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February 24, 2020

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

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg:

Recently, you wrote in the Financial Times that “Facebook is not waiting for regulation” and is “continuing to make progress” on issues ranging from disinformation in elections to harmful content on your platforms. Despite the new policies and investments you describe, I am deeply concerned that Facebook’s actions to date fall far short of what its unprecedented global influence requires. Today, Facebook has 2.9 billion users across its platforms, including Messenger, WhatsApp, and Instagram. In dozens of countries, Facebook has unparalleled power to shape democratic norms and debate, and as a result, elections. I am concerned that Facebook, as an American company, has not taken sufficient steps to prevent its platforms from undermining fundamental democratic values around the world.

Globally, misuse of Facebook platforms appears to be growing worse. Last year, the Oxford Internet Institute reported that governments or political parties orchestrated “social media manipulation” campaigns in 70 countries in 2019 (up from 28 in 2017 and 48 in 2018). Oxford found that at least 26 authoritarian regimes used social media “as a tool of information control... [and] to suppress fundamental human rights, discredit political opponents, and drown out dissenting opinions.” It reported that Facebook was authoritarians’ “platform of choice.”

Case after case suggests that Facebook’s efforts to address these issues are insufficient. Ahead of both the Brazilian presidential election in 2018 and the European Union elections in 2019, Facebook reportedly took steps to limit misinformation on its platforms. Nevertheless, 87 percent of Brazilian WhatsApp users reported seeing fake news on the platform. Facebook’s own analysis of the election found that it was unable to prevent large-scale misinformation, according to media reports. In a survey of eight European countries ahead of the E.U. elections, the nonprofit group Avaaz found that three-fourths of respondents had seen misinformation on the platform. The European Commission also criticized Facebook’s lack of transparency about the effectiveness of steps taken to curb disinformation ahead of the election.

In the Philippines, Facebook staff trained Rodrigo Duterte’s campaign, which then used the platform to circulate disinformation, including a fake endorsement from the pope and a fake sex tape of a political opponent. Since winning, Duterte has paid armies of online trolls to harass, dox, and spread disinformation about journalists and political opponents on Facebook. Although Facebook has since organized safety and digital literacy workshops while hiring more Tagalog speakers, journalists still contend that Facebook hasn’t “done anything to deal with the fundamental problem, which is they’re allowing lies to be treated the same way as truth and spreading it...Either they’re negligent or they’re complicit in state-sponsored hate.”

In Myanmar, military leaders have used Facebook since 2012 to inflame tensions between the country's Buddhist majority and Muslim Rohingya minority. The United Nations said Facebook played a "determining role" in setting the stage for a military assault in 2016 that displaced at least 700,000 people. Facebook was reportedly warned of these dangers as early as 2013, but over two years later, it had hired just four Burmese speakers to review content in a country with 7.3 million active users at the time. Over this period, a Facebook official also acknowledged that its systems struggled to interpret Burmese scripts, making it harder to identify hate speech.

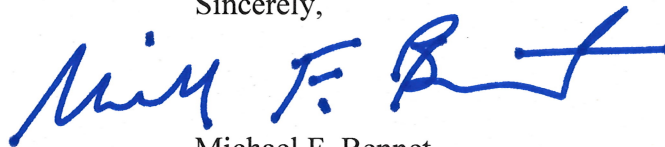
Even this partial record raises concerns. The Myanmar and the Philippines cases highlight the dangers of introducing and expanding platforms without first establishing the local infrastructure to mitigate the effects of hate speech and other dangerous incitement. In Brazil and Europe, even when Facebook made concerted efforts to mitigate the spread and impact of disinformation in elections, its measures were inadequate.

As we approach critical elections in 2020, not only in the United States, but also in countries such as Egypt, Georgia, Iraq, and Sri Lanka, Facebook must swiftly adopt stronger policies to limit abuses of its platforms and to absorb lessons learned from the cases cited above. I ask that you provide updates to the following questions by no later than April 1, 2020:

- What steps is Facebook taking to limit the virality of disinformation and hate speech?
- What has Facebook learned from its efforts to limit coordinated inauthentic behavior in the Brazilian and European Union elections? What new investments, policies, and other measures will Facebook adopt based on these cases?
- How does Facebook address disinformation spread by government officials or state-sponsored accounts, and does it adjust recommendation algorithms in these cases?
- How many content reviewers have you hired for different languages spoken by users?
- What steps has Facebook taken to improve its capacity to interpret non-English scripts to ensure its automated systems can detect content in violation of its community standards?
- Does Facebook have country-specific information about the average time content in violation of its community standards remained on the platform before its removal?
- Does Facebook conduct in-depth assessments, such as human rights audits, for the markets in which it operates? If so, how often does Facebook update these assessments?
- Beyond enforcing Facebook's community standards, what steps does Facebook plan to take to protect vulnerable populations, such as journalists or ethnic, racial, and religious minorities, from threats or harassment on its platforms?

Thank you for your attention to these issues.

Sincerely,



Michael F. Bennet