

United States Senate

January 26, 2021

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

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg:

I write regarding reports that Facebook has failed to meet commitments it made to stop recommending political groups on its platform. These commitments include your responses to questions I asked you at a recent public hearing of the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. Facebook must explain the apparent discrepancy between its promises to stop recommending political groups and what it has delivered.

Facebook's system of recommending political groups poses grave threats to American democracy and public safety. Many Facebook groups (pages on your platform that function as forums for users to communicate about a particular topic) are breeding grounds for hate, echo-chambers of misinformation, and venues for coordination of violence, including explicit planning for the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.¹ Users organize and coordinate violent and anti-democratic efforts on these pages, but Facebook does not just allow these dangerous pages to exist on its platform, it recommends them to users. In fact, Facebook's own internal research found that Facebook's recommendation tools are responsible for 64 percent of all extremist group joins.² Your company's group recommendation system aims to maximize users' time spent on the platform but seems to disregard the dangerous behavior that many of these pages foster.

Unfortunately, it appears that Facebook has failed to keep commitments on this topic that you made to me, other members of Congress, and your users. You and other senior Facebook officials have committed, and reiterated your commitment, to stop your platform's practice of recommending political groups. First, on October 28, 2020, you appeared before the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation and stated that Facebook had stopped recommending groups with political content and social issues. When I raised concerns about

¹ *Extremists Are Using Facebook to Organize for Civil War Amid Coronavirus*, Tech Transparency Project (Apr. 22, 2020), <https://www.techtransparencyproject.org/articles/extremists-are-using-facebook-to-organize-for-civil-war-amid-coronavirus>; *Capitol Attack Was Months in the Making on Facebook*, Tech Transparency Project (Jan. 19, 2021), <https://www.techtransparencyproject.org/articles/capitol-attack-was-months-making-facebook>.

² Jeff Horowitz and Deepa Seetharaman, *Facebook Executives Shut Down Efforts to Make the Site Less Divisive*, Wall St. J. (May 26, 2020), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-it-encourages-division-top-executives-nixed-solutions-11590507499>.

Facebook’s system of recommending groups, you stated, “Senator, we have taken the step of stopping recommendations in groups for all political content or social issue groups as a precaution for this.”³ Later, in an official blog post published on January 6, 2021, Guy Rosen, Facebook’s Vice President of Integrity, and Monika Bickert, Facebook’s Vice President of Global Policy Management, stated, “We’ve had emergency measures in place since before the US elections like not recommending civic groups for people to join. We’re keeping them in place.”⁴

It does not appear, however, that Facebook has kept these commitments. According to The Markup, Facebook “continued to recommend political groups to its users throughout December [of 2020]” — well after you responded to my question at the Commerce Committee hearing.⁵ The Markup’s investigation looked at more than 1,900 Facebook users and found that 12 of the top 100 groups that Facebook recommended to them were political. These pages included messages that promote violence, target individual elected officials, and support insurrection. Facebook’s recommendations allegedly reached users across the ideological spectrum, and it appears that Facebook continued to recommend political groups to its users in January 2021, even after your company reiterated its commitment not to do so.⁶

These findings cast serious doubt on Facebook’s compliance with the promises you have publicly made to me and to your users. Therefore, I request a detailed explanation of this apparent inconsistency between your commitments and your platform’s practices, as well as a detailed review of the steps you are currently taking and plan to take to stop Facebook from recommending political groups to its users. Please provide this information in writing by February 9, 2021.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

³Hearing before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation Hearing “Does Section 230’s Sweeping Immunity Enable Big Tech Bad Behavior?” 116th Cong. (Oct. 28, 2020) (Statement of Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg to Sen. Markey, Member S. Comm. on Commerce, Science, and Transportation).

⁴Guy Rosen & Monica Bickert, *Our Response to the Violence in Washington*, Facebook (Jan. 6, 2021), <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/01/responding-to-the-violence-in-washington-dc/>.

⁵Leon Yin & Alfred Ng, *Facebook Said It Would Stop Pushing Users to Join Partisan Political Groups. It Didn’t*, The Markup (Jan. 19, 2021), <https://themarkup.org/citizen-browser/2021/01/19/facebook-said-it-would-stop-pushing-users-to-join-partisan-political-groups-it-didnt>.

⁶ *Id.*