

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-0609

Friday, July 10, 2020

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

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg:

We write with deep concern about the findings of the newly released audit of Facebook’s civil rights policies and practices. The audit, which took place over two years and drew upon interviews with hundreds of civil rights organizations and advocates, provides an unsettling assessment of the company’s efforts to address longstanding concerns about how its platforms damage American democracy and civil rights by amplifying disinformation, voter suppression, and hate speech, among other concerns.

Although the audit identified several areas where Facebook has made progress, from strengthening civil rights engagement by senior management to cracking down on discriminatory advertising in housing to better combatting election interference campaigns by foreign actors, it identified many areas where progress has been sorely lacking. In fact, the audit concluded that many of the company’s recent decisions represent “significant setbacks for civil rights.” It also found that “Facebook’s approach to civil rights remains too reactive and piecemeal” and urged the company to better address civil rights concerns across several areas outlined in the report.

Specifically, the audit urged the company to devote more resources to address hate against the Muslim and Jewish communities, and other vulnerable populations on the platform, along with a stronger commitment to root out white separatism and white nationalism in all its forms. It also called for specific commitments to address concerns about algorithmic bias or discrimination, and more steps to prevent its platforms from fanning polarization and radicalization by pushing users toward “extremist echo chambers.”

The audit placed special emphasis on Facebook’s responsibility to combat disinformation and voter suppression ahead of the 2020 elections. With up to seven in ten Americans using Facebook, the company has incredible power to shape public debate and access to information ahead of the election. Although the company has shown a recent willingness to rein in disinformation with respect to COVID-19, it has not shown equal resolve to confront voter suppression and learn the lessons of the 2016 election, where hostile foreign actors like Russia used the platform to target minority communities – especially Black Americans – to depress voting by sowing division and disinformation.

Specifically, the audit recommended that Facebook embrace stronger interpretation and enforcement of its voter suppression policies to cover posts, like those from President Trump espousing falsehoods about mail-in voting, meant to discourage Americans from exercising their fundamental right to vote. Facebook's inaction on these posts underscores the inconsistent enforcement of its existing voter interference policy. Left unchecked, the auditors concluded that the status quo risks establishing "a terrible precedent that may lead other politicians and non-politicians to spread false information about legal voting methods, which would effectively allow the platform to be weaponized to suppress voting."

For all of these reasons, we share the auditors' concern that Facebook has failed to use the tools and resources at its disposal to more vigorously combat voter suppression and protect civil rights. Although none of these issues lend themselves to easy solutions, we do not accept that they are beyond Facebook's considerable power to address – especially when the audit has made clear where progress is possible in several areas.

Although Facebook deserves credit for initiating this audit, the issue now is whether the company will heed its findings. We ask that you please respond to the following questions by August 15, 2020.

- How does Facebook plan to more robustly and consistently enforce its voter suppression and voter interference policies leading up to the 2020 election?
- What steps is Facebook taking to address disinformation spread by government officials or state-sponsored accounts, such as false claims about mail-in voting made repeatedly by President Trump?
- Does Facebook have data on whether its platforms drive polarization or extremism, and if so, will it make that data available to the public or researchers? If not, will Facebook commit to studying this issue and acting on any findings such studies reveal?
- What additional resources will Facebook allocate to study and address organized hate against Muslims, Jews, Black Americans, and other targeted groups on the platform?
- What steps has Facebook taken to prevent hate groups and white nationalists from using event pages to organize events targeting communities based on race, religion, and ethnicity?
- Will Facebook commit to prohibit express praise, support, and representation of white separatism and white nationalism even where the terms themselves are not used?
- In a July 8, 2020 blog post, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg wrote, "While we won't make every change they (the auditors) call for, we will put more of their proposals into practice." Which proposals in the civil rights audit has Facebook already decided they will not implement?

- Did Facebook have any editorial control over the final audit, and if so, were there any recommendations that were not made public?
- Does Facebook plan to expand civil rights training, which it has offered to several groups of employees, to all of its employees?
- What steps will Facebook take to consistently engage with and implement feedback from leaders in the civil rights community following this audit?
- Will Facebook adopt comprehensive civil rights screening processes or programs to assess civil rights risks and implications across all its products?

Thank you for your attention to these matters.

Sincerely,



MICHAEL F. BENNET
United States Senator



KAMALA D. HARRIS
United States Senator