

Hearing Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs

“Social Media Platforms and the Amplification of Domestic Extremism & Other Harmful Content”

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On October 14, 2021, Facebook [announced](#) a new Artificial Intelligence project called Ego4D. The name derives from the project’s focus on “egocentric,” or first-person, perception, and Facebook plans to use the resulting dataset to, among other things, equip augmented reality glasses and virtual reality headsets with the capacity to transcribe and recall audio and visual recordings of individuals around the user. [Asked](#) whether Facebook had implemented measures to address privacy concerns regarding these capabilities, a spokesperson replied that the company “expected that privacy safeguards would be introduced further down the line.”

As underscored by multiple internal documents recently released by whistleblower Frances Haugen, this approach is characteristic of Facebook: aggressively push new, untested, and potentially dangerous products into the public realm and worry about the consequences later, if at all. Documents that Haugen shared with the Securities and Exchange Commission reveal the “‘asymmetrical’ [burden](#) placed on employees to ‘demonstrate legitimacy and user value’ before launching any harm-mitigation tactics—a burden not shared by those developing new features or algorithm changes with growth and engagement in mind.” While it may have been abandoned as an official motto, “move fast and break things” still seems to be an accurate description of Facebook’s philosophy.

It is even more remarkable that Facebook should choose to announce such a highly controversial new project as the company faces a storm of criticism and scrutiny over documented evidence that it knowingly allowed violent extremism, dangerous misinformation, and sexual exploitation to flourish on its platforms. One might have expected Facebook would be more circumspect about drastically increasing the capacity of individuals to record people around them without consent in light of the revelation, for example, that it [allowed](#) nude images of an alleged rape victim to be viewed 56 million times, simply because the man she accused of raping her was a famous soccer star.

Is it arrogance? Is it callousness? Or is it merely – confidence? Confidence that no matter what is revealed about Facebook’s role in the disintegration of our shared reality or the dissolution of our democracy – not its acceleration of conspiracy theories from PizzaGate to QAnon to Stop the Steal, its amplification of deadly disinformation about COVID-19, its endangerment of the mental health of teenagers, its preferential treatment of powerful elites, or its promotion of violently racist and sexist propaganda – it will face no real consequences? After all, that seems to be the lesson that Facebook and other dominant tech companies like Twitter and Google have learned every time they have been implicated in scandal. The media attention will be intense for

a while, they might be called before Congress to answer some uncomfortable questions, they may face some fines, some bills attempting to regulate the tech industry might be introduced – but the companies will reassure the public that their purpose was never to cause harm, they will promise to do better, and nothing will really change.

Debates over tech companies’ “intentions” tend to serve as a distraction from substantive reform efforts. Moral and legal responsibility is not limited only to those who act with the express purpose of causing harm. We also hold entities accountable when they know their actions will cause harm, when they are reckless about the possibility of harm, and even sometimes when they are negligent about harm. Facebook and other tech companies have known for years that a business model focused on what is euphemistically called “engagement” is ripe for exploitation and abuse. These companies have, at a minimum, consciously disregarded substantial and unjustified risks to individual privacy, equality, and autonomy.

The dominant tech companies are also aware that these risks are not politically neutral. Contrary to oft-repeated claims that social media is biased against conservatives, the algorithms of major social media sites disproportionately amplify right-wing content. The lopsided political amplification of social media is all the more troubling given the disproportionate rate of right-wing violence: “[Since 2015](#), right-wing extremists have been involved in 267 plots or attacks and 91 fatalities,” more than four times the number of plots and attacks associated with left-wing ideology.

Facebook repeatedly and deliberately promotes conservative sites on its platform, even [changing](#) its algorithm to reduce the visibility of left-leaning news sites and allowing right-wing sites to “[skirt](#) the company’s fact-checking rules, publish untrustworthy and offensive content and harm the tech giant’s relationship with advertisers,” despite the efforts of Facebook employees to convince the company to consistently apply its own policies. Internal Facebook research titled “[Carol’s Journey to QAnon](#),” demonstrated how quickly Facebook’s algorithm recommended extremist conspiracy theories to an account set up for an imaginary woman with interests in Fox News and Sinclair Broadcasting. The day after the 2020 election, [10%](#) of all views of political content on Facebook in the U.S. were of posts that falsely claimed that the vote was fraudulent. As one Facebook employee [wrote](#) in an internal document, “If [the civic integrity team] takes a hands-off stance for these problems, whether for technical (precision) or philosophical reasons, then the net result is that Facebook, taken as a whole, will be actively (if not necessarily consciously) promoting these types of activities. The mechanics of our platform are not neutral.”

Other social media platforms demonstrate partisan patterns as well. Twitter recently [released](#) internal research demonstrating that its algorithms also amplify right-wing content more than left-wing content. Research by the [Tech Transparency Project](#) found that YouTube algorithms create a much more robust filter bubble for right-wing content than left-wing content, and that Fox is by far the most recommended information channel on YouTube.

Researchers have [suggested](#) that the Fox News channel dominates YouTube because it traffics in conspiracy theories and employs more polarizing and inflammatory language than left-leaning channels like MSNBC. The influence of Fox News illustrates that the ecosystem of extremism and disinformation is not limited to social media. Indeed, it would not be much of an

exaggeration to say that Fox News pioneered the strategies of outrage, engagement, and virality that now characterize social media. Scholars have noted that Fox News, more so than Facebook or any other social media platform, “is by far the most [influential](#) outlet on the American right,” and that television (especially cable news) is [more influential](#) than social media as a source of political news for Americans.

To be clear, the object of concern here is not conservative content as such. Rather, it is content that encourages the dehumanization of human beings; targets individuals for violence, threats, and harassment; traffics in dangerous disinformation; and promotes baseless conspiracy theories that undermine our democratic institutions.

The security of America is under attack by those who fear equality and resent the loss of unearned privileges. Social media plays a large role in amplifying these antidemocratic forces, but mainstream media also plays a role, as do elected officials and other figures with influential platforms. No industry and no individual should be [considered](#) above the law when it comes to the reckless endangerment of democracy.