

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4606

COMMITTEES:

FINANCE

BANKING, HOUSING, AND
URBAN AFFAIRS

BUDGET

INTELLIGENCE

RULES AND ADMINISTRATION

February 21, 2023

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

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg,

I write to express my concern regarding Meta's efforts to combat the spread of racialized misinformation,¹ hate speech, and incitement content around the world and the destabilizing effects that Facebook is having on countries across the Global South. In its pursuit of growth and dominance in new markets, I worry that Meta has not adequately invested in the technical, organizational, and human safeguards necessary to ensuring that your platform is not used to incite violence and real-world harm. Meta has admitted that it can be "used to foment division and incite offline violence," as occurred in Myanmar during the genocide perpetrated against the Rohingya population.² And in testimony before the Senate, you acknowledged that Meta has a moral, if not *legal* responsibility, to prevent its products from being used to incite violence.³ Despite these acknowledgments, I am concerned that Meta is not taking seriously the responsibility it has to ensure that Facebook and its other platforms do not inspire similar events in other nations around the world.

According to Reuters, Facebook supported more than 110 languages on its platform as of October 2021 (e.g. offering menus and prompts), and users and advertisers posted on the platform in over 160 languages.⁴ However, Facebook's community standards – the policies that "outline what is and isn't allowed on the platform" – were available in less than half of the languages that Facebook offered at that time. Facebook has previously said that it uses artificial intelligence (AI) to proactively identify hate speech in more than 50 languages and that it has native speakers reviewing content in more than 70 languages. Setting aside the efficacy of Facebook's AI solutions to detect hate speech and violent rhetoric in all of the languages that it offers, the fact that Facebook does not employ native speakers in dozens of languages officially

¹ Radicalized Disinformation. The Media Manipulation Casebook. Available at:

<https://mediamanipulation.org/definitions/racialized-disinformation>

² Alex Warofka, "An Independent Assessment of the Human Rights Impact of Facebook in Myanmar," *Facebook.com*, November 5, 2018. Available at: <https://about.fb.com/news/2018/11/myanmar-hria/>

³ Open Hearing: Foreign Influence Operations' Use of Social Media. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. September 5, 2018. 115th Cong. Testimony of Sheryl Sandberg. Available at: <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/hearings/open-hearing-foreign-influence-operations%E2%80%99-use-social-media-platforms-company-witnesses>

⁴ Elizabeth Culliford and Brad Heath, "Facebook knew about, failed to police, abusive content globally – documents," *Reuters*, October 25, 2021. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/technology/facebook-knew-about-failed-police-abusive-content-globally-documents-2021-10-25/>

welcomed on its platform is troubling – indicating that Facebook has prioritized growth over the safety of its users and the communities Facebook operates in.

Of particular concern is the lack of resources dedicated to what Facebook itself calls “at-risk countries” – nations that are especially vulnerable to misinformation, hate speech, and incitement to violence. According to documents provided by Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen, a June 2020 internal audit of Facebook’s efforts to improve safety for users in “at-risk countries” found massive gaps in coverage.⁵ Facebook had failed to devote the resources necessary to ensure that users in “at-risk countries” could use the platform safely.

In Ethiopia, Facebook reportedly did not have automated systems capable of flagging harmful posts in Amharic and Oromo, the country’s two most spoken languages.⁶ A March 2021 internal report said that armed groups within Ethiopia were using Facebook to incite violence against ethnic minorities, recruit, and fundraise. In the wake of Facebook’s role in the genocide of the Rohingya in Myanmar – where UN investigators explicitly described Facebook as playing a “determining role” in the atrocities⁷ – one would imagine more resources would be dedicated to places like Ethiopia.

Even in languages where Meta does have experience, the systems in place appear woefully inadequate at preventing violent hate speech from appearing on Facebook. In advance of the 2022 general elections in Kenya, the non-profit Global Witness conducted an investigation in which it submitted twenty ads to Facebook for approval.⁸ All of these ads, ten of which were in English and ten of which were in Swahili, violated Facebook’s Community Standards for hate speech and ethnic-based calls to violence, as they included dehumanizing speech comparing specific tribal groups to animals as well as calls for rape, slaughter, and beheading. After the English-language ads were flagged for violating Facebook’s Grammar and Profanity policy, Global Witness was able to have those ads accepted after making only minor corrections. The failure of Facebook’s internal processes to catch these posts undermines statements from your company regarding the effectiveness of the solutions it has developed and your professed dedication to preventing this type of content from appearing on the platform.

