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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510–6250

October 12, 2020

Mr. Mark Zuckerberg
Founder, Chairman, Chief Executive Officer
Facebook, Inc.
1 Hacker Way
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg:

I am writing you in the wake of a successful example of collaboration between federal, state, and local law enforcement, government officials, and social media platforms to disrupt an active plot against the Governor, legislature, and citizens of Michigan.

In its recent Homeland Threat Assessment, the Department of Homeland Security warned about the risk of attacks in response to perceived infringement of liberties and government overreach as all levels of government seek to limit the spread of COVID-19. The assessment warns that "ideologies driven by such [Domestic Violent Extremists] often are reinforced by a variety of online content, including conspiracy theories and political commentary they view as controversial."

While violent extremism has existed online and offline for decades, it is important to understand how technology companies are addressing abuse of their services - including facilitating the recruitment and connection of extremists - to inform a comprehensive response to combating threats of violence and adapting to new and emerging threats.

I appreciate your company's efforts to keep my staff and the Committee up to date on your approach to addressing violent extremism and fulfilling our shared goal of keeping the American people safe, informed, and connected. When incidents do occur, I appreciate your quick response and ability to share data with Congress in close to real time.

Online platforms are unfortunately used both as a way to recruit and radicalize potential extremists and as a tool to plan subsequent violence. While the investigation into the plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer continues, there appears to be evidence the alleged perpetrators utilized various social media and messaging platforms to coordinate their efforts and recruit likeminded individuals. I appreciate Facebook's proactive efforts to assist law enforcement in disrupting this horrible plot.

I understand and am encouraged by the fact that you are working with critical law enforcement partners to ensure your platform does not support, perpetuate, or encourage violent activity. Your company is in a unique position to bring people together from all corners of the globe, but must be vigilant for those who would take advantage of this tool to recruit for, plan, or execute acts of terror driven by hateful ideologies.

In order to better understand the role Facebook plays in disrupting violent extremism, particularly domestic extremism, and how the company's workforce and technology has continued to evolve with the nature of the specific threat, I ask you respond to the following:

1) What metrics do you use to evaluate if your platform is successfully and efficiently removing content that violates your standards and promotes or recruits for violence?
   a) How do you know what percentage of content that violates your community standards you are removing? How do you know how much remains?
   b) How long is an acceptable amount of time from the posting of content that potentially violates your community standards with respect to inciting or recruiting for violence to when you discover it (either on your own or being notified by an outside partner)? What is your average time today?
   c) How long is an acceptable amount of time from the identification of discovery of content that potentially violates your community standards to the adjudication of that content as being in violation or not? What is your average time today?
   d) How long is an acceptable amount of time from your adjudication of content to its removal (if the content is deemed in violation of your standards)? What is your average time today?

2) Violent groups may use your platforms to identify potential recruits and then may move "off platform" to discuss specific operational plans for violence or other topics that violate your community standards. What is your company doing to prevent this type of recruitment?

3) While a key strategy for growth, the use of discovery features on social platforms often elevates and promotes misinformation, disinformation, or other harmful content. Please describe how these discovery features are monitored and adjusted in real time to ensure the platform is not elevating violent voices or conspiracy theories that may incite extremist groups or assist in recruitment.

4) Your company utilizes artificial intelligence (AI) in combination with human reviewers to identify content that does not comply with your community standards. Extremist groups utilizing your platforms are regularly changing their tactics to avoid being identified by your companies. Given the evolving nature of domestic extremist violence, and the shifts in calls to action over time, including some groups' recent responses to COVID-19 restrictions, how do your AI algorithms and training data, as well as your human reviewers, anticipate and identify the new behaviors, tradecraft, and lexicons of emerging threats on your platforms?
   a) How quickly are your algorithms and training data able to adjust to new behaviors, tradecraft, and lexicons of emerging threats on your platforms?
   b) What training do you offer to your human reviewers to ensure they are able to discern emerging behaviors, content, and lexicons?

5) While your company has worked to reduce the amount of mis- and disinformation on your platform, it is concerning that that this content often continues to spread, even when deprioritized or removed. Other than soft suggestions and information boxes stating that such content may be false or misleading, what else is your company doing to make this problematic content more difficult to spread?
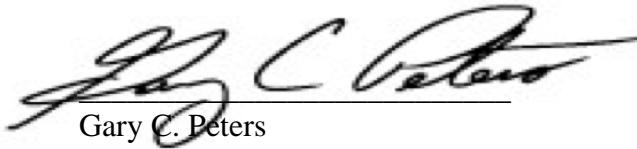
6) The counter-ISIS coalition included more than 85 countries and required government and industry to come together to defeat the threat. This critical effort evolved over years and has yielded positive lessons learned. I would hope addressing the threat of domestic extremism would not require a complete reinvention of our tactics and strategies. We must maximize the coordination of efforts to combat the rise of violent militia groups, both in the United States and abroad. From your perspective, what more should industry and government be doing to collaborate and stay ahead of this growing threat?

During these uncertain times, as we see a rising threat from groups that may take advantage of the chaos and divisiveness in communities across the country, social media companies have a responsibility to combat hate and violence when it flourishes on their platforms. Like local, state, and federal law enforcement and community organizations who combat these ideologies, private companies must evolve quickly and stay one step ahead of the threats we face as a nation.

I request response to the aforementioned questions no later than October 23rd. Thank you for your attention to my request.

Sincerely,

Gary C. Peters
Ranking Member