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September 17, 2021

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

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg:

I am writing to request information regarding Facebook's policies on monitoring and removing extremist and conspiracy content that advocates violence, its actions to address the increase in use of its platforms to promote acts of domestic terrorism and violent extremism, and its use of targeted advertising to reach individuals and groups that engage in these activities.

In recent years, domestic extremist groups' use of Facebook and other social media platforms for communication, organizing, and planning has expanded. Over time, this has included dissemination of digital manifestos, manuscripts, or magazines, participation in online forums, and posting or streaming videos of violent acts.¹ In 2017, violent extremists and hate groups used Facebook to recruit new members and organize a rally in Charlottesville, VA, at which a neo-Nazi drove his car into a group of people, injuring nineteen and killing one woman.² Recent mass attacks are equally disturbing examples of ways in which extremist violence and incitement to violence was amplified by technology and social media. In 2019, the perpetrator in El Paso, Texas announced his plans for an imminent attack in a manifesto posted online just before the attacks, while the perpetrator in Dayton, Ohio posted regularly about his violent intentions.³

¹ Robert O'Harrow Jr., Andrew Ba Tran, and Derek Hawkins, *The rise of domestic extremism in America*, Washington Post (Apr. 12, 2021) (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2021/domestic-terrorism-data/>); Ben Collins, *Instagram account connected to Gilroy shooter pushed staple of white supremacist internet forums*, NBC News (July 29, 2019) (<https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/instagram-account-connected-gilroy-shooter-pushed-staple-white-supremacist-internet-n1035926>); *Racist, Violent, Unpunished: A White Hate Group's Campaign of Menace*, ProPublica (Oct. 19, 2019) (<https://www.propublica.org/article/white-hate-group-campaign-of-menace-rise-above-movement>).

² Julia Carrie Wong, *A year after Charlottesville, why can't big tech delete white supremacists*, Guardian (July 25, 2018) (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/25/charlottesville-white-supremacists-big-tech-failure-remove>); *Racist, Violent, Unpunished: A White Hate Group's Campaign of Menace*, ProPublica (Oct. 19, 2019) (<https://www.propublica.org/article/white-hate-group-campaign-of-menace-rise-above-movement>); Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Brian M. Rosenthal, *Man Charged After White Nationalist Rally in Charlottesville Ends in Deadly Violence*, New York Times (Aug. 12, 2017) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/12/us/charlottesville-protest-white-nationalist.html>).

³ *Minutes Before El Paso Killing, Hate-Filled Manifesto Appears Online*, The New York Times (Aug. 3, 2019) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/03/us/patrick-crusius-el-paso-shooter-manifesto.html>); and see Paul

Online platforms continue to be used to fundraise, recruit, organize, train, and plan for acts of domestic terrorism. In Michigan, this increased use of social media for domestic extremism included using Facebook to communicate and share footage of paramilitary exercises in a plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer.⁴ In the lead up to the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol, individuals used social media, including Facebook, to recruit followers and organize the attack.⁵ This included use of Facebook and other social media platforms to organize and promote the Stop the Steal Rally, which promoted the false narrative that President Trump won the election.⁶ Some actors even used Facebook during the attack to coordinate actions and track the movement of elected officials.⁷ Most recently, a man threatened to detonate a bomb in front of the Library of Congress, causing several city blocks, the US Supreme Court, and several House and Senate office buildings to evacuate and shelter. The man posted videos documenting his actions on Facebook, where some of his videos stayed up for at least five hours, including a 71 minute livestream where he sat outside the Library of Congress claiming to have a bomb.⁸

Additional concern exists about risks associated with Facebook's tools that allow advertisers to create custom audiences by targeting based on age, interests, and more. For example, advertisements to purchase weapons holsters and semiautomatic rifle attachments appeared in the news feed of a nonprofit watchdog group, Tech Transparency Project's (TTP), Facebook account, which was "designed to mimic the online habits of someone who followed extremist content on the platform." According to TTP, one feed included an ad for gun holsters and another was for armored vests. Another had an ad for a laser pointer that could be attached to rifles, which "was shown next to a post from a group that promotes" content related to the boogaloo movement, a group that has promoted violent anti-government actions.⁹ It is unclear

Murphy, Konstantin Toropin, Drew Griffin, Scott Bronstein, Eric Levenson, *Dayton shooter had an obsession with violence and mass shootings, police say*, CNN (Aug. 7, 2019) (<https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/05/us/connor-betts-dayton-shooting-profile/index.html>).

