

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 15, 2020

Mark Zuckerberg
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer
Facebook, Inc.
1601 Willow Road
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg:

We write to you about reports that Facebook has created fact-checking exemptions for people and organizations who spread disinformation about the climate crisis on its social media platform. Your company has reportedly “decided to allow its staffers to overrule the climate scientists and make any climate disinformation ineligible for fact-checking by deeming it ‘opinion.’”¹ But the climate crisis and environmental degradation are not matters of opinion. They are existential threats that hurt communities and economies throughout the world – including and especially Black communities and other communities of color² –and will continue to do so.³ It is imperative that your company reverse course and take immediate steps to combat the spread of climate disinformation on its social media platforms.

Given Facebook’s long and troubling history with disinformation,⁴ it is deeply concerning that Facebook has now determined that climate disinformation is reportedly “immune

¹ Heated, “Facebook creates fact-checking exemption for climate deniers,” Emily Atkin, June 24, 2020, <https://heated.world/p/facebook-creates-fact-checking-exemption>.

² New York Times, “Climate Change Tied to Pregnancy Risks, Affecting Black Mothers Most,” Christopher Flavelle, June 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/18/climate/climate-change-pregnancy-study.html>; United Nations, “Climate Change and Social Inequality,” working paper, S. Nazrul Islam and John Winkel, October 17, 2017, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/publications/working-paper/wp152>.

³ New York Times, “Climate Change’s Giant Impact on the Economy: 4 Key Issues,” Neil Irwin, January 17, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/17/upshot/how-to-think-about-the-costs-of-climate-change.html>; Brookings Institution, “Ten facts about the economics of climate change and climate policy,” Ryan Nunn, Jimmy O’Donnell, Jay Shambaugh, Lawrence Goulder, Charles Kolstad, and Xianling Long, October 23, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/ten-facts-about-the-economics-of-climate-change-and-climate-policy/>.

⁴ New York Times, “Dealbook: All The Companies Quitting Facebook,” June 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/29/business/dealbook/facebook-boycott-ads.html>; Washington Post, “Facebook, Twitter and the Digital Disinformation Mess,” Shelly Banjo, December 3, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/facebook-twitter-and-the-digital-disinformation-mess/2019/12/03/e29930c0-15a0-11ea-80d6-d0ca7007273f_story.html; Business Insider, Facebook is the most popular social network for governments spreading fake news and propaganda,” Mary Hanbury, September 27, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-disinformation-campaigns-new-oxford-study-2019-9>; Columbia Journalism Review, Disinformation still running rampant on Facebook, study says,” Mathew Ingram, November 7, 2019, https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/disinformation-facebook.php.

to fact-checking.”⁵ Not only has Facebook permitted the spread of disinformation about U.S. elections⁶ and the ongoing novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic,⁷ but reports have also documented that “far-right, fringe and conspiratorial Facebook pages were enjoying unusual success by spreading content that misdirected blame away from climate change.”⁸ Notably, since Facebook issued a blog post on its efforts to combat misinformation on Facebook in April 2017,⁹ disinformation campaigns on the platform have continued and expanded, often with state-sponsored support.¹⁰

Facebook’s Climate Denial Designations and Relationship with Climate Denying Organizations

As part of Facebook’s fact-checking process, the company “rel[ies] on independent fact-checkers to identify and review potential misinformation, which enables [it] to take action.”¹¹ News reports last month documented Facebook’s intervention to overturn the decisions by climate scientists working as outside approved Facebook fact checkers.¹² The researchers flagged misleading climate posts “based on cherry-picked information to mislead readers into thinking climate science models are wrong about global warming” by a group called the CO2 Coalition, which has falsely claimed that “extreme weather events in recent years have not happened more often or with greater intensity”¹³ and that reports of environmental degradation are “myths designed to terrify people into accepting harmful policies,”¹⁴ as false.¹⁵ Facebook, however,

⁵ E&E News, “How CO2 boosters' op-ed slipped by Facebook fact-checkers,” Scott Waldman, June 23, 2020, <https://www.eenews.net/stories/1063436369>.

⁶ New York Times, “To Stir Discord in 2016, Russians Turned Most Often to Facebook,” Sheera Frenkel and Katie Benner, February 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/17/technology/indictment-russian-tech-facebook.html>.

