

Chairman Peters Opening Statement As Prepared for Delivery
Full Committee Hearing: Social Media Platforms and the Amplification of Domestic
Extremism & Other Harmful Content
October 28, 2021

Thank you to our witnesses for joining us today. Our Committee has held several hearings this year examining the rise in domestic terrorism.

Today's hearing will focus on the role social media platforms play in the amplification of domestic extremist content, and how that content can translate into real world violence.

Yesterday marked three years since a white supremacist gunman opened fire in a Pittsburgh synagogue, killing 11 innocent people, in the deadliest attack on the Jewish community in the United States.

The attacker used the fringe social media platform Gab prior to the attack to connect with like-minded extremists, and spread his own hateful, anti-Semitic views online.

While that violent and hateful ideology has long terrorized communities, for many Americans, this shocking attack was a first glimpse at how quickly increased exposure to extremist content, and users with similar beliefs, can radicalize domestic terrorists, and drive them to act on their violent intentions.

Less than a year after the Tree of Life attack, we saw a white nationalist open fire in an El Paso shopping center. This attacker was one of many who viewed video of the Christchurch mosque massacres that widely circulated on social media just months earlier, a video he reportedly cited as inspiration for his deadly attack in a 2,300 word racist manifesto he also posted online.

And on January 6, 2021, we saw a stark example of how individuals went beyond seeing and sharing extreme content across numerous social media platforms. They were spurred to action by what they repeatedly saw online, and ultimately a mob violently attacked Capitol Police and breached the Capitol Building.

In attack after attack, there are signs that social media platforms played a role in exposing people to increasingly extreme content, and even amplifying dangerous content to more users.

Yet there are still many unanswered questions about what role social media platforms play in amplifying extremist content. We need a better understanding of the algorithms that drive what users see on social media platforms, how companies target ads, and how these companies balance content moderation with generating revenue.

For the majority of social media users who want to connect with distant family and friends, or stay up to date on their favorite topics, there is very little transparency about why they see the content, recommendations, or ads that populate their feeds.

While social companies have promoted how they are providing more curated content for their users, we have seen how users can be shown increasingly polarizing content. In worst case scenarios, users are reportedly recommended more and more extreme content, nudging them down a rabbit hole.

Recent reporting, Congressional testimony, and revelations in the Facebook Papers, have shed some light on business models that appear to prioritize profits over safety, and decisions that appear to disregard the platforms' effects on our homeland security.

It's not enough for companies to simply pledge that they will get tougher on harmful content, those pledges have gone largely unfulfilled for several years now. Americans deserve answers on how the platforms themselves are designed to funnel specific content to certain users, and how that might distort users' views and shape their behavior, online and offline.

As part of my efforts to investigate rising domestic terrorism, including the January 6th attack, I've requested information from major social media companies about their practices and policies to address extremist content, so that we can better understand how they are working to tackle this serious threat.

While we are continuing to work with companies to get answers and examine relevant data, I'm looking forward to hearing from our experts today about how these platforms balance safety and business decisions, and specifically how these decisions relate to rising domestic extremism.