

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

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.

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Panel II

This morning, the Committee heard testimony from experts and former executives at Facebook and Twitter that provided important transparency and context for how many of the biggest social media companies operate.

Independent and accurate information about how companies balance competing priorities, or how they don't, who within the companies make those decisions, and how they build their products is incredibly difficult to find.

This morning's testimony shed light on many of the areas that this Committee, and the public, have questions about. I look forward to building on that testimony with our second panel of witnesses who can speak directly to what steps Meta, YouTube, TikTok and Twitter are taking to stop the spread of extremist content on their platforms. Thank you all for joining us today.

As we heard from our panel this morning, as chief product and operating officers, you play key roles in your companies' decision-making processes. You set the agendas for the product teams who are constantly updating the apps and developing new features.

You play a prominent role in setting priorities and determining what tradeoffs to make among those priorities, as product teams launch new features or make changes to your apps.

This is the first time executives in your positions have appeared before Congress, and I appreciate you joining us for this opportunity to hear directly about your roles at these powerful companies.

The platforms you are representing today reach billions of people around the world. Meta's platforms reach more than 3.6 billion people a month. TikTok has more than a billion users a month. YouTube reaches almost 2 billion people a month. And Twitter has more than 200 million monthly users.

That reach is massive and so is the influence your platforms wield.

Whether users are fully aware of it or not, the content they see on your platforms shapes their reality. And the business decisions you make are one of the main driving forces of that phenomenon.

This amount of influence may have a minimal impact on the average user of your platforms, but we have seen firsthand how quickly dangerous and extremist content can proliferate online, especially to vulnerable communities or users already on the fringe and alter how people view the world.

Conspiracies like QAnon and Stop the Steal, hateful ideologies like white supremacy and Anti-Semitism, and so many more examples of harmful content, pollute your platforms.

This extremist content can spread like wildfire, amplified by the recommendation algorithms and other tools your teams build to increase your companies' audiences and profits.

Extremists use the products you design to recruit and radicalize followers and plot attacks, including the January 6th attack on the Capitol, our democracy, and our nation.

There is no question that there is a relationship between social media amplification of this extremist content, and the rise we have seen in hate crimes and domestic terrorist attacks that mark one of the gravest threats to our homeland security.

Despite this serious threat, I am concerned that your companies have still not taken the necessary steps to limit the spread of the hateful, dangerous, and extremist content that has motivated real-world violence.

So that we all understand exactly the type of extremist content we are discussing today and how challenging this problem is to tackle. I'd like to take a moment to show a few examples.

[Video Plays**]**

This morning, we heard from former executives that your companies have no incentive to effectively address the problem this content creates or prioritize the safety of your users, as you build and introduce new social media products.

Instead, like any for-profit company, your incentives are to prioritize user engagement, grow your platforms and generate revenue.

I have asked you to appear before the Committee today to answer questions about your companies' incentives and priorities, how those incentives are reflected in how you compensate and promote your product development engineers, managers and other employees, and to provide important insight on your decision-making processes.

Thank you again for joining us today. I'm looking forward to this conversation, so that our Committee, and the public, can better understand this serious problem and how it threatens the safety and security of our nation.