⁷ Wall Street Journal, “Coronavirus Misinformation Spreads on Facebook, Watchdog Says,” Lukas Alpert, April 20, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/coronavirus-misinformation-spreads-on-facebook-watchdog-says-11587436159>.

⁸ BuzzFeed News, “As Australia Burned, Climate Change Denialism Got A Boost On Facebook,” Hannah Ryan and Cameron Wilson, January 22, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/hannahryan/facebook-australia-bushfires-climate-change-deniers-facebook>.

⁹ Facebook, “Working to Stop Misinformation and False News,” blog post, Adam Mosseri, April 7, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/facebookmedia/blog/working-to-stop-misinformation-and-false-news>.

¹⁰ New York Times, “Facebook Finds New Disinformation Campaigns and Braces for 2020 Torrent,” Mike Isaac, October 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/21/technology/facebook-disinformation-russia-iran.html>;

Atlantic, “The Billion-Dollar Disinformation Campaign to Reelect the President,” McKay Coppins, March 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/03/the-2020-disinformation-war/605530/>.

¹¹ Facebook, “How Our Fact-Checking Program Works,” blog post, March 23, 2020,

<https://www.facebook.com/journalismproject/programs/third-party-fact-checking/how-it-works>.

¹² E&E News, “How CO2 boosters' op-ed slipped by Facebook fact-checkers,” Scott Waldman, June 23, 2020, <https://www.eenews.net/stories/1063436369>.

¹³ CO₂ Coalition, “Frequently Asked Questions,” Accessed July 10, 2020, <https://co2coalition.org/frequently-asked-questions/>; National Aeronautics and Space Administration, “How Climate Change May Be Impacting Storms Over Earth’s Tropical Oceans,” blog post, Alan Buis, March 10, 2020, <https://climate.nasa.gov/blog/2956/how-climate-change-may-be-impacting-storms-over-earths-tropical-oceans/>; New York Times, “Climate Change Is Making Hurricanes Stronger, Researchers Find,” Henry Fountain, May 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/18/climate/climate-changes-hurricane-intensity.html>.

¹⁴ CO₂ Coalition, “Frequently Asked Questions,” Accessed July 10, 2020, <https://co2coalition.org/frequently-asked-questions/>; New York Magazine, “The Uninhabitable Earth,” David-Wallace-Wells, July 10, 2017, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans.html>.

¹⁵ E&E News, “How CO2 boosters' op-ed slipped by Facebook fact-checkers,” Scott Waldman, June 23, 2020, <https://www.eenews.net/stories/1063436369>.

removed notices that these posts contained false information by deeming them to be “opinion,”¹⁶ which then would not be labeled as false “even if they contain information the fact checkers determined was inaccurate,”¹⁷ creating a massive loophole in Facebook’s fact-checking process, as “false” content is removed or has its distribution reduced.¹⁸ These determinations are leading climate denying organizations to express their intentions “to exploit this loophole to spread climate misinformation” on your platform.¹⁹

Allowing the spread of climate disinformation on Facebook is wholly inconsistent with your company’s June 2020 claims that it is “committed to fighting the spread of false news on Facebook and Instagram”²⁰ – and represents another unfortunate example of Facebook’s refusal to fully combat the deliberate spread of misinformation.

For example, in October 2019, as Facebook worked to renew its relationship with news outlets, the company included Breitbart, “a far-right website known for misinformation,”²¹ in those efforts. You publicly defended the inclusion of Breitbart with news outlets, arguing that it was important “to include a breadth of content to make sure all different topics can be covered.”²² But Breitbart has knowingly and deliberately spread misinformation about the climate crisis. Scientific reviews of a 2019 Breitbart post making false claims about human impacts on climate change demonstrate “that it builds on a fallacious reasoning” and that “the content of the article does not support [its] claim.”²³ Similarly, in 2016, the Weather Company issued a press release responding to Breitbart’s misuse of a Weather Company video clip, describing the Breitbart piece as “a prime example of cherry picking, or pulling a single item out of context to build a misleading case” and stating that “this topic is too important to get wrong.”²⁴

¹⁶ Heated, “Facebook creates fact-checking exemption for climate deniers,” Emily Atkin, June 24, 2020, <https://heated.world/p/facebook-creates-fact-checking-exemption>.

