

ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEENTH CONGRESS
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
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WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6115

Majority (202) 225-2927
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March 3, 2021

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

Dear Mr. Pichai:

According to recent reports, significant extremist content continues to be available and recommended to viewers on YouTube.¹ We are deeply troubled by the growing threat of extremism propagating on your platform and write to inquire about YouTube's policies and enforcement efforts to combat extremism and protect its viewers.

Violent extremism poses a growing threat to our national security and public safety. The magnitude of that threat has become painfully clear in recent months with events like the Capitol insurrection, the foiled plot to capture and potentially kill Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, and dozens of other extremist plots and attacks.² Last year, 67 percent of all extremist activity in the United States were committed by white supremacists and other like-minded extremists.³ The Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Bureau of Investigations consider racially and ethnically-motivated violent extremists—specifically white supremacist extremists—the most lethal and persistent threat to the nation.⁴

¹ Anti-Defamation League, *Exposure to Alternative & Extremist Content on YouTube* (Feb. 12, 2021).

² Center for Strategic & International Studies, *The War Comes Home: The Evolution of Domestic Terrorism in the United States* (Oct. 2020).

³ *Id.*

⁴ Department of Homeland Security, *Homeland Threat Assessment* (Oct. 2020); House Committee on Homeland Security, *Testimony of Christopher Wray, Director, Federal Bureau of Investigations at the Hearing on Worldwide Threats to the Homeland*, 116th Cong. (Sept. 17, 2020).

Experts have warned that YouTube has become a fertile breeding ground for racially and ethnically motivated extremist content. Since 2015, videos from extremists and ‘alternative’ channels (i.e., YouTube content creator accounts that can serve as gateways to increasingly fringe content) have proliferated on YouTube, with steep increases in the number of channels created, videos posted, and users watching, liking, and commenting on such content.⁵ Further, YouTube’s algorithm-driven Up Next recommendations, which are designed to maintain user engagement by providing tailored suggestions for more videos to watch, may create dangerous ‘rabbit hole’ effects, guiding users from more innocuous or alternative content to more fringe channels and videos.⁶

To tackle hate on its platform, YouTube has enhanced enforcement and revamped policies to remove violative content, promote authoritative content, reduce the spread of “borderline” content, and reward trusted creators.⁷ YouTube claims that views of supremacist content have declined by 80 percent on average since 2017, recommendations to borderline content have decreased by over 50 percent in the United States since the end of 2019, and the watch time of borderline content and harmful misinformation has decreased by 70 percent on average in the United States since 2019.⁸

Despite these efforts to curb extremism on its platform, a recent study found that YouTube still amplifies extremist content and alternative content that could lead people to extremist videos and encourage radicalization. Between July and September 2020, the Anti-Defamation League conducted a nationally representative survey to collect data on YouTube users’ viewing habits and YouTube’s recommended content.⁹ Approximately one in ten respondents watched a video from an extremist channel, while one in five respondents watched a video from an alternative channel.¹⁰ And YouTube’s recommendations suggested additional extremist and alternative videos and channels.¹¹

By making these recommendations, YouTube is effectively driving its users to more dangerous, extreme videos and channels. Viewers of extremist channels followed

⁵ Cornell University, *Auditing Radicalization Pathways on YouTube* (Dec. 2019) (www.arxiv.org/pdf/1908.08313.pdf).

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ YouTube Official Blog, *Our Ongoing Work to Tackle Hate* (June 5, 2019) (www.blog.youtube/news-and-events/our-ongoing-work-to-tackle-hate).

⁸ *Id.*; YouTube Official Blog, *The Four Rs of Responsibility, Part 2: Raising Authoritative Content and Reducing Borderline Content and Harmful Misinformation* (Dec. 3, 2019) (www.blog.youtube/inside-youtube/the-four-rs-of-responsibility-raise-and-reduce).

⁹ *See* note 1.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

recommendations to more extremist content nearly 45 percent of the time.¹² Viewers of videos from alternative channels followed recommendations to more alternative content nearly half of the time and followed recommendations to extremist channels over two percent of the time.¹³

YouTube states that it will remove videos that violate its hate speech policy and violent criminal organizations policy, but disinformation, viral conspiracy theories, and incendiary content that indoctrinates, radicalizes, and mobilizes extremists continues to flourish on YouTube.¹⁴ Ultimately, we believe that YouTube bears a moral responsibility for the content it amplifies on its platform and should disrupt the pipeline of extremism driving users to more fringe videos and channels. YouTube should make meaningful reforms to its policies and strengthen enforcement efforts to eradicate dangerous extremist and alternative content on its platform. Gaining users, maintaining engagement, and generating more advertising revenue cannot come at the expense of our national security.

To better understand YouTube's policies and practices for combating extremism on its platform, we request that you provide written response to the following questions by March 17, 2021:

1. Please describe how YouTube defines and classifies violative extremist content, borderline content, and authoritative and trusted content. In your response, please provide the specific criteria distinguishing each category of content and provide specific examples of what constitutes violative extremist content, borderline content, and authoritative and trusted content.
2. Please describe all policy changes YouTube implemented to stop the spread of extremism on its platform and when such changes were made. For each policy change or action YouTube has taken to stop the spread of extremism on its platform, please describe how the company is measuring the effectiveness of each policy change or action.
3. Since November 1, 2020, how many videos and channels has YouTube removed from its platform for violating its policies related to extremism? In your response, please provide the following aggregate data for each the top five videos and the top five channels that generated the most views on the platform that YouTube removed for violating policies related to extremist content:
 - a. the duration of time between hateful and extremist videos being posted by a content creator and such videos being removed by YouTube;

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

- b. the number of views, likes and dislikes, and comments received for such videos and channels before removal;
 - c. total watch time for such videos and channels before removal;
 - d. total watch time for such videos and channels as a result of YouTube's Up Next recommendations before removal; and
 - e. the total amount of advertising revenue generated by content creators whose videos or channels were removed for violating YouTube's policies related to extremism.
4. As of the date of your response, how many videos and channels containing content YouTube considers borderline are on the platform? In your response, please provide the following aggregate data for each of the top five videos and top five channels that have generated the most views on the platform that YouTube considers borderline content:
 - a. the total time videos and channels containing borderline content have been viewable on the platform;
 - b. the number of views, likes and dislikes, and comments for borderline videos and channels;
 - c. the total watch time for such videos and channels;
 - d. total watch time for such videos as a result of YouTube's Up Next recommendations; and
 - e. the total amount of advertising revenue generated by content creators whose videos or channels contain borderline content.
5. Please provide the total number of videos that YouTube has flagged as containing borderline content since November 1, 2020.
6. Please provide the total number of borderline videos that have been accompanied by links to authoritative information since November 1, 2020.

Mr. Sundar Pichai

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We thank you for your attention to this important matter. If you have any questions about our request, please contact Lisa Goldman or Gerald Leverich with the Majority Committee staff at (202) 225-2927.

Sincerely,



Frank Pallone, Jr.
Chairman



Mike Doyle
Chairman
Subcommittee on Communications
and Technology



Jan Schakowsky
Chair
Subcommittee on Consumer Protection
and Commerce