



March 25, 2021

The Honorable Frank Pallone, Jr., Chairman
The Honorable Cathy McMorris Rodgers, Ranking Member
U.S House Energy and Commerce Committee

The Honorable Michael F. Doyle, Chairman
The Honorable Robert E. Latta, Ranking Member
U.S. House Communications and Technology Subcommittee

The Honorable Janice D. Schakowsky, Chairwoman
The Honorable Gus M. Bilirakis
U.S. House Consumer Protection and Commerce Subcommittee

RE: Energy and Commerce Committee Hearing with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai, and Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey

Dear Chairman Pallone, Ranking Member McMorris Rodgers, Chairman Doyle, Ranking Member Latta, Chairwoman Shakowsky, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and Members of the Subcommittees:

On behalf of Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC (Advancing Justice | AAJC), we submit this comment in advance of your March 25th, 2021 hearing with the CEOs of Alphabet, Facebook, and Twitter to examine the proliferation and management of misinformation and disinformation content on their platforms.

Advancing Justice | AAJC is a national non-profit, non-partisan organization that works through policy, advocacy, education, and litigation to advance the civil and human rights of Asian Americans and to build and promote a fair and equitable society for all. Founded in 1991, Advancing Justice | AAJC is one of the nation's leading experts on civil rights issues of importance to the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community including hate incidents, immigrant rights, and racial profiling.

The insurrection at the Capitol on Jan. 6 is only one instance of how mis- and disinformation, conspiracy theories, and racially-charged rhetoric have led to increases in violence. Disinformation and its negative offline effects profoundly impact minority and Black, Indigenous and people of color communities. Mis- and disinformation seeks to manipulate and indoctrinate Asian American communities with false information, while other campaigns scapegoat Asians and Asian Americans with baseless theories that ultimately stoke hate and violence against AAPIs.

As demonstrated by the recent surge in anti-Asian hate, Asian Americans are suffering from race-related discrimination, harassment, and violence. Platforms have failed to enforce their own internal guidelines and policies prohibiting hate speech and the incitement of violence, allowing racist and xenophobia to proliferate online. Derogatory online content has fueled, justified, and inspired acts of violence targeting AAPI individuals and perpetuated fear in AAPI communities across the country. While expressing legitimate criticism of or disagreement with the Chinese government for the handling of COVID-19 based on verified facts is certainly permissible and important, what cannot be tolerated is the use of “dog whistles” to spread verifiably false information or to falsely equate the actions and responsibilities of a government entity to an entire community of people based on race. Language that conflates Asians and Asian Americans with the Chinese government is weaponized to mischaracterize and harm an entire race. Failure to recognize and remove such “dog whistles” perpetuates and escalates harm to AAPI communities. In a 2017 report, *Advancing Justice | AAJC* noted an increase in hate crimes, harassment, and violence against Asian Americans within the first year of the Trump presidency when such conflation and disinformation started to become more normalized.¹ The number of anti-Asian incidents dramatically increased in 2020² – an outcome of continued anti-Asian rhetoric amplified and normalized by Trump and others on social media platforms.

Hate crimes against Muslims in the United States have also increased by 15% in recent years. According to the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), this rise can be attributed to xenophobic rhetoric used by Trump, including his statements on social media platforms.³ Under the Trump administration, a greater percentage of hate incidents against Muslims became physically violent against victims. Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, and other platforms have been consistently used as an organizing tool by white nationalists and militias to advance violent, anti-Muslim agendas; but Trump’s own anti-Muslim rhetoric gave such views legitimacy and authority. Allowing such content to persist on platforms without oversight or contest proliferated and uplifted the rhetoric of far-right extremist groups and encouraged violence and harassment against members of the Muslim community.

