

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr.

Hearing on, “Holding Big Tech Accountable: Legislation to Protect Online Users”

March 1, 2022

Today’s hearing is the third in a series of hearings this Committee has held on legislative reforms to hold social media companies accountable. The two previous legislative hearings covered reforms to Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act and consumer protection-focused legislation to help build a safer internet. Today we will examine legislation to enhance transparency and further promote safety online.

These hearings come after years of repeated, bipartisan calls for social media companies to change their ways. Since 2018, the Committee has held eight hearings on this subject. We’ve examined these issues from all sides and now it’s time for us to come together and to act. We’re committed to working with our Republican colleagues on legislation to increase transparency, limit online manipulation, and improve online safety.

We all know how important social media is to our daily lives. It allows us to connect with family and friends, to organize, and stay safe.

We’re seeing that firsthand right now in Ukraine as images posted on social media are exposing the world to just how depraved and misguided Vladimir Putin’s actions are. Ukrainians armed with their smartphones are documenting the bravery of their fellow citizens standing up to the Russian military, and the brutality of war. Social media is allowing Ukrainians to spread the word, without any filters, of the true impacts of this war. The images they are capturing on their phones are being shown worldwide – showing the world the atrocities being inflicted on the Ukrainian people.

But at the very same time, we have seen weeks of Russian disinformation campaigns used to lay the groundwork for the invasion of Ukraine. These campaigns use propaganda to build support for the Kremlin and, unfortunately, they spread like wildfire online.

There’s no question that fast moving current events can be difficult for social media companies to respond to quickly, but that is their responsibility and they must be held accountable. We must ensure they are transparent, and their incentives align with the good social media can do for people, not the bad.

Today, we will discuss five bills that target different parts of the social media ecosystem to make platforms safer for users.

March 1, 2022

Page 2

One of the best ways to make these companies more accountable is to make them more transparent. We will discuss legislation that establishes an “Office of Independent Research Facilitation” at the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). This new office would help facilitate academic research on social media platforms, to help us get the data we need on how these companies are targeting users.

Another bill requires companies that use automated decision making to conduct impact assessments on their systems and regularly report the results to the FTC. These assessments will help us ensure that machine learning is being employed in a fair and non-discriminatory matter.

We’ll consider a bill to ban the practice of targeted advertising, which includes a provision prohibiting advertisers from using information that identifies a consumer as a member of a protected class for advertising purposes.

Finally, we’ll consider bills that will help social media companies work better with federal, state, and local law enforcement to protect users who feel their safety has been violated online.

These proposals, along with the proposals we considered in the two previous legislative hearings, are collectively major steps in addressing the real harms caused by Big Tech.

Another part of tech accountability is protecting people’s privacy, especially our children’s privacy, as more and more apps are used by and targeted to our kids. I think every member of this Committee agrees that more must be done on privacy, and that’s why we have been working since last Congress on a bipartisan staff draft. Our work on that legislation continues and I hope that the Republicans will work together with us on that as well.

The bills before us today are important bills to address tech accountability. The time to act is now and these bills can help us make the internet a safer place. I look forward to our discussion today.