In Facebook’s largest market, India, Facebook’s “recommended” feature and algorithms have amplified the amount of hate speech and misinformation that users see. Reportedly, a Facebook employee in India created a fake account on the platform in February 2019 to see what a new user in the country would see based on Facebook’s recommendations. This employee was apparently “shocked” by the “near constant barrage of polarizing nationalist content, misinformation, and violence and gore” that quickly inundated her feed. The researcher wrote,

⁵ Cat Zakrzewski, Gerrit De Vynck, Niha Masih and Shibani Mahtani, “How Facebook neglected the rest of the world, fueling hate speech and violence in India,” *Washington Post*, October 24, 2021. Available at:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/10/24/india-facebook-misinformation-hate-speech/>

⁶ Eliza Mackintosh, “Facebook knew it was being used to incite violence in Ethiopia. It did little to stop the spread, documents show,” *CNN*, October 25, 2021. Available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/25/business/ethiopia-violence-facebook-papers-cmd-intl/index.html>

⁷ Tom Miles, “U.N. investigators cite Facebook role in Myanmar crisis,” *Reuters*, March 12, 2018. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-facebook/u-n-investigators-cite-facebook-role-in-myanmar-crisis-idUSKCN1G02PN>

⁸ Global Witness, “Facebook unable to detect hate speech weeks away from tight Kenyan election,” July 28, 2022. Available at: <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/digital-threats/hate-speech-kenyan-election/>

“Following this test user’s News Feed, I’ve seen more images of dead people in the last three weeks than I’ve seen in my entire life total.”⁹

Unfortunately, these are not isolated cases – or new revelations. For nearly six years, Facebook’s role in fueling, amplifying, and accelerating racial, religious, and ethnic violence has been documented across the globe – including in Bangladesh¹⁰, Indonesia^{11,12}, South Sudan¹³, and Sri Lanka¹⁴. In other developing countries – such as Cambodia¹⁵, Vietnam¹⁶ and the Philippines^{17,18} – Facebook has reportedly courted autocratic parties and leaders in order to ensure its continued penetration of those markets.

Across many of these cases, Facebook’s global success – an outgrowth of its business strategy to cultivate high levels of global dependence through efforts like Facebook Free Basics and Internet.org^{19,20} – has heightened the effects of its misuse. In many developing countries, Facebook, in effect, constitutes the internet for millions of people, and serves as the infrastructure for significant social, political, and economic activity.²¹ This dynamic is lucrative for Facebook but has been identified as contributing to declines in independent media and the

⁹ Sheikh Salliq and Krutika Pathio, “Facebook dithered in curbing divisive user content in India,” *Associated Press*, October 24, 2021. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-technology-business-media-religion-74175aa6f2cb50fc6fb1aedda11b2c6c>

¹⁰ Mubashar Hasan, Geoffrey Macdonald, and Hui Hui Ooi, “How Facebook Fuels Religious Violence,” *Foreign Policy*, February 4, 2022. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/04/facebook-tech-moderation-violence-bangladesh-religion/>

¹¹ Bhavan Jaipragas, “How Indonesia’s anti-Chinese fake news problem spun out of control,” *South China Morning Post*, December 22, 2016. Available at: <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2056627/how-indonesias-anti-chinese-fake-news-problem-spun-out-control>

¹² Sebastien Strangio, “Ghosts of Pogroms Past Haunt Indonesia,” *Foreign Policy*, August 11, 2017. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/11/beijing-wont-let-indonesias-chinese-burn-again/>

¹³ Benjamin Reeves, “Online fake news and hate speech are fueling tribal ‘genocide’ in South Sudan,” *The World*, April 24, 2017. Available at: <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-04-25/online-fake-news-and-hate-speech-are-fueling-tribal-genocide-south-sudan>

¹⁴ Shihar Aneez and Ranga Sirilal, “Grenade blast kills one in Sri Lanka communal violence, social media blocked,” *Reuters*, March 7, 2018. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-clashes/sri-lanka-blocks-social-media-as-buddhist-mobs-attack-mosques-idUSKCN1GJ1JT>

¹⁵ Megha Rajagopalan, “This Country’s Democracy Has Fallen Apart — And It Played Out To Millions On Facebook,” *BuzzFeed News*, January 21, 2018. Available at: <https://www.buzzfeed.com/meghara/facebook-cambodia-democracy>

¹⁶ Megha Rajagopalan, “Facebook Has Been Accused Of Helping The Vietnamese Government Crack Down On Dissent,” *BuzzFeed News*, April 10, 2018. Available at: https://www.buzzfeed.com/meghara/facebook-vietnam-mark-zuckerberg?utm_term=.ssX25GvJB#.bkOqMWaZO

¹⁷ Shihar Aneez and Ranga Sirilal, “Grenade blast kills one in Sri Lanka communal violence, social media blocked,” *Reuters*, March 7, 2018. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-clashes/sri-lanka-blocks-social-media-as-buddhist-mobs-attack-mosques-idUSKCN1GJ1JT>