¹⁷ Wall Street Journal, Facebook to Exempt Opinion and Satire From Fact-Checking,” Jeff Horwitz, September 30, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-to-create-fact-checking-exemptions-for-opinion-and-satire-11569875314>.

¹⁸ Facebook, “Fact-Checking on Facebook: What Publishers Should Know,” blog post, July 2, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/business/help/182222309230722>.

¹⁹ Heated, “Facebook creates fact-checking exemption for climate deniers,” Emily Atkin, June 24, 2020, <https://heated.world/p/facebook-creates-fact-checking-exemption>.

²⁰ Facebook, “Fact-Checking on Facebook: What Publishers Should Know,” July 2, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/business/help/182222309230722>.

²¹ CNN Business, “Facebook executive responds after inclusion of Breitbart, a site known for misinformation, in news tab sparks uproar,” Oliver Darcy, October 30, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/30/media/facebook-news-breitbart/index.html>.

²² Washington Post, “Facebook will begin paying some outlets for their content as it introduces its News tab,” Rachel Siegel, October 25, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/10/25/facebook-will-begin-paying-some-outlets-their-content-it-introduces-its-news-tab/>.

²³ Climate Feedback, “Breitbart article baselessly claims a study of past climate invalidates human-caused climate change,” Scott Johnson, editor, April 15, 2019, <https://climatefeedback.org/evaluation/breitbart-article-baselessly-claims-a-study-of-past-climate-invalidates-human-caused-climate-change-john-nolte/>.

²⁴ Weather Channel, “Note to Breitbart: Earth Is Not Cooling, Climate Change Is Real and Please Stop Using Our Video to Mislead Americans,” press release, December 6, 2016, <https://weather.com/news/news/breitbart-misleads-americans-climate-change>.

Dangerous Consequences of Amplifying Climate Denial on Social Media Platforms

The climate crisis is too important to allow blatant lies to spread on social media without consequence. Without action to address the crisis, the risks from climate change will continue to grow for political and financial systems around the world. The 2018 report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change found that human activities have already caused about 1 degree Celsius of global warming above pre-industrial levels and that global warming is likely to reach 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels in the coming decades, if climate change continues at the current rate.²⁵ The report found that on the world's current path, global temperatures are set to rise as much as 3.2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels by 2100 and that drastic action is necessary in order to prevent the most catastrophic effects of the climate crisis, including significant changes to global food, energy, water, and security systems.²⁶

The effects of the current trend of the climate crisis also pose a major threat to our domestic economy. In 2018, the Fourth National Climate Assessment, issued by 13 federal agencies, found that unless there is significant action to address the climate crisis, as much as 10 percent of the American economy, or more than double the losses of the Great Recession, will be lost by the end of the century.²⁷ Research shows that the increasingly rising global temperatures and its effects will “universally hurt worker health and productivity” and “increasingly disrupt and damage critical infrastructure and property.”²⁸ The devastation caused by the climate crisis will also be disproportionately felt by communities of color, low-income communities, and other frontline communities that have already withstood the worst environmental injustices.²⁹ These communities and their local economies do not have the opportunity to ignore or delay action on the climate crisis, and these communities especially do not have the opportunity to engage in a misleading debate as to whether the crisis they are facing is even real, simply because your company is failing to stop disinformation from spreading.

²⁵ Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change, “Summary for Policymakers: Global warming of 1.5°C: An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty,”

https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/05/SR15_SPM_version_report_LR.pdf.

²⁶ Washington Post, “In bleak report, U.N. says drastic action is only way to avoid worst effects of climate change,” Brady Dennis, November 26, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2019/11/26/bleak-report-un-says-drastic-action-is-only-way-avoid-worst-impacts-climate-change/>.

²⁷ U.S. Global Change Research Program, “Fourth National Climate Assessment,” November 23, 2018, <https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/>; New York Times, “U.S. Climate Report Warns of Damaged Environment and Shrinking Economy,” Coral Davenport and Kendra Pierre-Louis, November 23, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/23/climate/us-climate-report.html>.

