

Sept. 27, 2021

TO: The Honorable Eddie Bernice Johnson
The Honorable Frank Lucas
The Honorable Bill Foster
The Honorable Jay Obernolte

RE: Facebook's Stonewalling of Research into its Role in the Capitol Insurrection

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Chairwoman Johnson, Ranking Member Lucas, Subcommittee Chairman Foster, Subcommittee Ranking Member Obernolte

We are writing to express our consternation over Facebook's flagrant disregard for transparency and our democracy, most recently by deplatforming NYU researchers hours after learning they were studying the company's role in spreading disinformation related to the January 6th Capitol insurrection¹.

While there is overwhelming evidence that Facebook was negligent as its platform was weaponized to help incite and plan the insurrection – including evidence compiled by an internal Facebook task force² and in federal court documents³ – the company has failed to evaluate how their platform may have helped facilitate the Capitol insurrection, despite calls to do so from the public⁴, Congress⁵, and even their own carefully curated Oversight Board⁶.

When Facebook initially deplatformed the NYU researchers, they claimed it was in service of protecting people's privacy. They falsely insinuated their action was mandated by the terms of the 2019 consent decree imposed on them by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), before being forced to acknowledge that was not the case⁷. They dishonestly claimed⁸ the NYU team's browser extension was a privacy threat – and yet despite establishing that false pretense, their action was *not* to block the tool, but to sanction the independent researchers⁹.

¹ Vice News, "Facebook Just Suspended the Accounts of Some of Its Biggest Critics," David Gilbert, August 4, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/n7bkg8/facebook-just-suspended-the-accounts-of-some-of-its-biggest-critics>

² BuzzFeed News, "Facebook Knows It Was Used To Help Incite The Capitol Insurrection," Craig Silverman, Ryan Mac, and Jane Lytvynenko, April 22, 2021, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/facebook-failed-stop-the-steal-insurrection>

³ Business Insider, "In court documents about the pro-Trump riots at the Capitol, Facebook is cited far more than any other social network," Ben Gilbert, February 8, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-capitol-riots-arrests-parler-instagram-youtube-2021-2>

⁴ The Hill, "Tech groups urge Congress to 'dig deeper' on Facebook role in Capitol riot," Rebecca Klar, July 26, 2021, <https://thehill.com/policy/technology/564830-tech-accountability-groups-urge-congress-to-dig-deeper-on-facebooks-role-in>

⁵ Just Security, "Senate Report on January 6 Points to Need to Investigate Role of Social Media in Insurrection," Justin Hendrix, June 9, 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/76829/senate-report-on-january-6-points-to-need-to-investigate-role-of-social-media-in-insurrection/>

⁶ CNN, "Facebook told to investigate its role in insurrection," Donie O'Sullivan, May 6, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/06/tech/facebook-oversight-board-insurrection/index.html>

⁷ Wired, "Facebook's Reason for Banning Researchers Doesn't Hold Up," Gilad Edelman, August 4, 2021, <https://www.wired.com/story/facebooks-reason-banning-researchers-doesnt-hold-up/>

⁸ Mozilla, "Why Facebook's claims about the Ad Observer are wrong," Marshal Erwin, August 4, 2021, <https://blog.mozilla.org/en/mozilla/news/why-facebooks-claims-about-the-ad-observer-are-wrong/>

⁹ Wired, "Facebook's Reason for Banning Researchers Doesn't Hold Up," Gilad Edelman, August 4, 2021, <https://www.wired.com/story/facebooks-reason-banning-researchers-doesnt-hold-up/>

It is increasingly clear that Facebook is actively working to prevent any investigation into their platform's role in the January 6th insurrection, suggesting they have something to hide.

And this incident can't be examined in a vacuum. It is imperative to consider the stark reality that the platform is still awash with dangerous election lies¹⁰ unchecked by reality, that the company's efforts to shield critical data from researchers is ubiquitous, and that every way to get data from Facebook is controlled by Facebook.

That must change if we are to quell their continued assaults on our information ecosystem and protect our democratic process. We urge Congress to demand that Facebook immediately restore the NYU researchers' accounts and submit to a complete independent audit of its role in the Capitol insurrection to ensure similarly horrific events do not happen in 2022, 2024, and beyond. Our country depends on it.

Signed,

Accountable Tech
ADL (the Anti-Defamation League)
American Family Voices
Broward for Progress
Center for American Progress
Center for Countering Digital Hate
Common Sense Media
Damian Collins MP, Co-Founder of the International Grand Committee on Disinformation
Decode Democracy
Fair Vote
Fight for the Future
Free Press
Friends of the Earth
Indivisible Hawaii
Indivisible Ulster
Institute for Strategic Dialogue
Jason Kint, CEO of Digital Content Next
Jessica J. González, Co-CEO, Free Press
Liberation in a Generation
Media Matters for America
Progress America
Real Facebook Oversight Board
Roger McNamee, Author of Zucked: Waking Up to the Facebook Catastrophe
Safiya Noble, Author, Algorithms of Oppression
Secure Elections Network
Stop Online Violence Against Women Inc.
SumOfUs
Tech Transparency Project
The Connector
Tierra Común
Women's March

¹⁰ Tech Transparency Project, "False Election Audit Claims Surge on Facebook," August 5, 2021, <https://www.techtransparencyproject.org/articles/false-election-audit-claims-surge-facebook>