



Written Testimony of

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Subcommittee on Communications and Technology

Hearing Regarding

“Holding Big Tech Accountable”

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Sub-committee Chairman Doyle, Ranking Member McMorris Rodgers, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

My name is Frances Haugen. I used to work at Facebook. I joined the company because I believe Facebook has the potential to bring out the best in us. But I am here today because I believe that Facebook's products harm children, stoke division in our communities, threaten our democracy, weaken our national security and much more. Facebook is a company that has paid for its immense profits with our safety and security.

I am honored to be here today to share what I know, and I am grateful for the level of scrutiny these issues are getting. I hope we can stay focused on the real harms to real people rather than talk in abstractions. This is about the teenagers whose mental health is undermined by Instagram. And it is about their parents and teachers who are struggling to deal with the consequences of that harm. It is about the doctors and nurses who have to cope with the conspiracies about COVID-19 and vaccines. It is about the people who have suffered harassment online. It is about the families -- at home and around the world -- who live in places where hate, fear, and conflict have been ratcheted up to fever pitch through online radicalization.

Facebook may not cause all of these problems. But the company has definitely made them worse. Facebook knows what is happening on the platform, and they do far too little about it -- in fact they have incentives for it to be this way. That's what has to change.

The company's leadership knows how to make Facebook and Instagram safer. But they repeatedly chose to ignore these options, and continue to put their profits before people. They can change the name of the company, but unless they change the products, they will continue to damage the health and safety of our communities and threaten the integrity of our democracies.

There have been many others sounding this same alarm. This committee has heard from many experts in recent years. They have done the painstaking work of documenting these harms. I am sad to validate their findings. We have long known that Facebook's business model is problematic -- now we have the evidence to prove it. The documents I have shared with Congress speak for themselves.

What I have to say about these documents is grounded in far more than my experience at Facebook. I have worked as a product manager at large tech companies since 2006, including Google, Pinterest, Yelp, and Facebook. My job has largely focused on algorithmic products like Google+ Search and recommendation systems like the one that powers the Facebook News Feed. I know my way around these products, and I have watched them evolve over many years.

Working at four major tech companies that operate different types of social networks has given me the perspective to compare and contrast how each company approaches and deals with different challenges. The choices being made by Facebook's leadership are a huge problem — for our children, for our communities and for our democracy -- that is why I came forward. And let's be clear: it does not have to be this way. They could make a different choice.

We are here today because of deliberate choices Facebook has made. During my time at the company, first working as the lead product manager for Civic Misinformation and later on Counter-Espionage, I saw that Facebook repeatedly encountered conflicts between its own profits and our safety. Management consistently resolved those conflicts in favor of its own profits.

Facebook wants you to have analysis paralysis, to get stuck in false choices and to not act here. But let's not miss that Facebook programs its algorithms to maximize profits, which means it decides which speakers are heard and which are not. Facebook decides which content is seen by tens of millions and which is buried. The result is a system that amplifies division, extremism, and polarization. Facebook is running the show, whether we know it or not.

Facebook's choices have led to disastrous ends in too many cases. Facebook's amplification promotes violence that harms and even kills people. In other cases, Facebook's profit-optimizing machine is generating self-harm and self-hate — especially for vulnerable groups, like teenage girls, the socially isolated, and the recently widowed. And no one is held accountable.

These problems have been confirmed repeatedly by Facebook's own internal research -- secrets that do not see the light of day. This is not simply a matter of some social media users being angry or unstable. Facebook became a \$1 trillion company by paying for its profits with our safety, including the safety of our children. And that is unacceptable.

This committee's attention, and this Congress's action, are critical. The public deserves further investigation and action to protect consumers on several fronts.

First, given that platforms like Facebook have become part of the new cybersecurity attack surface on the U.S., our national security demands more oversight. Second, we should be concerned about how Facebook's products are used to influence vulnerable populations. Third, we must correct the broken incentive system that perpetuates consistent misalignment between Facebook decisions and the values espoused by the majority of its users.

I cannot stress enough that none of this will matter if there continues to be no transparency or accountability guardrails. No efforts to address these problems are ever going to be effective, if Facebook is not required to share data in support of its claims or be subject to oversight of its business decisions.

I came forward because I recognized a frightening truth: almost no one outside of Facebook knows what happens inside Facebook.

The company's leadership keeps vital information from the public, the U.S. government, its shareholders, and governments around the world. The documents I have provided prove that Facebook has repeatedly misled us about what its own research reveals about the safety of children, its role in spreading hateful and polarizing messages, and so much more.

Rising to meet these challenges won't be easy. But democracies must do what they have always done when the actions of commerce conflict with the interests of the people and society as a whole -- Democracies must step in and make new laws.

Let's not forget -- we have stood at these crossroads before. When the tobacco companies claimed that filtered cigarettes were safer for consumers, it was possible for scientists to independently invalidate that marketing message and confirm that, in fact, they still posed a serious threat to human health. But today we cannot make this kind of independent assessment of Facebook. We have to just trust that what Facebook says is true — and they have repeatedly proved that they do not deserve our blind faith.

We need to open up the black box at Facebook. We need additional capacity to investigate the problems these products cause, and the ability to audit what they tell us, because we have learned they cannot be trusted.

Facebook wants you to get caught up in a long, drawn out debate over the minutiae of different legislative approaches. Please don't fall into that trap. Time is of the essence.

There is a lot at stake here. You have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to create new rules for our online world.

I came forward, at great personal risk, because I believe we still have time to act. But we must act now.

Thank you.