²⁸ Moody's Analytics, “The Economic Implications of Climate Change,” Chris Lafakis, Laura Ratz, Emily Fazio, and Maria Cosma, June 2019, <https://www.moodyanalytics.com/-/media/article/2019/economic-implications-of-climate-change.pdf>.

²⁹ Brookings Institution, “Ten facts about the economics of climate change and climate policy,” Ryan Nunn, Jimmy O'Donnell, Jay Shambaugh, Lawrence Goulder, Charles Kolstad, and Xianling Long, October 23, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/ten-facts-about-the-economics-of-climate-change-and-climate-policy/>.

You have stated that, “[s]topping climate change is something we can only do as a global community, and we have to act together before it’s too late.”³⁰ Without action to stop the spread of climate disinformation, those words remain hollow.

Climate denialism, particularly if amplified on social media channels such as Facebook and its subsidiaries, puts action on climate change at risk. Research has found that the “concerted effort to discredit the scientific consensus over man-made global warming has been continuing” and “shows no sign of weakening,” with findings that climate deniers “have been remarkably successful in confusing public opinion and delaying decisive action” and that they “receive considerable media attention and enjoy access to key Washington power brokers.”³¹ Fossil fuel companies and other large corporations spend hundreds of millions of dollars each year to lobby against robust climate action.³² The Trump administration has reportedly worked to embed climate denial in scientific research.³³ Amidst these efforts to undermine the important work to combat climate change, Facebook’s assertions that “[w]e don’t have a policy that stipulates that the information you post on Facebook must be true”³⁴ troublingly amplifies climate denialism at the expense of communities and economies that will continue to be ravaged by the climate crisis. If Facebook is truly “committed to fighting the spread of false news on Facebook and Instagram,”³⁵ the company must immediately acknowledge in its fact-checking process that the climate crisis is not a matter of opinion and act to close loopholes that allow climate disinformation to spread on its platform.

Questions

In order to ensure that Facebook is taking measures to truly prevent the spread of climate disinformation, we ask that you answer the following questions by Friday, July 31, 2020:

³⁰ Vox, “Mark Zuckerberg says Donald Trump’s decision on the Paris agreement ‘puts our children’s future at risk,’” Kurt Wagner, June 1, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/2017/6/1/15727122/mark-zuckerberg-trump-paris-agreement-statement>.

³¹ European Journal of American Studies, “The Ideology of Climate Change Denial in the United States,” Jean-Daniel Collomb, January 2014, <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10305>.

³² Forbes, “Oil And Gas Giants Spend Millions Lobbying To Block Climate Change Policies [Infographic],” Niall McCarthy, March 25, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2019/03/25/oil-and-gas-giants-spend-millions-lobbying-to-block-climate-change-policies-infographic/#4c550cad7c4f>; New York Times, “Following the Money That Undermines Climate Science,” Tik Root, Lisa Friedman, and Hiroko Tabuchi, July 10, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/10/climate/nyt-climate-newsletter-cei.html>.

³³ New York Times, “A Trump Insider Embeds Climate Denial in Scientific Research,” Hiroko Tabuchi, March 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/02/climate/goks-uncertainty-language-interior.html>.

³⁴ Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, “Why Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are bad for the climate,” Dawn Stover, August 22, 2019, <https://thebulletin.org/2019/08/why-facebook-youtube-and-twitter-are-bad-for-the-climate/>; Washington Post, “Facebook acknowledges Pelosi video is faked but declines to delete it,” Drew Harwell, May 24, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/05/24/facebook-acknowledges-pelosi-video-is-faked-declines-delete-it/>.

³⁵ Facebook, “Fact-Checking on Facebook: What Publishers Should Know,” July 2, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/business/help/182222309230722>.

