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Good morning Mr Chairman and Members of the Committee. Thank you for holding these hearings that cover such important issues for our nation. And thank you for inviting me here today to provide testimony on my experiences as a senior executive at Facebook, now known as Meta. For the last few years I have grown increasingly concerned about the roles that Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter and TikTok play in driving the growth of misinformation, extremism and generally harmful content.

I worked at Facebook for 11 years in a variety of leadership roles helping to build products for organizations and businesses who use Facebook products and services. In my roles, I helped to shape product and marketing strategies for a broad range of products including advertising, news, media, games, Workplace, internet access and more. During my tenure at the company I worked with the most senior executives at the company and was deeply embedded in the product development process.

In the last two years of my time at the company, the CrowdTangle team and product was a part of my organization. CrowdTangle is a tool that provides limited, albeit industry leading, transparency into public News Feed content on Facebook. What finally convinced me that it was time to leave was that despite growing evidence that the News Feed may be causing harm globally, the focus on and investments in safety remained small and siloed.

The documents released by Frances Haugen, the Facebook whistleblower who last fall testified in Congress, highlight issues around polarization globally and the power of Facebook to lead people down a path to more extreme beliefs. These papers demonstrate thoughtful, well researched documentation of the harms that greatly concerned me. This research was done by highly skilled Facebook employees - experts in their field - and was extensive.

And rather than address the serious issues raised by its own research, Meta leadership chooses growing the company over keeping more people safe. While the company has made investments in safety, those investments are routinely abandoned if they will impact company growth. My experience at Facebook was that rather than seeking to find issues on the platform first they would rather reactively work to mitigate the PR risk for issues that came to light.

I have come to believe that several circumstances have put Americans at risk from the content on these platforms.

The first is the growth over safety incentive structures that lead to products that are designed and built without a focus on user safety. The next is the unprecedented lack of public transparency available from these platforms to analyze content and understand the impact from these tools. And finally, the lack of clear oversight for the business practices of these companies.

The reality is that for all of the debate about whether social media is good or bad - the truth is that we really don't know. The good news is that I believe with the right incentives in place and rules around transparency we can develop a better understanding of these issues and take steps to mitigate the harms.

Today I hope to shed light on the product development process, internal and external incentive structures for these organizations and the critical importance of transparency. I do so with an aim to guide us to improvements in how these businesses work - so that we can capture the many wonderful benefits that they bring to society while mitigating the harms that are broadly ignored today.

### **Prioritization and Resources**

People criticize tech companies for not hiring more people in safety roles considering the incredible profits they report each quarter. Unfortunately, it isn't that simple. In any given year and in any given city there are only so many qualified engineers to hire at a company. And within that limited number even fewer will accept roles and join. This creates an internal scarcity where even though you may have the monetary budgets to hire anyone you want - you simply can't. The scarcest type of talent is engineering talent.

And so the CEO, Mark Zuckerberg at Meta, must define the priorities for the company and choose to assign engineers to the work he believes to be most important. Because of this, the best way to understand what truly matters for a tech company is to look at their relative staffing - whichever groups are allocated the most engineers are the highest priority.

Despite claims for a deep focus on safety and user integrity my experience was that these teams were often under-resourced. Further, safety and user integrity issues were isolated to a specific team focused on those issues rather than distributed among the various product teams. As such, safety and user integrity issues were not top of mind for nearly all development teams.

### **Business Incentives and User Safety**

At Meta, employees are rewarded through a ratings system that measures their performance twice a year. Each employee is rated on where they stood with respect to the measurable goals that were set for them at the beginning of that six month period. For most product teams, those expectations are highly quantifiable product metrics. These goals focus on the growth of their product or feature - are more people using it, is revenue growing, etc.

One good way to understand what is important to these companies is to look at the standard metrics that they require for any product test. While user engagement and revenue metrics may be standard, user safety metrics are not. Until user safety is a core part of the development and testing process it will remain an afterthought.

As an illustration, when it became clear that the future for Facebook apps was on mobile devices, Mark Zuckerberg required that every product review meeting would first include designs of that product on a mobile device. In the first meeting without one, he sent the team away until they could come back with a mobile design. Everyone else came in with mobile designs after that.

Similarly, when the advertising business was slowing around the IPO, Mark mandated that advertising was a part of the goals for all teams - not just the ads team. This marked a shift at the company where it became clear that each team needed to think about, design for and measure their growth in ads revenue. This type of structural change for the teams led to a significant shift in focus and growth in advertising revenue.

In the same way, each team should have clear goals on user safety and reducing the conditions for misinformation. If teams are broadly measured and rewarded based on these metrics you would expect a significant improvement in understanding of the issues and steps to take to mitigate them.

To be fair, this focus on growth is how these companies are incentivized today. The stock market rewards growth with an increased share price while remaining unaware of the risks lurking below the surface. And there aren't rules today that would create an incentive to add safety or misinformation metrics to more teams at the company.

### **Defining Metrics Matters**

In discussions of harmful content and misinformation the framing of the conversation and definition of specific metrics matters greatly.

It is important to avoid discussions on percentages instead of absolute numbers. The scale of these platforms is so massive that very small percentages of users turn into very large absolute numbers. If Facebook can reach 222 million people in the United States, 1% of that audience is 2.2 million people.

Another example is whether a company discusses "average prevalence" vs "p99 prevalence".

The issue with hate speech, misinformation and other harmful content isn't whether the average person is seeing more or less of it, but whether there are pockets of people receiving significantly more of it than others.

If the average person is seeing less hate speech but people at the fringe who are more susceptible to those ideas see an avalanche of it you can have a significant problem on your hands.

