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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE,
AND TRANSPORTATION

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6125

WEBSITE: <http://commerce.senate.gov>

July 10, 2018

Mr. Larry Page
Chief Executive Officer
Alphabet Inc.
1600 Amphitheatre Parkway
Mountain View, CA 94043

Dear Mr. Page:

We write today regarding the use of Gmail users' personal data by third party email application ("app") developers. Last week, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that hundreds of third party app developers with access to users' Gmail accounts use email contents for a variety of purposes of which users may not be aware.¹ These purposes include scanning email contents for travel and package information as well as marketing information to provide targeted ads (a practice Google itself abandoned over a year ago²). More surprising, however, is the revelation that third party app developers may be giving access to personal emails to their employees. In one example, marketing data firm Return Path Inc. reportedly gave 8,000 unredacted emails to its data analysts to manually train its algorithms.

The Senate Commerce Committee has jurisdiction over consumer protection and data privacy issues. In the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, in which a third party app developer for Facebook obtained large amounts of user data and shared it with a political consulting firm, the potential misuse of personal data held by large internet platforms and shared with third party developers is a matter of particular concern to the Committee.

While we recognize that third party email apps need access to Gmail data to provide various services, and that users consent to much of this access, the full scope of the use of email content and the ease with which developer employees may be able to read personal emails are likely not well understood by most consumers. Furthermore, though no allegations of misuse of personal email data akin to the Cambridge Analytica case have surfaced, the reported lack of oversight from Google to ensure that Gmail data is properly safeguarded is cause for concern.

To assist the Committee as it considers potential legislation to address the issues discussed above and broader data privacy matters, we request responses to the following:

¹ Douglas MacMillan, *Tech's 'Dirty Secret': The App Developers Sifting Through Your Gmail*, WALL ST. J., July 2, 2018.

² Diane Greene, *As G Suite gains traction in the enterprise, G Suite's Gmail and consumer Gmail to more closely align*, GOOGLE: THE KEYWORD (June 23, 2017), <https://blog.google/products/gmail/g-suite-gains-traction-in-the-enterprise-g-suites-gmail-and-consumer-gmail-to-more-closely-align/>.

- 1) Does Google require developers of apps requesting access to Gmail data to conform to any privacy or data protection policies? If so, please describe these policies.
- 2) In a recent blog post, a Google representative stated that Google manually reviews developers and apps requesting access to Gmail data to ensure that the developers and apps accurately represent themselves and only request relevant data. Please describe this process in detail.
- 3) That blog post also stated that Google reviews apps' compliance with Google's policies and suspends them if they fall out of compliance. Please describe this process in detail. In addition, provide a list of all instances in which Google has suspended an app in this way, with an explanation of the circumstances for each.
- 4) Does Google allow its own employees to access the content of Gmail users' personal emails? If so, what safeguards does Google have in place to ensure that personal email content is not misused or shared more broadly?
- 5) Is Google aware of any instance of an app developer sharing Gmail user data with a third party for any purpose? If so, describe any such instance and the parties involved, as well as any action Google has taken to recover such data.

Please provide your written response as soon as possible, but by no later than 5:00 p.m. on July 24, 2018. Thank you for your prompt attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



JOHN THUNE
Chairman
Committee on Commerce, Science,
and Transportation



ROGER F. WICKER
Chairman
Subcommittee on Communications, Technology,
Innovation, and the Internet



JERRY MORAN
Chairman
Subcommittee on Consumer Protection, Product
Safety, Insurance, and Data Security

cc: The Honorable Bill Nelson, Ranking Member