

Opening Statement
Chair Jan Schakowsky
Subcommittee on Consumer Protection and Commerce
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Hearing on “Consumers Beware: Increased Risks During the COVID-19 Pandemic”
September 24, 2020

Good morning and thank you for joining us today for a virtual hearing on social media’s role in spreading extremism.

Throughout our nation’s history, we have seen extremism undermine public faith in our institutions, incite violence, sow division, and spread hate speech. Whether it be the Ku Klux Klan, Neo Nazis or bullying of vulnerable individuals, these attacks are not new to Americans. What is different today is the way social media algorithms can amplify hate speech.

Despite many conveniences and benefits for communication, over time social media’s dark side has grown and divided Americans at a time when we need to pull together. As Big Tech developed the online ecosystem and monetized its functions to their enormous benefit, these companies have done little to protect Americans from the dangers lurking in the dark corners. Driven by profit and power, and in the face of obvious harms, these mega companies successfully convinced governments all over the world to leave them alone, lest we disturb the delicate garden they are tending.

Big Tech has helped divide our nation, and stoke genocide in others. Consider Myanmar, where we saw mass murder of the Rohingya people. And these companies have profited at every turn. Consider the QAnon conspiracy theory that has thrived online for years now. Q followers believe that the entire world is controlled by a secret cabal of child abusers who will eventually drink the blood of victims. The FBI has linked the group to domestic terror and considers it a continuing terrorism threat.

I would like to commend our colleagues Adam Kinzinger, Tom Malinowski, and Denver Riggleman for confronting this threat head-on.

There is no doubt that controversy and extremism drive engagement, and therefore profits. Algorithms that amplify extremist views also amplifies profit for these platforms. A 911 conspiracy video has been seen 22 million times on Facebook in the last week. Each view keeps eyeballs on the platform and dollars rolling in. Nowhere has Facebook been more negligent than in its oversight of its Group function.

Facebook Groups promoting misogyny have grown by 10%, anti-LGBT groups have grown by 22%, and groups promoting antisemitism have grown by 27%. IN THE PAST WEEK.

In a recent interview, an engineer at Facebook said the group recommendation algorithm is “the scariest feature of the platform – the darkest manifestation.” And he continued, “A user enters one group, and Facebook essentially pigeonholes them into a lifestyle they can never really get out of.”

Next week I'll be circulating draft legislation that aims to fundamentally alter these companies' business models and give consumers and regulators recourse when these companies fail in their basic commitments to consumers. I hope you'll all take a look.

I thank the witnesses for their testimony, and recognize for five minutes the Ranking Member, Cathy McMorris Rodgers.