

**Opening Statement of Republican Leader
Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Joint Hearing: Subcommittees on Consumer
Protection and Commerce
and Communications and Technology
“A Country in Crisis: How Disinformation Online is
Dividing the Nation.”
June 24, 2020**

Good morning and welcome to our witnesses to our virtual joint subcommittee hearing focused on disinformation online.

We are living in unprecedented times. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, millions of Americans have been forced to stay home and as a result we are spending more time online.

There are few values more central to the foundation of American democracy than the freedom of speech.

It's what sets America apart from nearly every other nation on Earth.

And yet, this bedrock principle is increasingly under attack.

Whether online, on campus, or in the media, ideas are now more often “canceled” than debated.

Those who find ideas or concepts objectionable would rather shut down debate and speech rather than offer a compelling counter argument.

Whether or not the First Amendment applies directly, our institutions should be striving to uphold its ideals.

Censorship over political differences, whether done by a government, a university, a newspaper, a tech company, or other medium is unamerican.

Ironically, this movement against speech largely began in our universities.

By shouting down or forcing administrators to cancel conservative speakers, many students have learned it's OK to shutdown dissent to protect themselves from "wrong" or "triggering" thought."

Unsurprisingly, this method of speech suppression has found its way into the real world.

Just recently, employees of the New York Times forced out an editor for running an Op-Ed by a United States Senator that they disagreed with.

Where was this outrage when the Times ran an Op-Ed from the Taliban? Or Putin? Or one from 2017 praising Chairman Mao?

This is just one example in a long, disturbing trend against free speech, and specifically against conservatives.

I have long said the answer to bad speech – or any speech you disagree with – should be more speech, not less.

If you disagree with an idea, don't try to suppress the speaker. Engage with ideas of your own.

Our country was built on great debates over ideas and ideologies and we are better for it.

While there's been too much censorship of political discourse, more needs to be done to combat actual harmful misinformation online.

From the very outset of this pandemic, the world's collective response was hamstrung by the lack of transparency and outright disinformation spread by the Chinese Communist Party.

They withheld crucial information about the virus's spread and used propaganda and disinformation about its origins.

Because of this, the Chinese Communist Party has done extreme harm to the citizens of the world.

It has resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths and trillions in economic losses.

China must be held accountable.

That starts by calling China out on its attempts to shift blame and hide facts about the start of the outbreak, especially when they use our social media platforms to do so.

While the First Amendment does not apply to private companies and social media companies, our Internet platforms should still strive to protect free speech, human and civil rights, and be transparent in how they operate.

Just last month Leader Walden and I pressed TikTok about their ties to the CCP and about their compliance with the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act.

They must protect our children's information and ensure no American's information is shared with our adversaries.

We also pressed Zoom after learning they had suppressed the free speech of U.S.-based Chinese activists even though they were on U.S. soil.

Although we expect answers to our questions later this week...

... we are pleased to see Zoom respond publicly to our letter stating they will no longer allow requests from the Chinese government to impact anyone outside of mainland China.

While some social media companies do a better job than others in protecting free expression this should be a reminder to all, we are watching.

That includes Twitter, which appears to be targeting President Trump, while turning a blind eye to many regimes pushing disinformation and propaganda.

These companies have a lot of power and an important role to play in our country's political discourse. To build trust, platforms must enforce terms of services and apply content policies uniformly.

The path of bias towards one ideology over another will further sow distrust and division in our already divided country.

We expect more from you and the American people deserve better.

Society benefits from an open and free dialogue we must cherish that principle not discard it.

Thank you and I yield back.