While some platforms have taken some steps to flag and/or label potential disinformation⁴, they continue to host, monetize, and enable the sharing of such content. Community organizers and advocates do not believe that labeling does enough to stop the harmful effects of such content. Platforms must do more to prevent the active spread of harmful content, including enforcing their own terms and conditions by banning and taking down flagged disinformation. Even though some entities like Facebook publicly committed to bolstering security and content moderation efforts during the election cycle,⁵ some researchers believe that enforcement was not as effective or vigilant on non-English content such as Asian language videos (even after they had been flagged by users as featuring problematic content).⁶ As some of the largest and most influential digital platforms, Alphabet, Twitter, and Facebook must go beyond monitoring only explicit calls

¹<https://www.advancingjustice-ajc.org/news/advocates-see-disturbing-rise-hate-crimes-targeting-asian-americans>

²http://www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/A3PCON_Public_Weekly_Report_3.pdf

³ <https://www.dw.com/en/anti-muslim-hate-crime-on-the-rise-in-donald-trumps-us-report/a-43500942>

⁴ <https://www.vox.com/identities/21579752/asian-american-misinformation-after-2020>

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/05/technology/facebook-election-misinformation.html>

⁶ <https://www.vox.com/recode/21551696/stolen-election-misinformation-youtube-trump-voter-fraud>

to violence in response to user flags, to actively identifying and removing “dog whistles,” discriminatory language, and other more implicit but equally threatening and dangerous content.

Examples of hate speech and violence inciting language on digital platforms

Google:

Content perpetuating the myth that COVID-19 is the result of a lab or other conspiracy theories surrounding China’s responsibility for the spread of the virus continues to proliferate on platforms like Youtube.⁷ Other content repeatedly insists that “China must pay” for “victimizing the world,”⁸ blaming China for the “wuhan flu’s” “devastation” on America.⁹ In some videos, Trump supporters also blamed his 2020 presidential election loss on the “kung flu.”¹⁰ Another video goes as far as to claim that the Chinese government intentionally deployed Chinese tourists with the virus to deliberately spread it.¹¹ This type of Youtube content scapegoats China and Chinese people, while normalizing and legitimizing hateful and dehumanizing speech. Google does label COVID-19 related content with a link to the CDC website, but many of these videos remain unflagged and unmarked with any warning about their false claims. Moreover, some content creators deny the prevalence of anti-Asian hate stemming from disinformation they spread about the pandemic, dismissing victims’ reports and undermining statements of law enforcement.¹² This rhetoric continues to be readily accessible on Youtube and shared through networks, accumulating views and receiving supportive comments from viewers.

While Google has removed some Youtube content in reaction to content-enforcement flags, its reasons for removing videos is not always consistent with addressing racism or hateful content. For example, one video that suggested Chinese restaurants were responsible for the spread of COVID-19 was not removed for its jarring racist images, but because Google found the video to be in violation of COVID misinformation policies that prohibit content that underplays the severity of the illness.¹³ Alphabet must set clear guidelines on racist and xenophobic content and strictly adhere to enforcement of such guidelines.

Facebook:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of Facebook posts baselessly accused Chinese individuals and Chinese Americans for the spread of COVID-19 in the United States. Trump and other prominent figures repeatedly posted content on Facebook that scapegoated China and Chinese individuals for the outbreak of the virus, using phrases like “China ban,”¹⁴ “China virus,”¹⁵ and other racialized rhetoric like “Remember, it was China’s fault!”¹⁶ Posts also encouraged xenophobia against Asians and Asian Americans, suggesting only U.S. citizens were

⁷ One example with 146 views: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rR2C7gkd_4E; another with 185k views: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U023FSiOdf0>

⁸ <https://youtu.be/em77L2CsqYg>

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JY1RhCSj0v0&t=478s>

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LiUN6e7tXVc&t=2225s>

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QX97s5RNuY8&t=438s>

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oztCntBBDaw>

¹³ <https://www.mercurynews.com/2021/03/17/youtube-takes-down-racist-video-but-not-because-of-the-racism/>

¹⁴ Over 12 instances of “China ban,” “China travel ban,” or other language on Trump’s account alone, suggesting individuals of Chinese descent should not be allowed to enter the United States.

¹⁵ Over 40 instances of “China virus” or “ChinaVirus” appear in Donald Trump’s Facebook posts alone

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/153080620724/posts/10166036380945725>

welcome into the country¹⁷ and even conflating U.S. Chinatowns with the virus.¹⁸ The scapegoating of Chinese people is a continuation of anti-Asian rhetoric Trump and other right-wing personalities have amplified on Facebook's platforms throughout recent years, including content that repeatedly singles out Chinese and North Koreans as threats.