1. A press report from June 2020 indicated that Facebook’s fact-checking process allowed climate denial to be categorized as “opinion,” creating a loophole in its fact-checking process.³⁶
 - a. Is this report correct?
 - b. If so, how was the decision made to categorize false information about climate change as “opinion,” and who was involved in this decision?
 - i. Please provide a list of each issue that has been categorized as “opinion.” For each such issue, please indicate the process by which the categorization was made, including the name and affiliation of any entity requesting that such a categorization be made and the manner in which Facebook evaluated the request.
 - c. Do you believe that allowing false information on the climate crisis to spread unchallenged on your platform provides weight to efforts to deny climate science?
 - d. What other scientific issues are treated in this fashion by Facebook?
2. In April 2017, Facebook stated: “False news is harmful to our community, it makes the world less informed, and it erodes trust. It's not a new phenomenon, and all of us — tech companies, media companies, newsrooms, teachers — have a responsibility to do our part in addressing it.”³⁷
 - a. Is the spread of false information on the climate crisis included in Facebook’s understanding of false news?
3. In March 2019, Facebook announced steps to “tackle vaccine misinformation on Facebook by reducing its distribution and providing people with authoritative information on the topic.”³⁸ In Facebook’s announcement, the company stated: “We will reduce the ranking of groups and Pages that spread misinformation about vaccinations in News Feed and Search.” It also stated that “[w]hen we find ads that include misinformation about vaccinations, we will reject them;” and “[w]e are exploring ways to share educational information about vaccines when people come across misinformation on this topic,” among other measures.³⁹
 - a. Please provide information on how Facebook reached its decision to tackle vaccine disinformation on its social media platforms.
 - i. Please explain how disinformation on vaccination differs from the disinformation on the climate crisis, which Facebook has permitted by designating false information as “opinion.”⁴⁰

³⁶ E&E News, “How CO2 boosters' op-ed slipped by Facebook fact-checkers,” Scott Waldman, June 23, 2020, <https://www.eenews.net/stories/1063436369>.

³⁷ Facebook, “Working to Stop Misinformation and False News,” blog post, Adam Mosseri, April 7, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/facebookmedia/blog/working-to-stop-misinformation-and-false-news>.

³⁸ Facebook, “Combatting Vaccine Misinformation,” blog post, Monika Bickert, September 4, 2019, <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/03/combatting-vaccine-misinformation/>.

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ E&E News, “How CO2 boosters' op-ed slipped by Facebook fact-checkers,” Scott Waldman, June 23, 2020, <https://www.eenews.net/stories/1063436369>.

- b. Has Facebook considered taking similar measures to prevent the spread of climate disinformation on its social media platforms? If so, please provide additional information.
4. In June 2020, in reference to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Facebook announced measures to support “the global public health community’s work to keep people safe and informed during the coronavirus public health crisis.”⁴¹ The company’s announcement stated that it would better connect “people to credible information,” combat “COVID-19 misinformation across our apps,” and prohibit “exploitative tactics in ads,” among other actions.⁴²
 - a. Please provide information on how Facebook reached its decision to tackle COVID-19 disinformation on its social media platforms.
 - i. Please explain how disinformation on COVID-19 differs from the disinformation on the climate crisis, which Facebook has permitted by designating false information as “opinion.”⁴³
 - b. Has Facebook considered taking similar measures to prevent the spread of climate disinformation on its social media platforms? If so, please provide additional information.
5. As announced in October 2019, Facebook has included the far-right website Breitbart, “a far-right website known for misinformation,”⁴⁴ alongside news outlets in its news section.⁴⁵
 - a. Please explain why this website was included, particularly given its long history of climate denial and spread of disinformation on the climate crisis.⁴⁶
 - b. Please provide a list of news outlets and other organizations included in Facebook’s news section.

⁴¹ Facebook, “Keeping People Safe and Informed About the Coronavirus,” blog post, Kang-Xing Jin, June 24, 2020, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/06/coronavirus/>.

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ E&E News, “How CO2 boosters’ op-ed slipped by Facebook fact-checkers,” Scott Waldman, June 23, 2020, <https://www.eenews.net/stories/1063436369>.

⁴⁴ CNN Business, “Facebook executive responds after inclusion of Breitbart, a site known for misinformation, in news tab sparks uproar,” Oliver Darcy, October 30, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/30/media/facebook-news-breitbart/index.html>.

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ Media Matters for America, “Facebook must close loophole that allows the viral spread of climate disinformation,” Allison Fisher, Ted MacDonald, and Evlondo Cooper, June 25, 2020, <https://www.mediamatters.org/facebook/facebook-must-close-loophole-allows-viral-spread-climate-disinformation>.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

/s/

Thomas R. Carper
United States Senator



Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator



Brian Schatz
United States Senator