⁴ Lois Beckett, *Michigan terror plot: why rightwing extremists are thriving on Facebook*, Guardian (Oct. 10, 2020) (<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/oct/09/facebook-rightwing-extremists-michigan-plot-militia-boogaloo>).

⁵ Digital Citizens Alliance and Coalition for a Safer Web, *The Domestic Extremist Next Door* (Apr. 2021) (https://www.digitalcitizensalliance.org/clientuploads/directory/Reports/DCA_The_Domestic_Extremist_Next_Door.pdf).

⁶ Kari Paul, *'It let white supremacists organize': the toxic legacy of Facebook's Groups*, Guardian (Feb. 4, 2021) (<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/feb/04/facebook-groups-misinformation>); Rebecca Heilweil and Shirin Ghaffary, *How Trump's internet build and broadcast the Capitol insurrection*, Vox (Jan. 8, 2021) (<https://www.vox.com/recode/22221285/trump-online-capitol-riot-far-right-parler-twitter-facebook>).

⁷ Affidavit in Support of Amended Criminal Complaint (Jan. 19, 2021), *U.S. v. Caldwell*, D.C.D.C.

⁸ Brian Naylor, *Man Who Claimed To Have A Bomb Near The U.S. Capitol Surrenders*, NPR (Aug. 19, 2021) (<https://www.npr.org/2021/08/19/1029275390/bomb-threat-near-capitol-library-of-congress>); Emily Birnbaum, *Library of Congress bomb suspect livestreamed on Facebook for hours before being blocked*, Politico (Aug. 19, 2021) (<https://www.politico.com/news/2021/08/19/capitol-bomb-threat-facebook-livestream-506268>).

⁹ Ryan Mac and Craig Silverman, *Facebook Has Been Showing Military Gear Ads Next To Insurrection Posts*, BuzzFeed (Jan. 13, 2021) (<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanmac/facebook-profits-military-gear-ads-capitol-riot>); Emma Bowman, *4 Alleged 'Boogaloo' Members Charged with Obstructing Probe Into Police*

the extent to which Facebook policies and practices continue to result in similar targeted advertisements to individuals associated with domestic extremist groups and how they may generate revenue from their placement.¹⁰

In addition, social media platforms can rapidly spread extremist content through their algorithms, which suggest content to users based on the users' previous engagements and on what content has the greatest overall engagement on the platform.¹¹ These algorithms increase user engagement, which in turn increases the amount of time users spend on these platforms, and by extension, the amount of advertisements that can be shown. There is a financial incentive for social media platforms like Facebook to keep users engaged on their platforms and viewing content, including extremist content. According to one report, in 2020, Facebook declined to make certain changes to its content suggestion algorithms, which could have led to a decrease in use of its platform. As a result, Facebook and other platforms continue to employ algorithms designed to drive continued viewing, including of content that can facilitate radicalization and spread promotion of extremist acts.¹²

Under current law, with some exceptions, online service platforms are generally protected from legal liability resulting from user-generated content.¹³ As a private company, Facebook generally has the right to decide, through policies and user guidelines, what is and what is not allowed on its website. Using that right, Facebook has established policies that

Killings (April 9, 2021) (<https://www.npr.org/2021/04/09/985872120/4-alleged-boogaloo-members-charged-with-obstructing-probe-into-police-killings>).

¹⁰ Tech Transparency Project, *Facebook's Militia Mess*, Campaign for Accountability (Mar. 24, 2021) (<https://www.techtransparencyproject.org/articles/facebooks-militia-mess>); Matthew Johnston, *How Facebook Makes Money*, Investopedia (Jan. 30, 2021) (<https://www.investopedia.com/ask/answers/120114/how-does-facebook-fb-make-money.asp>); Tech Transparency Project, *Facebook Ran Recruitment Ads for Militia Groups*, Campaign for Accountability (Oct. 19, 2020) (<https://www.techtransparencyproject.org/articles/facebook-ran-recruitment-ads-militia-groups>); Ryan Mac and Craig Silverman, *Facebook Has Been Showing Military Gear Ads Next To Insurrection Posts*, BuzzFeed (Jan. 13, 2021) (<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanmac/facebook-profits-military-gear-ads-capitol-riot>); *Ad Targeting*, Facebook (accessed on Aug. 6, 2021) (<https://www.facebook.com/business/ads/ad-targeting>). While Facebook has taken steps to prohibit advertising of weapons, ammunition, and explosives, this does not extend to device accessories. *Advertising Policies*, Facebook (accessed Aug. 6, 2021) (<https://www.facebook.com/policies/ads/>).

¹¹ Max Fisher and Amanda Taub, *How Everyday Social Media Users Become Real-World Extremists*, New York Times (Apr. 25, 2018) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/25/world/asia/facebook-extremism.html>).

¹² Kevin Roose, Mike Isaac, and Sheera Frenkel, *Facebook Struggles to Balance Civility and Growth*, New York Times (Nov. 24, 2020) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/24/technology/facebook-election-misinformation.html>); Jeff Horwitz, *Facebook Knew Calls for Violence Plagued 'Groups,' Now Plans Overhaul*, Wall Street Journal (Jan. 31, 2021) (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knew-calls-for-violence-plagued-groups-now-plans-overhaul-11612131374>); Steve Rathje, Jay Van Bavel, and Sander van der Linden, *Why Facebook really, really doesn't want to discourage extremism*, Washington Post (July 13, 2021) (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/07/13/why-facebook-really-really-doesnt-want-discourage-extremism/>).

¹³ The Communications Decency Act of 1996, as amended (47 U.S.C. §§ 223, 230). *See also*, Congressional Research Service, *How Broad a Shield? A Brief Overview of Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act* (LSB10082) (Feb. 21, 2018).

prohibit content that would promote or incite extremist violence on their platforms.¹⁴ However, in the aftermath of recent events, questions remain about the effectiveness of these policies and Facebook's willingness and ability to enforce them.¹⁵

I appreciate that Facebook has taken actions in response to the increased use of social media platforms to promote domestic extremist violence, including the formation of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) and the Tech Against Terrorism alliance, as well as its recent cooperation in law enforcement investigations and increased monitoring of extremist content.¹⁶ I also recognize that Facebook has taken steps to remove militia groups and punish rule-breaking groups.¹⁷ However, continued reports have identified violent militia and conspiracy related groups that Facebook has allowed to return and continue operating on its platform.¹⁸

I also recognize that Facebook has taken steps to increase transparency, such as the creation and the release of the Widely Viewed Content Report that summarizes the most engaged with content on Facebook from April 1, 2021 to June 30, 2021.¹⁹ However, I continue to have concerns over the content on Facebook's platform. According to media reports, Facebook compiled a report that analyzed the most popular content on the platform from January 1, 2021 to March 31, 2021, which showed that the most-viewed link was to an article "suggesting that the COVID-19 vaccine was at fault for the death of a Florida doctor" and the 19th-most-popular

¹⁴ Facebook, *Community Standards, Violence and Criminal Behavior* (https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/violence_criminal_behavior) (accessed on July 13, 2021).

¹⁵ See Digital Citizens Alliance and Coalition for a Safer Web, *The Domestic Extremist Next Door* (Apr. 2021) (https://www.digitalcitizensalliance.org/clientuploads/directory/Reports/DCA_The_Domestic_Extremist_Next_Door.pdf).

¹⁶ Adi Robertson, *Tech company anti-terrorism initiative will increase its focus on far-right groups*, Verge (July 26, 2021) (<https://www.theverge.com/2021/7/26/22594067/gifct-facebook-twitter-youtube-microsoft-far-right-terrorism-manifestos-banned>); Tech Against Terrorism, Partners (accessed on Aug. 25, 2021) (<https://www.techagainstterrorism.org/>); Veronica Rocha, Melissa Macaya, and Meg Wagner, *FBI uncovers plot to kidnap Michigan governor*, CNN (Oct. 8, 2020) (https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/fbi-plot-michigan-governor/h_107717db4f929e29663318307676847e); Andrea Chang and Sam Dean, *Social media platforms are cracking down to prevent Inauguration Day violence*, Los Angeles Times (Jan. 18, 2021) (<https://www.latimes.com/business/technology/story/2021-01-18/inauguration-platforms>).

¹⁷ *An Update to How We Address Movements and Organizations Tied to Violence*, Facebook (Aug. 19, 2020) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20210324143305/https://about.fb.com/news/2020/08/addressing-movements-and-organizations-tied-to-violence/>); Kari Paul, *'It let white supremacists organize': the toxic legacy of Facebook's Groups*, Guardian (Feb. 4, 2021) (<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/feb/04/facebook-groups-misinformation>); Brandy Zadrozny, *Facebook to crack down on groups that break its rules*, NBC News (Mar. 17, 2021) (<https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/facebook-crack-groups-break-rules-rcna435>).

¹⁸ Tech Transparency Project, *Facebook's Militia Mess*, Campaign for Accountability (Mar. 24, 2021) (<https://www.techtransparencyproject.org/articles/facebooks-militia-mess>); Kari Paul, *'It let white supremacists organize': the toxic legacy of Facebook's Groups*, Guardian (Feb. 4, 2021) (<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/feb/04/facebook-groups-misinformation>).

¹⁹ Facebook, *Widely Viewed Content Report: What People See on Facebook* (accessed on Aug. 25, 2021) (<https://transparency.fb.com/data/widely-viewed-content-report/>).

page was a publication that has spread conspiracy theories promoting Q-Anon and false claims about the 2020 presidential election.²⁰ Facebook declined to issue this report, deciding only to release an alternate report once it became clear that news articles about its first report would become public. The alternate report, which analyzes the most popular content on the platform from April 1, 2021 to June 30, 2021, shows only nonpolitical content in the top twenty most-viewed links and top posts consisting of “local news stories, a cat GIF, and a Green Bay Packers alumni website.”²¹

In light of recurring concerns about advertising and content policies related to domestic extremist threats and to better understand what Facebook and its subsidiaries, including Instagram, are doing to address the proliferation of domestic extremism online, for the period dating from January 1, 2019 to present, I respectfully request that you provide the following documents and information:

1. Facebook’s guidelines and parameters, including without limitation, for the program XCheck, for determining how content violates Facebook and its subsidiaries’ hate speech, violence, and domestic adversarial threat policies, including without limitation its groups and events policies, as well as information on how Facebook’s artificial intelligence (AI) moderation software finds such content.
2. Information identifying Facebook and its subsidiaries’ terms of service and what actions have been taken to enforce and comply with these terms of service, including without limitation, policies for removal of content in violation of its hate speech, violence, and domestic adversarial threat policies.
3. Information on the content covered by the guidelines and policies referenced in question 1, including content related to the promotion, recruitment, and advocacy of events leading to the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol that was removed from Facebook and its subsidiaries’ platforms in the three months preceding the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol.
4. Strategies and actions, planned or taken, by Facebook and its subsidiaries in coordination with federal, state, local, and tribal governments and agencies to detect and prevent extremist violence online, including without limitation, in relation to the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol.
5. Facebook and its subsidiaries’ guidelines and parameters for recommending content, including without limitation a description of how their algorithms identify and decide how to recommend content.

²⁰ Davey Alba and Ryan Mac, *Facebook, Fearing Public Outcry, Shelved Earlier Report on Popular Posts*, New York Times (Aug. 20, 2021) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/20/technology/facebook-popular-posts.html>).

²¹ Davey Alba and Ryan Mac, *Facebook, Fearing Public Outcry, Shelved Earlier Report on Popular Posts*, New York Times (Aug. 20, 2021) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/20/technology/facebook-popular-posts.html>).

6. Facebook and its subsidiaries' guidelines and parameters for targeted advertising, including without limitation a description of how their algorithms identify advertisements' intended targets.
7. Facebook and its subsidiaries' guidelines and procedures in place to ensure that the advertising parameters in question 5 align with its policies on hate speech, violence, and domestic adversarial threat policies.
8. A description of Facebook and its subsidiaries' actions to ensure terms of service and targeted advertising policies are enforced.

The Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs is authorized by Rule XXV of the Standing Rules of the Senate and Section 12(e) of S. Res. 70 (117th Congress) to investigate the "efficiency, economy, and effectiveness of all agencies and departments of the Government" and "processes as tested against the requirements imposed by the rapidly mounting complexity of national security problems... [and] legislative and other proposals to improve these methods, processes, and relationships."²²

Please provide these documents and information as soon as possible, but no later than October 4, 2021. Thank you for your prompt attention and cooperation in this matter.

Sincerely,



Gary C. Peters
Chairman

²² S. Rule XXV, S. Res. 70 (117th Congress).