Prominent Facebook accounts and groups have also frequently shared negatively charged language like "terrorist" and "jihadist" and attached negative connotations to the word "Muslim." In one Facebook post, Trump characterized Middle Eastern immigrants as "terrorists, jihadists, and violent extremists." The post garnered over 273,000 reactions, 45,000 comments, and 58,000 shares with a sizable number of reactions and comments in support of this hateful rhetoric.¹⁹ Groups such as Muslim Advocates have repeatedly called for Facebook to take anti-Muslim rhetoric on the platform seriously. They cite that White nationalists and militias have used Facebook to organize protests at mosques.²⁰ They also emphasize that the platform has been used internationally to incite violence and even genocide against Muslims.

Twitter:

Anti-Asian hate and scapegoating intensified on Twitter as prominent accounts with high numbers of followers like those of Trump, Senator Cruz, and others amplified hateful rhetoric, hashtags, and disinformation on the platform. The former President's tweets referring to COVID-19 as the "#chinesevirus" was associated with a rise in anti-Asian content on the platform. Posts that contained "#chinesevirus" had higher associations with anti-Asian language and the use of other hateful hashtags such as "#batmaneatingflu" and "#yellowmanflu,"²¹ shifting blame to Asians and Asian Americans. One popular hashtag that proliferated anti-Asian sentiment was "#ChinaLiedPeopleDied," which more explicitly blamed China for the virus, baselessly accused Chinese people of intentionally spreading the virus, and even called for revenge. Another trending topic was "#MakeChinaPay," which echoed the Trump administration's desire to punish China for the pandemic.²²

Studies indicate that increases in hateful social media activity and content consumption is associated with increases in anti-minority sentiment and even hate crimes. For example, Trump's tweets "about Islam-related topics are highly correlated with anti-Muslim hate crimes... [and] Trump's tweets [even] predict[ed] more anti-Muslim Twitter activity of his followers."²³ Social media platforms like Twitter normalizes anti-minority sentiments, which can make such bigotry seem more socially acceptable, potentially leading to an increase in violence.

Conclusion

¹⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/153080620724/posts/10164590148900725>

¹⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/153080620724/posts/10165154893590725>

¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/153080620724/posts/10165726004780725>

²⁰ <https://www.commondreams.org/newswire/2021/01/11/muslim-advocates-calls-facebooks-new-civil-rights-vp-ban-trump-prioritize-anti>

²¹ Hswen, Yulin, et al. "Association of '#covid19' Versus '#chinesevirus' With Anti-Asian Sentiments on Twitter: March 9–23, 2020." *American Journal of Public Health*, Mar. 2021, pp. e1–9. DOI.org (Crossref), doi:10.2105/AJPH.2021.306154.

²² <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/07/15/the-world-will-make-china-pay-a-price-over-coronavirus-outbreak-mike-pompeo-says.html>

²³ Muller, Karsten, and Carlo Schwarz. *From Hashtag to Hate Crime: Twitter and Anti-Minority Sentiment*. p. 110.

When tech platforms like Alphabet, Facebook, and Twitter fail to adequately respond to the rise of hate speech, xenophobic content, and fabricated claims, they amplify and enable racist, white-supremacist, violent agendas that lead to the dehumanization of and attacks against Asian American communities. Continuing to give hateful rhetoric a platform without proper oversight and consequences will continue to encourage and normalize the scapegoating and otherization of Asian Americans. The recent surge in anti-Asian hate demonstrates how critical it is to address the sources of mis- and disinformation, xenophobia, and scapegoating of the Asian American community. Dismantling the spread of hateful rhetoric must be a priority to protect minority and BIPOC communities from harm, and Alphabet, Facebook, and Twitter have a crucial role to play here. They must do more, and they must be held accountable.

Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC thanks you for your attention to and examination of this critical issue, and urges you to consider the effects of mis- and dis-information on minority and BIPOC communities.

Please contact Emily Chi, Assistant Director for Telecommunications, Technology and Media at Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC at echi@advancingjustice-ajc.org for any inquiries.

Sincerely,
Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC