

United States Senate

July 27, 2021

Mark Zuckerberg
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer
Facebook, Inc.
1 Hacker Way
Menlo Park, California 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg,

I write to request that Facebook immediately make public all data pertaining to vaccine misinformation. Although Facebook eagerly touts that more than two billion of its users have viewed authoritative information about the coronavirus and vaccines,¹ you refuse to share the number of users who have viewed vaccine misinformation.

Reports indicate Facebook is not moving nearly fast enough when it comes to removing misinformation. According to the Washington Post, “In May 2020, a 26-minute video presented as a trailer for an upcoming documentary called ‘Plandemic’ featured a prominent anti-vaccine activist falsely claiming that billionaires were helping to spread the virus to increase use of vaccines [...] By the time Facebook took down the original video, it had already been viewed 1.8 million times.”² According to reporting from NBC, “[s]ome anti-vaccination groups on Facebook are changing their names to euphemisms like ‘Dance Party’ or ‘Dinner Party,’ and using code words to fit those themes in order to skirt bans from Facebook.”³ One of these groups has more than 40,000 users.⁴ Yet, your July 17, 2021 blog post entitled “Moving Past the Finger Pointing” highlights the rising rates of vaccine acceptance on Facebook, touts your pop-up vaccine clinics, and claims that your company has “devoted unprecedented resources to the fight against the pandemic.”⁵ We see little evidence to back up those claims.

Unfortunately, this is part of a larger practice on the part of your company of refusing to provide straightforward answers to Congressional inquiries. Over the course of several years, I have sent numerous letters to Facebook requesting information on a variety of topics including firearm

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/07/19/technology-202-facebook-isnt-sharing-how-many-americans-viewed-vaccine-misinformation/>

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/07/22/facebook-youtube-vaccine-misinformation/>

³ <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/anti-vaccination-groups-turn-coded-language-facebook-pledges-crackdown-rcna1480>

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/07/support-for-covid-19-vaccines-is-high-on-facebook-and-growing/>

sales on Facebook marketplace, misleading PrEP ads targeting the LGBTQ+ community, and hate speech, receiving in most cases tangential responses wholly lacking of substance.

Below is a sampling of your failure to respond to Congressional inquiries:

- In a September 5, 2019 letter to Facebook expressing concern that despite its ban of gun sales on its platforms, users are still able to facilitate firearm transactions via Facebook Marketplace, I asked, “On average, how many accounts does Facebook Marketplace suspend for violating its gun sale policy?”⁶
 - *You responded, “We do not have numbers available specifically for Marketplace at this time. However in our most recent Community Standards Enforcement Report, released in May of 2019, we noted that between October 2018 and May 2019 we had taken action on approximately 670,000 pieces of firearm sale content, 69.9% of which we detected proactively.”*⁷
- In a November 14, 2019 letter to Facebook about the ongoing presence of ads on their site promoting misinformation about vaccine safety, I asked, “How many Facebook users have been exposed to anti-vaccine ads since March 2019?”⁸
 - *Facebook refused to answer the question.*
- In a December 19, 2019 letter to Facebook expressing concern over advertising on Facebook regarding the harmful impacts of misleading PrEP ads on the LGBTQ community, I asked “How many Facebook ads related to Truvada or other pre-exposure prophylaxis medications have you removed for their potential to cause physical harm in 2019?”⁹
 - *Facebook responded, “While we do not disclose this specific category of data, with respect to Truvada we removed all ads determined to be misleading by our third-party fact-checking organizations.”*¹⁰
- In a February 27, 2020 letter to Facebook regarding its continued failure to enforce and monitor its own ban on guns sales, I asked, “On average, how many accounts does Facebook Marketplace suspend for violating the firearm sale policy?”¹¹
 - *Facebook responded, “We do not have specific numbers for groups available at this time. However in our most recent Community Standards Enforcement Report, released in November of 2019, we noted that in Q2 2019 we had taken action on 2.5 million pieces of firearm sale content, an increase from approximately 670,000 pieces of firearm sale content in the previous quarter. This improvement increased our proactive detection to above 90%.”*¹²

⁶ <https://www.menendez.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/09-05-19%20Letter%20to%20Facebook%20on%20Marketplace%20Gun%20sales.pdf>

⁷ Kevin Martin, Facebook Response to September 5 Letter from Senator Menendez, September 26, 2019

⁸ <https://www.menendez.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FINAL%2011%2014%2019%20Menendez%20Letter%20to%20Facebook%20about%20Anti%20Vaccine%20Ads.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.menendez.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Senator%20Menendez%20Letter%20to%20Facebook%20December%2019%202019.pdf>

¹⁰ Kevin Martin, Facebook Response to December 19 Letter from Senator Menendez, January 9, 2020

¹¹ <https://www.menendez.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Facebook%20Private%20Group%20Gun%20Sale%20Letter.pdf>

¹² Kevin Martin, Facebook Response to February 27 Letter from Senator Menendez, March 12, 2020

- In a May 12, 2020 letter to Facebook asking a series of questions regarding the company’s COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation policies, I asked, “Will Facebook permit posts and ads by politicians regarding the election process that are factually incorrect?”¹³
 - *Facebook responded “We remove voter interference content that violates our Community Standards —specifically ‘misrepresentation of the dates, locations, and times, and methods for voting or voter registration...’ and ‘misrepresentation of who can vote, qualifications for voting, whether a vote will be counted, and what information and/or materials must be provided in order to vote.’” (Note: this only has to do with the actual action of casting a ballot; nothing on the integrity of the election results.)*
- In a May 14, 2020 letter asking Facebook to elucidate its policies regarding hate speech and COVID-19 misinformation in non-English posts, I asked, “How many people does Facebook and its platforms employ with the specific task of fact-checking information shared on its platforms regarding COVID-19? How many of them speak native-languages other than English?”¹⁴
 - *Facebook responded, “Our fact-checking partners are independent. We publicly list all fact-checking organizations we partner with around the world for Instagram and Facebook and for Whatsapp.”*¹⁵
- On June 21, 2021, in a letter to Facebook regarding vaccine misinformation, I asked, “In calendar year 2021, how many users viewed vaccine-related misinformation?”¹⁶
 - *Facebook responded “We don’t have details to share about how many users have viewed certain types of misinformation.”*¹⁷

In a 2009 interview with Wired Magazine, you stated, “We talk about this concept of openness and transparency as the high level ideal that we’re moving towards at Facebook.”¹⁸ In a 2012 letter to investors, you wrote, [w]e believe building tools to help people share can bring a more honest and transparent dialogue around government that could lead to more direct empowerment of people, more accountability for officials and better solutions to some of the biggest problems of our time.”¹⁹ Perhaps now is the time to reread your own statements and evaluate whether Facebook still adheres to its own ideals. It is ironic that a company that encourages its users to share the innermost details about their lives, refuses to share the most information about its practices.

Given that nearly 200 million Americans have granted your platform access to mundane as well as intimate particulars of their lives, the very least Facebook can do is adhere to its own purported values and mission. Unlike you, Members of Congress are accountable to the

¹³ [https://www.menendez.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Facebook%20Disinformation%20Policy%20\(final\).pdf](https://www.menendez.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Facebook%20Disinformation%20Policy%20(final).pdf)

¹⁴ https://www.menendez.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/LETTER_FB%20Letter%20COVID%20Misinformation%20Languages%20.pdf

¹⁵ Kevin Martin, Facebook Response to May 14 Letter from Senator Menendez, June 15, 2020

¹⁶ https://www.menendez.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/facebook_vaccine_misinformation_letter.pdf

¹⁷ Facebook, Inc., Facebook Response to June 21 Letter from Senator Menendez, July 2, 2021

¹⁸ <https://www.wired.com/2009/06/mark-zuckerberg-speaks/>

¹⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-letter/zuckerbergs-letter-to-investors-idUSTRE8102MT20120201>

American people and for that reason, I will keep pushing your company to hold itself to a higher standard. If you truly believe in transparency, share with us the data available to you that will help us understand the magnitude of vaccine misinformation and inform our decision-making processes as we continue to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

As such, I once again request answers to the following questions:

1. In calendar years 2020 and 2021, how many users viewed vaccine-related misinformation?
2. In calendar years 2020 and 2021, how many users were recommended anti-vaccine information or vaccine-related misinformation?
3. In calendar years 2020 and 2021 how many accounts did Facebook disable due to violations of its vaccine misinformation policy?
 - a. On average, how long did these pages or posts remain on the platform in violation of the policy before Facebook removed them?

Please provide response no later than August 10, 2021.

Sincerely,



Robert Menendez
United States Senator