So rather than looking at averages, it is particularly helpful to look at p99 metrics. The p99 metric tracks the 99th percentile of most hate speech filled (or other content you define) News Feed. From this metric you can better understand the impact at the fringes and not focus on a watered down and much less useful average.

A strong discussion of this can be found at:

<https://twitter.com/samidh/status/1450105897431175169>

## **Understanding the Algorithms**

I believe that we don't have a problem with an explosion of the creation of misinformation but rather a hyper amplification and bias problem. These platforms aren't creating a marketplace of ideas but rather skewed selections of reality. As more companies are creating algorithmic experiences, what we individually experience is highly curated.

There are studies that argue both sides of this curated experience - some stating that this algorithmic content brings us closer together and some that it is driving divisions in America. The truth is that nobody really knows.

Contrary to popular belief, technology companies cannot accurately predict what their algorithms will do. At Facebook, a robust A/B testing system was created so that engineers could observe and measure what happened when changes were made to the system. These A/B testing systems record a handful of important metrics.

During the product development process, teams will run a variety of tests on new features they would like to release. These experiments will track an array of metrics - some focused on user engagement with the features and other site metrics, and others focused on impacts to company revenue. People are rewarded for growth metrics, not safety metrics.

In many ways, this is similar to crash testing a car. Despite years of work to design and develop new cars, they are incredibly complex machines and when they encounter the real world they behave in ways that we don't expect. By crash testing cars, we can gather a significant amount of data on what happens and work to fix current issues and improve future designs. Further, the NHTSA gathers data on real world incidents involving cars for the same purpose - to uncover existing issues, mitigate them and improve future safety.

The challenge that we face here is that tech companies are deciding whether to crash test anything, what to test, when to test, whether to fix the product and whether to disclose it to the

public. There is no independent public ability to study these platforms and develop an understanding of their impacts.

These platforms function as a black box by design. As such researchers, academics and human rights organizations have an incredibly limited amount of data that they can use to protect Americans and people around the world. Once researchers and academics have a better view of what is happening on these platforms we can have a more informed public debate about the issues discovered and how to best mitigate them.

### **Lack of Transparency**

One of the turning points for me was the summer of 2020. As political and race-related divisions in this country grew, I saw those same divisions reflected in the public data from CrowdTangle, a tool Meta had purchased to help companies understand how people engaged with their content. CrowdTangle was also utilized by researchers and journalists to find problematic content on Facebook and understand how people engaged with it.

As the public scrutiny intensified, Meta attempted to delegitimize the CrowdTangle-generated data. It rejected strong internal proposals to take industry-leading actions to increase transparency.

In some ways the internal resistance is understandable. There is no requirement for transparency. And often the limited data that is used can create significant PR headaches for the company - something that they aim to avoid. This leads us to the path where we are today - there is minimal investment in transparency and efforts like CrowdTangle are diminished. And the other tech platforms generally haven't taken steps to provide transparency.

Further, companies like Meta shift to a "Widely Viewed Content Report" which only provides the most seen content on Facebook in the US. The report delivers high level distribution which creates the same challenge as the average metrics discussed earlier. We don't get a view into what really is happening in pockets on Facebook - just a view of the highest level averages.

To solve this, we must require platforms to move beyond the black box with legislation like The Platform Transparency and Accountability Act.

### **Responsibility to Shareholders**

I believe that these tech platforms have a fiduciary duty to their investors to better understand and mitigate the harms created by their platforms. Due to the lack of transparency in the platforms today, we understand little of what is actually happening on them and their impacts to homeland security and the depths of misinformation. Since the companies underinvest in investigating potential harms and fail to provide meaningful useful data to researchers and human rights organizations it is highly likely that severe vulnerabilities lurk in their systems.

These lurking risks could pop up at any time and cause a negative impact to investors in the company. We saw this type of price decline following the release of the stories and documents from Frances Haugen last fall.

Despite Meta's claims of significant investment, in context those investments are small. During the period of time where they claimed \$13 billion in safety investments they spent \$50 billion in stock buybacks. The commitment to short term shareholder value, I believe, is creating a significant future risk for shareholders.

Should pressure continue to grow from increased revelations and understanding of harms, ESG investors could divest from these platforms along with many other socially conscious investors. By failing to deeply investigate and understand their own platform, Meta is putting their shareholders at risk.

## **Conclusion**

It is important to note that there are incredible benefits from these platforms. Social media has enabled families to stay in touch, allowed friends to remain connected across geographies, empowered people struggling with illness to find support, entertained us, given marginalized people voice and at times informed us.

Additionally, most of the people that I worked with are well intentioned, high integrity people who aspire for positive societal outcomes. Despite that however, the incentives, lack of transparency and the risks these platforms create have reached the point where regulation is greatly needed.

We can hope for a better future with these platforms where we see outsized benefit from them rather than living in a constant fear of the next unseen crisis building beneath the surface.

In order to get there we need to start with three steps:

First, incentivize these companies to study, measure, prioritize and invest in innovations that can stem the tide of disinformation, misinformation and harmful content. Left alone these companies will continue to pursue investments and metrics that benefit their growth and the short term value of their stock. This is the rational approach with the incentives and rules that we have today.

Second, legislate transparency for public content on tech platforms. The Platform Transparency and Accountability Act provides a framework for required transparency by tech companies. The framework is strong but I would further expand it to ensure access of public data to human rights organizations and journalists.

Third, clarify which agency or agencies have oversight of these platforms and ensure

that those agencies are funded to do the work. It isn't enough to simply open up the public data on these platforms - we need to ensure that as we better understand what is happening on these platforms we can change their incentives to better serve the public. If the incentives don't change, the results won't change despite improved transparency.

Our goal here is a common one - to ensure that we help American innovations like Facebook, Instagram, Google and Twitter to thrive and better incentivize them to serve their communities.

Thank you.