Chairman Peters Opening Statement As Prepared for Delivery
Full Committee Hearing: Social Media's Impact on Homeland Security
September 14, 2022

In recent years, domestic terrorism, and specifically white supremacist, conspiracy related, and anti-government violence, has become one of our nation's greatest homeland security threats.

Last October, the Committee held a hearing to examine the role social media platforms play in the amplification of domestic extremist content and how that content can translate into real world violence.

We heard from expert witnesses who discussed how recommendation algorithms, ad targeting, and other amplification tools end up pushing increasingly extreme content to users because that type of content is what keeps people active on the platforms.

Unfortunately, because these platforms are designed to push the most engaging posts to more users, they end up amplifying extremist, dangerous and radicalizing content.

This includes QAnon, Stop the Steal, and other conspiracy theories, as well as white supremacist and Anti-Semitic rhetoric.

In some cases, this content may not necessarily violate a company's community guidelines. In other cases, even content that is in clear violation of company policies remains on the platforms, and is often only removed after public pressure. In both cases, this content does significant harm to our society and stokes real-world violence.

We have seen this happen time and time again. From the 2017 neo-Nazi "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia that was organized using a Facebook event page, to the violent January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol spurred to action in part by "Stop the Steal" content that repeatedly surfaced online, to the shooter who livestreamed as he massacred Black shoppers at a Buffalo supermarket, there is a clear connection between online content and offline violence.

Over the years, we have heard many explanations from social media companies about their content moderation policies, efforts to boost trust and safety, and actions taken to remove harmful accounts.

There is no question that those efforts are important. But there is a question of whether those actions are enough to effectively address the spread of dangerous content online and the resulting threats it poses to our homeland security.

The central question is not just what content the platforms can take down once it is posted, but how they design their products in a way that boosts this content in the first place, and whether they build those products with safety in mind to effectively address how harmful content spreads.

That is the focus of today's hearing where we will have the opportunity to hear from two panels of witnesses, outside experts, including former Facebook and Twitter executives, as well as current senior executives from Meta, YouTube, TikTok and Twitter, who are charged with designing social media products used by billions of people around the world.

The overwhelming majority of social media users have very little information about why they see certain recommended content in their feed, and there is very limited transparency into how social media companies balance their business decisions with the need for online safety, including what resources they invest into limiting the spread of harmful content.

Our goal is to better understand how company business models and incentive structures, including revenue generation, growth and employee compensation, determine how social media products are built and the extent to which current incentives contribute to the amplification of content that threatens homeland security.

For nearly a year, I have been pressing Meta, YouTube, TikTok and Twitter for more information on their policies to monitor and remove extremist and conspiracy content that advocates violence, as well as the relationship between their recommendation algorithms and targeted advertising tools that generate much of the companies' revenues, and the amplification of extremist content.

The companies' response to those inquiries have been incomplete and insufficient so far.

This morning, we will hear from two former executives and a technology journalist with social media expertise about the internal product development process and the business decisions these companies make, including tradeoffs between revenues and growth and their trust and safety efforts, as well as how they interact with foreign governments.

Later this afternoon we will hear directly from the Chief Product Officers of Meta, YouTube, and Twitter and the Chief Operating Officer of TikTok, the executives who are charged with making these business decisions and driving the strategic vision of the companies.

I look forward to a productive discussion.