



March 25, 2021

The Honorable Frank Pallone, Jr., Chairman
The Honorable Cathy McMorris Rodgers, Ranking Member
U.S House Energy and Commerce Committee

The Honorable Michael F. Doyle, Chairman
The Honorable Robert E. Latta, Ranking Member
U.S. House Communications and Technology Subcommittee

The Honorable Janice D. Schakowsky, Chairwoman
The Honorable Gus M. Bilirakis
U.S. House Consumer Protection and Commerce Subcommittee

Re: Misinformation and Disinformation Plaguing Online Platforms

Dear Chairman Pallone, Ranking Member McMorris Rodgers, Chairman Doyle, Ranking Member Latta, Chairwoman Shakowsky, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and Members of the Subcommittees:

We the undersigned parties, together the Disinfo Defense League, respectfully request that you accept this letter for the record of your March 25, 2021, hearing with the CEOs of Alphabet, Facebook and Twitter to examine misinformation and disinformation on their platforms.

The Disinfo Defense League, or DDL, is a distributed national network of grassroots, community-based organizations that are building a collective defense against disinformation campaigns deliberately targeting Black, Latinx, AAPI, and other communities of color. For the past year, the DDL has taken on the storm of conspiracy theories, half-truths, and lies surgically designed to depress the Black, Brown, Asian American, and Pacific Islander vote. Following the

January 6th insurrection at the Capitol, DDL researchers and members are working together to understand this ongoing threat and to find innovative solutions to combat these attacks on our democracy.

As Mark Zuckerberg, Jack Dorsey, and Sundar Pichai appear before your committee, it is vitally important that you and the CEOs themselves hear directly from grassroots, community leaders about the true cost of disinformation, and the real-world harms impacting our communities, which are perpetuated and amplified by Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

Mitigating disinformation is critical to a flourishing and inclusive democracy, and advancing public health and safety. As researchers at Harvard's Shorenstein Center have explained, disinformation disrupts our access to timely, relevant, and accurate information; it takes advantage of algorithmic amplification; and silences its victims through harassment and by inciting fear.¹ Repeated false claims about election fraud, which were proliferated on social and traditional media ahead of January 6th, drove the violent insurrectionist mob to storm the U.S. Capitol. Moreover, a flood of COVID-19 disinformation has led to weak public policy responses undermining our collective ability to mitigate the spread of the virus, and has spurred the politicization of various community safety regulations, which has resulted in massive infection and death rates, disproportionately affecting Black, Latinx, Native American, Indigenous, and Asian American people.

In fact, disinformation routinely and disproportionately harms communities of color, women, immigrants, religious minorities, people living on low incomes, LGBTQIA people and others.

Big Tech not only allows this disinformation, it drives it. Big Tech's hate-and-lie-for-profit business model has built algorithmic systems that direct traffic to content that keeps people engaged and enraged; and they funnel their users to certain kinds of content based, in part, on behavioral and demographic data that the companies collect on them. Facebook's own research revealed that 64 percent of people who find extremist content on the site are led there by Facebook's own recommendations system.² Facebook buried that research for several years, until

¹ See Letter from Joan Donovan et al., Technology and Social Change Team, Harvard Kennedy School, Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, to Irene Khan, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, United Nations (Feb. 15, 2021) (comment submitted to UN Special Rapporteur's Annual Thematic Report to be presented to the Human Rights Council at its 47th Session in June 2021), <https://mediamanipulation.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/Donovan%20et%20al%20TaSC%20Comment%20-%20FINAL.pdf>.

² See Jeff Horwitz & Deepa Seetharaman, *Facebook Executives Shut Down Efforts to Make the Site Less Divisive*, Wall St. J. (May 26, 2020), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-it-encourages-division-top-executives-nixed-solutions-11590507499>.

the *Wall Street Journal* exposed it. How many such studies have these companies conducted? What else does it know about how its products are harming people and our democracy? These and other important questions must be answered by the CEOs before you today.

