

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515–3302

October 23, 2024

The Honorable Jim Jordan
Chair
House Committee on the Judiciary
2138 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable James Comer
Chair
House Committee on Oversight
2157 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Chair
House Committee on Energy & Commerce
2125 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jerrold Nadler
Ranking Member
House Committee on the Judiciary
2138 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jamie Raskin
Ranking Member
House Committee on Oversight
2157 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Frank Pallone
Ranking Member
House Committee on Energy & Commerce
2125 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chair Jordan, Ranking Member Nadler, Chair Comer, Ranking Member Raskin, Chair McMorris Rodgers and Ranking Member Pallone:

We write to urge the House Judiciary, Oversight, and Energy & Commerce Committees to investigate and hold hearings on the role social media platforms play in the dissemination of misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and scams in the wake of natural disasters. In the aftermath of Hurricanes Helene and Milton, we have witnessed a troubling surge in misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and scams that are hindering recovery efforts and exploiting vulnerable individuals and families. We urge your respective Committees to probe these dangerous trends, which have exacerbated the challenges facing communities during this critical period of storm recovery and preparation.

The severity of this issue is difficult to overstate. In North Carolina, Florida, and Georgia, we have observed numerous false claims about the storm's origin, government assistance, and the availability of disaster relief funds spreading across platforms. In the days following Hurricane Helene, we have seen posts encouraging people to apply for fake Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) relief programs, scams targeting those who have lost their homes, and misleading information about where to find shelter and resources¹.

For example, a series of widely circulated posts on Facebook and X falsely claimed that FEMA was offering a new grant for immediate cash assistance to all residents, regardless of impact, resulting in a

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2024/10/07/nx-s1-5144159/fema-funding-migrants-disaster-relief-fund>

flood of applications to non-existent programs.² These scams took advantage of families who were already in distress, further delaying their ability to access legitimate aid.

Similarly, on Instagram, TikTok, and Discord, conspiracy theories have spread claiming that both storms are the result of government actions.³ It is gravely concerning to witness these behaviors now escalating into harassment, death threats, and calls for violence against government officials, meteorologists, and aid workers. One post on TikTok stated that FEMA employees should be “arrested or shot or hung on sight.”⁴

Disaster response agencies, climate scientists and rescue organizations work tirelessly to provide critical information and render assistance to those impacted by catastrophic events. The lies, scams, and conspiracies widely circulating on social media platforms compromise their ability to work effectively and place the lives and safety of Americans at risk. Moreover, this distracts from the real challenges we face and sows division in our communities when they are already in crisis.

Misinformation not only delays the recovery process but also erodes public trust in institutions that are essential to helping our states to rebuild. It is critical that the American people know where to turn for reliable information during these emergencies, and social media platforms play a significant role in shaping those sources of information.

It is clear that much more needs to be done, particularly in the context of disaster recovery. We, therefore, urge your Committees to investigate:

1. **The Failure of Social Media Companies to Adequately Address Misinformation:** Despite existing policies, platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and X have failed to sufficiently mitigate the rapid spread of lies targeting vulnerable disaster victims. These failures include inconsistent and lax content moderation standards, failure to flag violent, misleading, and/or artificially generated content, insufficient cooperation with local agencies, and enabling algorithms that make harmful content to go viral.
2. **The Role of Algorithms in Amplifying Misinformation and Scams:** There is growing evidence that the algorithms driving user engagement on platforms prioritize sensational and misleading content. This was evident following Hurricane Helene, where misinformation related to government aid, disaster response, and shelter availability spread rapidly across multiple platforms.
3. **The Impact of Misinformation on Public Trust and Disaster Recovery:** As social media platforms are now primary sources of information for many Americans, their role in undermining public trust during times of crisis cannot be ignored. The spread of false information has a tangible impact on recovery efforts, delaying the distribution of aid and eroding trust in government institutions and volunteer organizations alike.
4. **Failures to Protect Against Scams and Fraud:** Recovery scams, particularly those impersonating FEMA officials and charitable organizations, have proliferated on these platforms.

² <https://consumer.ftc.gov/consumer-alerts/2024/10/recovery-scams-will-follow-hurricane-helene-heres-how-spot-them>

³ <https://grist.org/extreme-weather/fact-checking-the-wild-conspiracies-in-the-wake-of-hurricane-helene/>

⁴ <https://thehill.com/policy/technology/4935083-hurricane-misinformation-stokes-fears/>

These scams have targeted individuals at their most vulnerable, exacerbating the financial and emotional toll of the hurricanes.

Congress has the power and the responsibility to improve the digital spaces where millions of Americans both seek and promote information during crises, and recent Congressional efforts to hold social media platforms accountable have set an important precedent. The House Energy and Commerce Committee's bipartisan investigation into misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic raised critical questions about the role of algorithms and ineffective content moderation on platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. Likewise, the Senate Judiciary Committee has investigated social media's role in amplifying harmful content, demanding greater transparency into the decisions made by these platforms regarding user safety and the handling of misinformation. A similar investigation into the handling of disaster-related misinformation is necessary to protect the public from further harm.

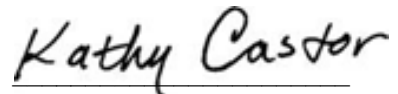
Again, we request that the Judiciary and Oversight Committees hold hearings, demand documents, and question executives from these companies regarding their policies and practices around content moderation, algorithmic transparency, and user protection during emergencies. Lives, livelihoods, and the integrity of our recovery efforts depend on it. We stand ready to work with you to ensure that we protect those affected by these disasters and future emergencies.

Thank you for your immediate attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Deborah K. Ross
Member of Congress



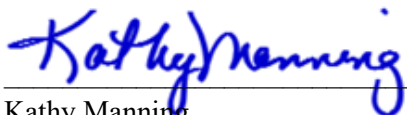
Kathy Castor
Member of Congress



Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.
Member of Congress



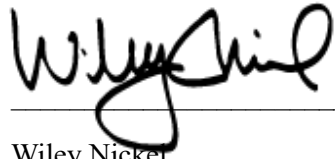
Jared Moskowitz
Member of Congress



Kathy Manning
Member of Congress



Valerie Foushee
Member of Congress

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Wiley Nickel". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping "W" and "N".

Wiley Nickel
Member of Congress