

Opening Statement of Republican Leader Greg Walden

CPAC Subcommittee Hearing

“Mainstreaming Extremism: Social Media’s Role in Radicalizing America.”

September 24, 2020

As Prepared for Delivery

Good morning. I would first like to welcome and thank our witnesses for being here and sharing your experiences and perspectives.

My colleagues have heard me discuss my degree in journalism and my background in radio, which I believe has given me a good perspective on our liberties guaranteed in the Bill of Rights. It has also provided important perspective on the responsibilities that platforms have to ensure voices can be heard.

You can learn a lot from the history of radio. In 1938, for instance, Orson Welles had a radio program that inspired widespread panic in dramatizing a Martian invasion with an adaptation of the H.G. Wells’ novel “The War of the Worlds.” Despite notices of it being fiction, people still believed it was real at the time, and it set off a furor.

Unfortunately, in today’s social media age, furor set off by misinformation has become more common, spreads more quickly, and is often harder to recognize.

This year, following the tragic death of George Floyd in May, Washington, D.C. experienced its own strange occurrence online, with no disclosure it was fictional content. Under a hashtag “*#DCBlackout*” that went viral on Twitter, claims were made that internet service had gone down, despite no legitimate news sources corroborating the information. The viral campaign went unfettered on Twitter for hours and spread to other platforms.

To quote the Washington Post, “*the thread swelled with untrue claims that authorities had somehow blocked protesters from communicating from their smartphones to crack down on the unrest, which included looting and some fires.*” The tweets included images of Washington burning, images we would learn were from a TV show, not from real life.

During this incident, we now know there were fake and hijacked accounts involved with the misinformation campaign around the events in Washington. Despite its ability to quickly spot trends for its own promotional purposes, as well as suspect activity and accounts, it concerns me that Twitter was not able to promptly spot this misinformation on its platform. This is a problem.

People of every ethnicity, age, gender and religion are harmed when these events escalate, and bad actors look to turn peaceful protests into violent riots.

The platforms must do more; they must do better and they owe it to their users to share publicly how they plan to. In fact, Chairman Pallone, Chairwoman Schakowsky, Subcommittee Republican Leader Rodgers and I wanted the CEOs of these companies here today. It’s not the first time we’ve requested they appear. It is helpful and appropriate when the leaders of these amazingly successful

American companies come before congressional committees and explain their practices, which they did over three years ago while I was chairman of this committee. Some have been willing to appear but others, like Google, have yet to do so.

Users of your services deserve answers...like Miss Dumpson who should feel safe to study at a place of her choosing. Police Officers like Mister Donohue who has to worry about his brothers and sisters in uniform being the targets of violence.

I hope to be more enlightened from the questions and debate here today.

I also want to share my disappointment that the majority's memo for today's hearing did not include "ambush-style killings of law enforcement officers" as a form of "mainstreaming of extremism." Let me be clear, extremism that results in violence is wrong, and that includes the terrible ambush-style killings of law enforcement. The Democrats' memo stated that from 1994 to 2020 "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." That number should, sadly, be a lot higher, but the Democrats looked the other way when came to ambush-style killings of law enforcement officials...why? Think how that makes their families feel.

Our great country has had a rough 2020. We'll all be glad to put this year in the rearview mirror. But along the way I hope we have realized how modern tools of communications can easily be misused and how important it is that we all work together to both protect free speech without ripping the fabric of the country and to

protect the safety and well-being of online users. Hopefully, the platforms will rise to the challenge and do more voluntarily, otherwise Congress will have to step further into this fray.

Thank you and I yield back.