¹⁸ Lauren Etter, Vernon Silver, and Sarah Frier, “How Facebook’s Political Unit Enables the Dark Art of Digital Propaganda,” *Bloomberg*, December 21, 2017. Available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2017-12-21/inside-the-facebook-team-helping-regimes-that-reach-out-and-crack-down>

¹⁹ Saritha Rai, “How Facebook Uses ‘WhatsApp Phones’ to Tap Next Emerging Market,” *Bloomberg*, December 2, 2018. Available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-12-02/how-facebook-uses-whatsapp-phones-to-tap-next-emerging-market>

²⁰ Olivia Solon, “‘It’s Digital Colonialism’: How Facebook’s Free Internet Service Has Failed Its Users,” *The Guardian*, July 27, 2017. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jul/27/facebook-free-basics-developing-markets>

²¹ Leo Mirani, “Millions of Facebook Users Have No Idea They’re Using the Internet,” *Quartz*, February 9, 2015. Available at: <https://qz.com/33/millions-of-facebook-users-have-no-idea-theyre-using-the-internet/>; Savannah Wallace, “In the Developing World, Facebook Is the Internet,” *Medium*, September 7, 2020. Available at: [In the Developing World, Facebook Is the Internet | The Startup | Medium](https://medium.com/@savannahwallace/in-the-developing-world-facebook-is-the-internet-1e1e1e1e1e1e)

extent to which Facebook has become an attractive vector for abuse, manipulation, and deception.^{22,23}

While Facebook has made some progress in addressing misuse of its platform in the United States, the allegation that Facebook is dedicating eighty-four percent of its misinformation budget to the United States, where only ten percent of its users reside, reveals the lack of a proactive approach to ensuring its platform is not used to cause harm in other countries around the world.²⁴ Ultimately, the destabilizing impacts of your platform on fragile societies across the globe poses a set of regional – if not global – security risks.

I ask that you give due consideration to the concerns raised in this letter and that you provide answers to the following questions by March 15, 2023.

Questions:

1. How many languages does Facebook currently offer menus and prompts for on its platform? How many languages does Facebook's AI-based content moderation tools cover? How many languages do Facebook content moderators have native language expertise in?
2. A Facebook spokesman said that the figures regarding the allocation of Facebook's global misinformation budget were incomplete because they did not include third-party fact-checking partners. What was Facebook's budget for efforts to counter misinformation in 2021 and in 2022? How much of that was spent in the United States? How much was spent in Bangladesh? How much was spent in Ethiopia? How much was spent in India?
3. In a statement to the Associated Press, Facebook said it "invested significantly in technology to find hate speech in various languages including Hindi and Bengali" and those efforts have "reduced [the] amount of hate speech that people see by half" in India in 2021. Please describe how this figure was calculated. How do you quantify the amount of hate speech that people see? How much hate speech did users see in 2020? 2021? 2022?
4. What is the process for determining which languages Facebook will add to its platform? What is the process for determining which languages Facebook will translate the community standards into?
5. Please list each country in which Facebook, its subsidiaries, or affiliates offer a program associated with, or similar to, Facebook Basics and list each mobile network operator Facebook has contracts with.

²² Luu Van Dat, "Vietnam's Business Owners Are Loving Facebook," *Bloomberg*, November 7, 2017. Available at:

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-11-07/vietnam-relies-on-once-banned-facebook-to-kick-start-businesses>

²³ Christina Larson, "Facebook Can't Cope With the World It's Created," *Foreign Policy*, November 7, 2017. Available at:

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/11/07/facebook-cant-cope-with-the-world-its-created/>; Nitasha Tiku, "After Troubles in Myanmar, Facebook Charges Ahead in Africa," *Wired*, October 7, 2018. Available at: <https://www.wired.com/story/after-troubles-myanmar-facebook-charges-ahead-africa/>

²⁴ Cat Zakrzewski, Gerrit De Vynck, Niha Masih and Shibani Mahtani, "How Facebook neglected the rest of the world, fueling hate speech and violence in India," *Washington Post*, October 24, 2021. Available at:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/10/24/india-facebook-misinformation-hate-speech/>

6. During the November 2020 election in Myanmar, Facebook installed measures to demote misinformation, including disinformation shared by the Myanmar military junta. Facebook then decided to rollback these measures after the election, despite evidence that the measures reduced views of inflammatory posts by 25.1% and photo posts containing misinformation by 48.5%. Why did Facebook rollback these features? Does Facebook believe that misinformation should only be a priority during national elections? What other events may require added anti-misinformation measures?
7. A Facebook spokesman said, "Hate speech against marginalized groups, including Muslims, is on the rise in India and globally. So we are improving enforcement and are committed to updating our policies as hate speech evolves online." Does Facebook acknowledge that its platform plays a role in the rise in hate speech online?

I know that you share my belief that Facebook and Meta's other products should be safe for users regardless of where they live or the language they speak. I appreciate your attention to this critically important matter and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Mark R. Warner
United States Senator