

ONE HUNDRED FIFTEENTH CONGRESS  
**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**

COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE

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Majority (202) 225-2927  
Minority (202) 225-3641

October 23, 2017

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

Mr. Mark Zuckerberg  
Chief Executive Officer  
Facebook  
1 Hacker Way  
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Mr. Jack Dorsey  
Chief Executive Officer  
Twitter  
1355 Market St., Suite 900  
San Francisco, CA 94103

Dear Mr. Page, Mr. Zuckerberg, and Mr. Dorsey:

I am writing to better understand your policies for managing content and advertising on your platform. The influence of the internet over our national dialogue and our lives has skyrocketed over the past decade. At the same time, the number of websites handling this traffic has consolidated to a handful of key platforms.<sup>1</sup> The combination of these trends have led to these few companies taking on a quasi-governmental role policing content, and therefore a large amount of communication, on the internet.

Despite these companies having taken over this important policymaking role, their objective is monetizing web traffic, not public policy. With a goal of ad clicks or driving page views, these companies' policies are not neutral; they actively shape content on the web.<sup>2</sup> And to the extent that these companies' platforms have publicly available policies for moderating content, those policies are vague and applied inconsistently. This lack of transparency makes it difficult for consumers to understand how content is controlled and for the government to oversee the market. Ultimately, algorithms and employees become the arbiters of what is acceptable content in the public forum without transparent guidelines. The result of these dynamics can often be absurd:

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<sup>1</sup> *Referral Traffic - Google or Facebook?*, Statista (May 24, 2017); *In the Americas, Netflix + Google + Facebook = The Internet?*, Sandvine (May 28, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> *Should Facebook and Twitter Be Regulated Under the First Amendment*, Wired (Oct. 11, 2017); *Do Our Devices Control More Than We Think?*, TED Radio Hour (Oct. 13, 2017).

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- One website justifiably bans certain terrorist organizations such as al-Qaida, the Taliban and Boko Haram, but permits Holocaust denial and white supremacist sites.<sup>3</sup>
- Some websites have refused to act on individual reports of threatening and harassing behavior. But those same sites do remove the posts and suspend accounts of the offenders when those same posts are raised by reporters or politicians.<sup>4</sup>
- In some cases, posts from sexual assault victims raising awareness of sexual assault have been removed by moderators and the victims' accounts have been suspended.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, posts threatening sexual assault against users are permitted.<sup>6</sup>
- One website trains moderators to protect white men from harassment, but not African American children.<sup>7</sup>
- In another case, a platform's CEO admitted to using his administrative powers to secretly edit users' comments that were critical of him.<sup>8</sup>
- Junk news, misleading advertising, and other disinformation is running rampant on the major platforms.<sup>9</sup> False and deceptive content are part of a widespread Russian operation designed to use major platforms to sway our elections and undermine our democracy.<sup>10</sup> But it also seems to come from individuals who are trying to game your content policies to make money from advertising through increased traffic to their sites.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Facebook's Secret Censorship Rules Protect White Men from Hate Speech but Not Black Children*, ProPublica (June 28, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> *Twitter Is Still Dismissing Harassment Reports and Frustrating Victims*, BuzzFeed News (July 18, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> *Rose McGowan's Twitter Account Locked After Posts About Weinstein*, New York Times (Oct. 12, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> *Twitter Still Isn't Doing Enough About Rape Threats Against Women*, Teen Vogue (Apr. 20, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> *Facebook's Secret Censorship Rules Protect White Men from Hate Speech but Not Black Children*, ProPublica (June 28, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> *Tumblr Says It Fixed the 'Safe Mode' Glitch That Hid Innocent Posts, Including LGBTQ+ Content*, TechCrunch (June 24, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> *Social Media Companies Must Respond to the Sinister Reality behind Fake News*, The Guardian (Sept. 30, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> *Silicon Valley's Russian Ads Problem, Explained*, Recode (Oct. 10, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> *Fake News Expert on How False Stories Spread and Why People Believe Them*, NPR (Dec. 14, 2016).

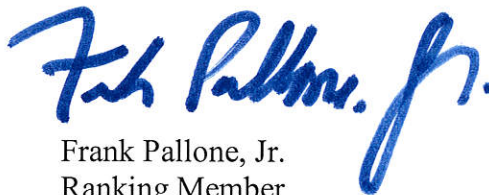
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Your platforms have taken on a role of policing content but your practices for doing so are not clear. I therefore request a briefing with Committee staff on your platforms' policies for moderating content and advertising and the implementation of those policies. Please be prepared to discuss:

1. How did you develop your policies for user content?
2. How do you enforce violations of your policies? What quality control measures do you employ to ensure consistency in policing these policies?
3. How do you ensure that users are aware of the policies both before content is posted and after content has been removed?
4. What safeguards do you have in place to prevent creators of fabricated content from gaming your algorithms to promote their stories?
5. What processes do you have in place to provide appeals of your decisions? What remedies are provided for users who have been harmed by incorrect decisions to promote or take down content?

Your assistance in this matter is greatly appreciated. Should you have any questions, please contact the Minority Committee staff at (202) 225-3641.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Frank Pallone, Jr." in a cursive style.

Frank Pallone, Jr.  
Ranking Member