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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE,
AND TRANSPORTATION

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6125

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October 12, 2021

Mr. Mark Zuckerberg
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer
Facebook, Inc.
1601 Willow Road
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg,

The United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation heard testimony last week from Ms. Frances Haugen, a former Facebook employee and whistleblower, who testified about concerning practices at Facebook. Ms. Haugen's testimony followed Antigone Davis' testimony at our September 30 hearing regarding the impact of Instagram and Facebook's other platforms on users' privacy interests and safety. Ms. Haugen provided information regarding internal Facebook research, documents, and deliberations, and testified that Facebook's own research recognizes the role its platforms play in spreading hate and divisive content in the United States and abroad, eroding individual privacy interests, undermining the mental health of vulnerable teenagers and children, and promoting ethnic violence, among other troubling impacts. Ms. Haugen asserted that Facebook has misled the public about the impact of its platforms, and the degree to which Facebook's decisions encourage and exploit divisive content to drive higher profits. The testimony at these two hearings raises significant concerns about whether Facebook has misled the public, Federal regulators, and this Committee.

The potential danger that social media platforms pose as forums for spreading divisive content was demonstrated, with horrifying consequences, by the role the Facebook platform played in fomenting ethnic violence against the Rohingya. *See* REUTERS, HATEBOOK: INSIDE FACEBOOK'S MYANMAR OPERATION (2018). Thousands of Burmese refugees currently live in the State of Washington. In April 2018, one of my constituents contacted me about her ongoing efforts over several years to alert Facebook to the widespread use of its platform to post hate speech and grisly images that were instigating violence, destabilizing the political environment in Myanmar, and driving ethnic violence on a broad scale. She pleaded with your company to shut down the offending accounts. Over the course of her efforts, Facebook remained unresponsive to her and failed to take action in response to her communications.

Working with that same constituent, my staff contacted Facebook's government affairs division on June 11, 2018 and, notwithstanding our persistent efforts, we were similarly frustrated by Facebook's lack of responsiveness and failure to take effective action. I raised these concerns when I met with Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's Chief Operating Officer, on May 17, 2019, and she assured me that Facebook had subsequently instituted a number of safeguards to limit the proliferation of divisive content on its platforms.

Despite these assurances, my constituent continues to alert Facebook that individuals who had been posting divisive content during the worst of the violence against the Rohingya, such as a Myanmar military lieutenant, are still posting such content on Facebook. Last month, my Senate staff again reached out to Facebook, yet these posts continue.

The role of Facebook's platform in the Rohingya tragedy illustrates the horrible consequences that failing to effectively limit the spread of divisive content on social media platforms can have in inflicting public harm. Against that backdrop, Ms. Haugen's testimony that Facebook's algorithms incentivize angry and divisive content on its platforms is chilling. More specifically, Ms. Haugen testified that Facebook made algorithmic changes in 2018 to maximize "meaningful social interactions" on its platforms, and its research showed that those changes actually accelerate and expand the spread of angry and divisive content on its platforms. Ms. Haugen further testified that, in the face of that research, Facebook declined to make the necessary adjustments, which would have reduced profitability, to fix this problem. Ms. Haugen's testimony, if true, raises serious concerns about the motivations that drive Facebook's decisions, policies and use of its internal research, and their widespread impacts on Facebook users worldwide.

Ms. Haugen also shared information regarding internal Facebook practices, including a practice of silencing employees who ask the "wrong" questions by deleting data and dismissing employees. This is deeply troubling and, if true, raises serious concerns that further erode the public's trust in Facebook.

Ms. Davis testified that Facebook wants to be more transparent and is considering how it can allow external researchers to have more access to Facebook's data. To that end, I request that Facebook preserve and retain documents, data and other electronically stored information relating to the issues raised at the September 30 and October 5 hearings, including: (1) the internal Facebook research that is the subject of Ms. Haugen's testimony, and the documents that reflect Facebook's evaluation and use of such research; (2) ranking or composition systems, including content recommendation systems; (3) experiments or recommendations to change those ranking or composition systems; (4) the use of, and internal decisions regarding, Facebook platforms in settings where there is ethnic violence, including in Myanmar and Ethiopia, and Facebook's role or response; (5) the impact of Facebook's platforms on children and teenagers under the age of 18; and (6) Facebook's targeted efforts to market its platforms to children, teenagers and parents.

Mr. Zuckerberg, you have acknowledged before our Committee that Facebook has a responsibility to ensure that people who use your products can do so safely. Given the importance of these issues, I urge Facebook to take these concerns seriously. This Committee will continue its oversight and work to pursue legislation to protect consumers' privacy, improve data security, and strengthen federal enforcement to address the digital harms that are the subject of these hearings.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Maria Cantwell". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Maria Cantwell
Chair