

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 21, 2021

Mr. Sundar Pichai, CEO
Google, LLC
Alphabet, Inc.
1600 Amphitheatre Parkway
Mountain View, California 94043

Ms. Susan Wojcicki, CEO
YouTube Inc.
901 Cherry Avenue
San Bruno, California 94066

Dear Mr. Pichai and Ms. Wojcicki,

On Wednesday, January 6th the United States Capitol was attacked by a violent, insurrectionist mob radicalized in part in a digital echo chamber that your company designed, built, and maintained. YouTube is among the online services most responsible for spreading fringe conspiracy theories at scale and for radicalizing some of its users to commit real-world, physical violence.

We recognize the steps YouTube has taken in recent months to limit, though not eliminate, videos perpetuating dangerous conspiracy theories, including those related to QAnon.¹ But content moderation on a service with more than *five-hundred hours* of video uploaded *every minute*² is a whack-a-mole answer to a systemic problem, one that is rooted in the very design of YouTube.

The fundamental problem is that YouTube, like other social media platforms, sorts, presents, and recommends information to users by feeding them the content most likely to reinforce their existing political biases, especially those rooted in anger, anxiety, and fear. The algorithms YouTube uses to maximize user engagement on its platform undermine our shared sense of objective reality, intensify fringe political beliefs, facilitate connections between extremist users, and, tragically, lead some of them to commit real-world, physical violence, such as what we experienced firsthand on January 6th.

YouTube's Chief Product Officer has stated that more than 70% of viewing time on the platform is attributable to recommendations.³ After the company announced that users were watching more than one billion hours of videos per day, the same executive said, "[t]he corpus of content continues to get richer and richer by the minute, and machine-learning algorithms do a better and better job of surfacing the content that an individual

¹ Elias, Jennifer, "YouTube Tightens Rules on Conspiracy Videos, but Stops Short of Banning QAnon." *CNBC*. October 15, 2020. <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/10/15/youtube-tightens-rules-on-conspiracy-videos-but-no-qanon-ban.html>.

² YouTube Official Blog. "YouTube for Press." <https://blog.youtube/press>

³ Solsman, Joan E., "YouTube's AI is the Puppet Master Over Most of what you Watch." *CNET*. January 10, 2018. <https://www.cnet.com/news/youtube-ces-2018-neal-mohan/>.

user likes.”⁴ These systems include a feature enabled by default that auto-plays videos one after another until the user exits or clicks to another video. This system, which was clearly designed to maximize the amount of time users spend on YouTube, also has the effect of trapping some in increasingly extremist echo chambers, a phenomenon which tragically leads some to commit the sort of violence we experienced at the Capitol on January 6th. Last year, the *New York Times* launched an entire podcast series about radicalization on YouTube, appropriately titled “Rabbit Hole.”

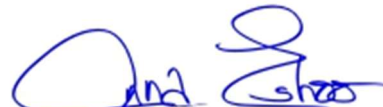
While YouTube has taken steps to reduce recommendations of conspiracy-related videos, leading researchers studying the problem have found that, “the overall volume of conspiratorial content recommended from informational channels remains relatively high.”⁵ Just after the attack on the Capitol, employees of YouTube and parent company Alphabet stated that YouTube continues to demonstrate a “policy of selective and insufficient enforcement of its guidelines against the use of the platform to spread hatred and extremism.”⁶

We believe YouTube should immediately make additional permanent changes to its recommendation systems, including disabling auto-play by default and ceasing all recommendations of conspiratorial material on users’ homepages and alongside videos. If those are too difficult to identify using automated processes, the company should cease all recommendations until an effective, technical solution is developed. More broadly, it is our hope that YouTube will begin a fundamental reexamination of maximizing user engagement as the basis for algorithmic sorting and recommendation.

Sincerely,



Tom Malinowski
Member of Congress



Anna G. Eshoo
Member of Congress

⁴ Nicas, Jack, “YouTube Tops 1 Billion Hours of Video a Day, on Pace to Eclipse TV.” *The Wall Street Journal*. February 27, 2017. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/youtube-tops-1-billion-hours-of-video-a-day-on-pace-to-eclipse-tv-1488220851>

⁵ Faddoul, Marc; Guillaume Chaslot; Hany Farid, “A Longitudinal Analysis of YouTube’s Promotion of Conspiracy Videos.” *ArXiv:2003.03318 [Cs]*. March 6, 2020. <http://arxiv.org/abs/2003.03318>.

⁶ Alphabet Workers Union (@AlphabetWorkers), Tweet, January 7, 2021, 6:57pm, <https://twitter.com/AlphabetWorkers/status/1347331587315171330>.

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