United States Senate
COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION
WASHINGTON, DC 20510–6125
WEBSITE: https://commerce.senate.gov

March 16, 2023

Mr. Sundar Pichai
Chief Executive Officer
Google LLC
1600 Amphitheatre Parkway
Mountain View, CA 94043

Dear Mr. Pichai:

I write to follow up on my February 13, 2023 letter regarding Google's practices related to the scope, deployment, and impact of recommendation systems across your platforms. To date, you have failed to provide an adequate response to that letter, which requested answers to 20 specific questions concerning the scope of recommender systems on your platforms, the effects of those systems on the distribution of content and accounts, manual intervention in recommendations, treatment of political speech in recommendations, and procedures for transparency and due process.

The American people have a vested interest in the policies and practices that govern their speech on large social media platforms. To this end, it is disappointing that your response runs counter to Google's public commitment to greater transparency.[1] As content moderation has grown in both scale and complexity, the need for sunlight—particularly on politically-charged moderation questions—has become an imperative. In light of such public interest, increased congressional oversight of social media companies, and pending Section 230 litigation at the Supreme Court, it is essential that Google responds substantively to congressional requests, especially from this Committee, which has jurisdiction over key industry issues like Section 230 and data privacy.

Based on my staff's analysis of your response dated March 1, 2023, you failed to answer 18 of 20 questions (Questions 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, and 20). Incredibly, these questions included straightforward requests such as "define 'recommendation system'" (Question 1), the amount of distribution posters receive from being recommended (Question 5), and whether Google has protocols in place to audit the accuracy of its systems (Question 18), as well as requests for illustrative data about these systems. For your convenience,

[1] See, for example, Google's Transparency Report, https://transparencyreport.google.com/ ("Sharing data that sheds light on how the policies and actions of governments and corporations affect privacy, security, and access to information") and Google U.S. Public Policy, *Principles and Standards of Business Conduct*, https://www.google.com/publicpolicy/transparency/ ("Our engagement with policymakers and regulators is guided by a commitment to ensuring our participation is always open, transparent and clear to our users, shareholders, and the public").

these questions are replicated in the appendix of this letter. Further, this letter serves as a reminder to preserve any and all documents and information, inclusive of e-mails, text messages, internal message system messages, calls, logs of meetings, and internal memoranda, responsive to my February 13, 2023 request.

Your failure to adequately respond suggests that Google believes it has no obligation to cooperate with congressional oversight or to provide any modicum of transparency to the American people. If that is not the case, I look forward to reviewing your complete response to each of these questions no later than March 23, 2023.

Sincerely,

Ted Cruz
Ranking Member

Encl: Unanswered Questions from February 13, 2023 Request

Appendix: Unanswered Questions from February 13, 2023 Request

- Define "recommendation system."

- Provide a complete list of the names of any individuals outside of your organization that you consulted with in developing any of the documents and information described in Question 3.

- On average, how much additional distribution can a poster expect from being included in your recommendations? Please include a brief summary of your methodology for estimating this percentage.

- What percentage of total time spent on your platforms is driven by your recommendation systems? Of that time, what is the median amount of time that users spend within a 24-hour period? Please include a brief summary of your methodology for calculating this percentage.

- What percentage of total time spent by users under 18 on your platforms is driven by your recommendation systems? Of that time, what is the median amount of time that users under 18 spend within a 24-hour period? Please include a brief summary of your methodology for calculating this percentage.

- For the recommendations described in Question 7, please list the top 25 topics, using your internal classifications, associated with the recommended content, entities, or accounts.

- For the recommendations described in Question 7, please list the top 100 sources of recommendations.

- Do you place any limits on the total amount of content, accounts, or entities that users can be served by your recommendation systems in a given period of time? If yes, please elaborate. If no, please explain why not.

- Have you ever, or do you currently, maintain any hardcoded lists of individual accounts, entities, or individual pieces of content that are (a) whitelisted or (b) blacklisted from appearing in your recommendation systems? If yes, please provide a description of each list and the number of items on each list.

- Have you ever, or do you currently, maintain any hardcoded lists of individual accounts, entities, or individual pieces of content that are (a) boosted or (b) downranked in your recommendation systems? If yes, please provide a description of each list and the number of items on each list.

- Have you ever, or do you currently, include any human-curated content, accounts, or entities in your recommendations? If yes, please describe and provide copies of any curation guidelines.

- Please list all U.S.-based users with more than 500,000 total followers or subscribers that have been removed from recommendations, even if temporarily, for a period of at least three continuous days within the past ten years. Please include the duration of and reason for the removal, and note whether the removal is currently in effect.

- What percentage of U.S.-based recommendations on your platform(s) are political in nature, such as accounts of political figures or content discussing current political issues? If you do not include political content in recommendations, please (a) elaborate on why not and (b) provide your precision rate for enforcing this rule.

- Please list the top 100 sources of political content shown in recommendations, as defined by total distribution from recommendations, for each year over the past ten years. Please provide these lists regardless of whether you have a policy to not include political content in recommendations.

- Please list all federal, state, and local elected officials that have been removed from or downranked in recommendations, even if temporarily, for a period of at least three continuous days within the past ten years. Please include the duration of and reason for the restriction, and note whether the restriction is currently in effect.

- What protocols do you have in place, if any, to audit the accuracy of your recommendation systems relative to your platform's stated rules?

- How do you ensure that content, entities, and accounts are not being improperly or mistakenly filtered from your recommendation systems?

- If an account or a significant portion of content posted by an account is removed from recommendations, does the account holder receive notice? If yes, please elaborate on the nature of the notice and whether such removal can be appealed. If no, please explain why not.