As we confront these threats, however, we must remember that hate-and-lie-for-profit punditry is hardly a new phenomenon — and broadcasters and cable companies are exploiting it too, as they have been for many years. Following the historic immigration reform marches in 2006, Lou Dobbs routinely spewed anti-immigrant lies from his CNN perch, falsely claiming for instance that Latinx immigrants were bringing 7,000 cases of leprosy to the United States per year. iHeartRadio (at the time, Clear Channel Radio), the largest radio broadcaster in the country with more than a thousand stations nationwide, is rife with talk shows spewing hate, divisiveness and downright racist conspiracy theories.³

Mega-media conglomerates like Fox News⁴ and Sinclair Broadcast Group,⁵ as well as channels like One America News Network⁶ and Newsmax TV,⁷ are also regular purveyors of hate and disinformation for profit to this day. In the past year alone, they have all spread, and amplified with their huge megaphones, dangerous conspiracies about the pandemic and vaccines, promoted outright lies about voting and the irrefutable outcome of the presidential election, and smeared activists, journalists and members of Congress.

³ See, e.g., Chon A. Noriega & Francisco Javier Iribarren, *Quantifying Hate Speech on Commercial Talk Radio* (Nov. 2011), https://www.chicano.ucla.edu/files/WP01_Quantifying-Hate-Speech.pdf; *Conservative talk radio contributes to more hate of minorities, study says*, Fox News Latino (Aug. 1, 2012), <https://www.chicano.ucla.edu/files/news/TalkRadio-ConservativeTalkRadio-FoxNewsLatino-08-01-12.pdf>; *Clear Channel Radio - A Risky Investment for Bain Capital and Thomas H. Lee Partners: NHMC Calls Investors to Help Stop Trafficking Hate*, LatinHeat (Jun. 14, 2012), <https://www.latinheat.com/the-biz/clear-channel-radio-a-risky-investment-for-bain-capital-and-thomas-h-lee-partners/>; National Hispanic Media Coalition, *American Hate Radio: How a Powerful Outlet for Democratic Discourse Has Deteriorated Into Hate, Racism and Extremism* (2012), https://www.nhmc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/american_hate_radio_nhmc.pdf; National Hispanic Media Coalition, *Clear Channel's Company Culture of Hate Profiteering: How a Corporate Conglomerate Has Grown Immune to Market Forces*, <https://www.nhmc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Clear-Channels-Company-Culture-of-Hate-Profitteering-Final.pdf> (last visited Mar. 24, 2021).

⁴ See Media Matters for America, *Fox News*, <https://www.mediamatters.org/search?search=Fox+News> (last visited Mar. 24, 2021).

⁵ See Media Matters for America, *Sinclair Broadcast Group*, <https://www.mediamatters.org/search?search=Sinclair+Broadcast+Group> (last visited Mar. 24, 2021).

⁶ See Media Matters for America, *One America News Network*, <https://www.mediamatters.org/search?search=OAN> (last visited Mar. 24, 2021).

⁷ See Media Matters for America, *Newsmax TV*, <https://www.mediamatters.org/search?search=Newsmax> (last visited Mar. 24, 2021).

For these reasons, the undersigned thank you for examining the proliferation of disinformation over Big Tech platforms and urge you to examine the same over Big Media platforms. We look forward to working together to ensure the voices of your constituents impacted by disinformation help inform legislative interventions in Washington.

Respectfully submitted,

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Global Exchange
Higher Height Leadership Fund
Indivisible Northern Nevada
Indivisible Plus Washington
Kairos
MediaJustice
Media Matters for America
NARAL Pro-Choice America
National Council of Asian Pacific Americans (NCAPA)
New Georgia Project
People's Action
ReFrame
Rural Organizing Project
Stop Online Violence Against Women Inc.
UltraViolet
United We Dream
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