisposition toward violence to form communities of interest around violence, talk to each other, and to plan and encourage future violence. These violent communities are fertile recruitment grounds for radical and extremist groups who approach these communities offering social acceptance, and a purpose towards which they can apply their violent inclinations. As noted in the hearing materials, “Otherwise socially isolated individuals turn to social media for connection with others and, through algorithm-driven recommendations, find an

¹² Courtney Lee, “The PACT Act: A Step in the Right Direction on the Path to Animal Welfare,” JURIST, December 2019, <https://www.jurist.org/commentary/2019/12/courtney-lee-pact-act>.



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outlet for their grievances in hate-filled, violent material and camaraderie with those who post that material.”¹³

The online platforms are able to connect like-minded individuals to discuss, share in, and encourage violence, which makes them more likely to act on their violent tendencies. As noted in the hearing materials, “The ability of social media platforms to connect like-minded, but geographically distant people is a key factor in radicalization.”¹⁴ Those seeking justification for something that is culturally taboo (violence to animals or humans) find acceptance and sometimes purpose for their violence in these online groups and are much more susceptible to a group dynamic that encourages it. Group pressures within extremist groups “produce extremely powerful forces. In particular, there are pressures to conform and pressures to commit acts of violence.”¹⁵ Online communities centered on violence, and ones potentially filled with those looking to recruit for radical causes, can be quite similar.

The issues of algorithm-driven recommendations, privacy and liability shields for illegal activity, as well as a lack of enforcement activity, all contribute to the persistence of online wildlife trafficking and illegal animal abuse. While many of the platforms have policies banning illegal activity, these policies are only as effective as their enforcement, and more need to include restrictions and disclosures regarding these illegal activities in their terms and conditions.

The issues discussed here and at the hearing are all intrinsically connected. They influence and drive each other. We urge the committee to take into consideration the impacts that social media has on extremism and violence through its facilitation of wildlife trafficking and illegal animal abuse content sharing.

Thank you for your consideration of these important issues.

¹³ Life After Hate, “What We Get Wrong About Online Radicalization,” September 17, 2019, www.lifeafterhate.org/blog/2019/9/12/what-we-get-wrong-about-online-radicalization; “Isolation and Social Media Combine to Radicalize Violent Offenders”, Wall Street Journal, August 5, 2019.

¹⁴ *Id.* Life After Hate.

¹⁵ Jerrold Post, “Terrorist psycho-logic: Terrorist behavior as a product of psychological forces,” in *Origins of Terrorism*, ed. Walter Reich (Washington, D.C.: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998) 33.