

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Subcommittee on Consumer Protection and Commerce Chair Janice D. Schakowsky

Hearing on “Disinformation Nation: Social Media’s Role in Promoting Extremism and Misinformation”

March 25, 2021

I want to welcome our witnesses and thank them for coming. It is not an exaggeration to say that your companies have fundamentally and permanently transformed our very culture: and our understand of the world.

Much of this is for the good, but it is also true that our country, our democracy, even our understanding of what is truth, has been harmed by the proliferation of disinformation, misinformation, and extremism, all of which has deeply divided us.

What our witnesses need to take away from this hearing is that self-regulation has come to the end of its road, and that this democratically elected body is prepared to move forward with legislation and regulation.

The regulation we seek should not attempt to limit Constitutionally protected free speech, but it must hold platforms accountable when they are used to incite violence and hatred— or as in the case of the Covid pandemic – spread misinformation that costs thousands of lives.

All three companies here today run platforms that are hotbeds of misinformation and disinformation.

Despite all the promises and new policies to match, disinformation was rampant in the 2020 election -- especially targeting vulnerable communities.

For example, Spanish language ads run by the Trump campaign falsely claimed President Biden was endorsed by Venezuelan President Maduro. The spread of disinformation fed upon itself until it came to a head in the historic assault on our Capitol and our democracy on January 6th, which cost 5 lives.

The lives lost to the Insurrection were not the first casualties of these platforms’ failures, nor are they the worst. In 2018, Facebook admitted a genocide of the Rohingya people in Myanmar was planned and executed on Facebook.

2020 saw the rise of coronavirus disinformation on Facebook’s platforms including the propaganda film “Plandemic.” This film got 1.8 million views and 150,000 shares before it was removed by Facebook.¹

March 25, 2021

Page 2

Disinformation like Plandemic made people skeptical of the need for vaccines and almost certainly contributed to the horrible loss of life during the pandemic.

Disinformation also hops platforms to spread virally across the internet. Plandemic was first posted on YouTube before taking off on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Misinformation regarding the election dropped by 73% across social media platforms after Twitter permanently suspended Trump as well as accounts tied to the Capitol Insurrection and QAnon.² The question is, what took so long?

The witnesses here today have demonstrated time and again that promises to self-regulate don't work. They must be held accountable for allowing disinformation and misinformation to spread across their platforms, infect our public discourse, and threaten our democracy.

That's why I'll be introducing the Online Consumer Protection Act, which I hope will earn bipartisan support.

Thank you, and I yield back.