

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

July 24, 2024

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

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg:

We write with concern about Meta’s announced plan to end access on August 14, 2024 to CrowdTangle, a powerful transparency tool it owns to help the public analyze and understand content that is being widely disseminated on Facebook and other platforms.¹ We urge Meta to, at a minimum, postpone this plan for six months and provide further information about its plans and commitment to ensure sufficient transparency for independent research going forward.

The imperative to understand how social media platforms are affecting society has never been greater than it is today. In light of threats to our national security, growing concern about the effect of social media on our children and their mental health, the advent and proliferation of generative artificial intelligence, and important elections coming up in the United States and elsewhere in the world, Meta (like other platforms) has a responsibility to ensure that the public, independent researchers, journalists, and policymakers can study and address the impact that platforms and their algorithms are having in these and other dimensions, in both positive and negative ways.

Over the past several years, CrowdTangle has been an important step towards such transparency for public content on Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms, and Meta deserves credit for making this tool available at a time when many of its counterparts offer no comparable alternative.² CrowdTangle data has been the basis of hundreds of academic research papers (including in *Nature* and *Science*) and has been referenced in thousands of news articles by journalists reporting on social media and other topics.³ For example, CrowdTangle data has been used to help researchers to understand and expose Russian-linked influence operations in Africa (that Facebook then appropriately shut down);⁴ to help journalists to report on the effects of COVID-19-related shutdowns on mental health;⁵ to identify security threats to candidates of both political parties;⁶ to document

¹ Meta, “Important Update to CrowdTangle | March 2024”, available at <https://help.crowdtangle.com/en/articles/9014544-important-update-to-crowdtangle-march-2024> (last accessed July 2024).

² Testimony of Brandon Silverman to the Subcommittee on Privacy, Technology, and the Law, “Platform Transparency: Understanding the Impact of Social Media” (May 4, 2022), available at <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Silverman%20Testimony.pdf> [hereinafter, “Silverman Testimony”] at 4.

³ Silverman Testimony at 2.

⁴ Meta, CrowdTangle, “Stanford Internet Observatory: Using CrowdTangle to Identify and Analyze Russia-Linked Influence Operations in Africa”, available at <https://help.crowdtangle.com/en/articles/4296489-stanford-internet-observatory-using-crowdtangle-to-identify-and-analyze-russia-linked-influence-operations-in-africa> (last accessed July 2024); see also Shelby Grossman, Khadija H., Renee DiResta, Stanford Internet Observatory, “Coordinated behavior across 18 pro-Saif Gaddafi Facebook Pages” (April 27, 2020), available at <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/content/oya-cluster-takedown>.

⁵ Meta, CrowdTangle, “How NBC News Uses CrowdTangle To Source and Tell Local Stories on a National Level,” available at <https://help.crowdtangle.com/en/articles/4554891-how-nbc-news-uses-crowdtangle-to-source-and-tell-local-stories-on-a-national-level> (last accessed July 2024).

⁶ Cecile Guerin and Eisha Maharasingam-Shah, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, “Public Figures, Public Rage: Candidate abuse on social media” (2020), available at <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Public-Figures-Public-Rage-4.pdf>.

ISIS⁷ and Russian war crime⁸ propaganda, and to test the value of educational technologies.⁹ Some of us cosponsor the bipartisan *Platform Accountability and Transparency Act (S.1876)*, which, among other things, would require platforms to offer a tool similar to CrowdTangle in recognition of the value that this kind of transparency provides.

In announcing it will end CrowdTangle access on August 14, Meta has pointed to its recently created Meta Content Library as an available alternative that it says “provide[s] the most comprehensive access to publicly-available content across Facebook and Instagram of any research tool we have built to date.”¹⁰ We recognize that Meta Content Library does in some important ways provide greater data and context than was available through CrowdTangle (including information on the reach of content and the ability to study comments), and we welcome and appreciate Meta’s willingness to improve upon what it makes available in these directions.

At the same time, we are deeply concerned that Meta Content Library also has significant limitations that make it an inadequate replacement for CrowdTangle at the current time. Most notable is that, while CrowdTangle retains historical time-series data about posts that allows for reproducible searches and seeing trends over time, Meta Content Library currently only provides a view of the platform as it exists at the moment that a search is run.¹¹ This makes it difficult if not impossible for a researcher to reproduce a search conducted by another and also significantly limits and complicates the ability of researchers to study what occurred on the platform retroactively prior to, and after, the development of the research question. More generally, researchers have raised concern that Meta Content Library has more restrictive data retention policies and export rules, more limited interfaces, fewer tools for researcher collaboration, fewer insight capacities, and less accessibility to those without data science backgrounds.¹² One analysis cited 11 different dimensions in which Meta Content Library has fewer features than CrowdTangle for research.¹³

There are also questions of how many organizations will have access to and the practical ability to use Meta Content Library if CrowdTangle access is ended. Meta has further restricted the ability to access Meta Content Library compared with the types of individuals and organizations who have had access to CrowdTangle,¹⁴ and eligible researchers report a months, if not years, long process to obtain access to Meta Content Library and to develop the necessary integrations with a new tool suite, particularly as the functionality continues to be

⁷ Moustafa Ayad, “The terrorist radio revival: How the Islamic State’s radio station survives on social media,” *Digital Dispatches* (Jan. 4, 2024), available at https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/the-terrorist-radio-revival-how-the-islamic-states-radio-station-survives-on-social-media/.

⁸ Institute for Strategic Dialogue, “On Facebook, Content Denying Russian Atrocities in Bucha Is More Popular Than the Truth,” *Digital Dispatches* (April 20, 2022), available at https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/on-facebook-content-denying-russian-atrocities-in-bucha-is-more-popular-than-the-truth/.

⁹ Conrad Borchers, Joshua Rosenberg, Rita Swartzentruber, “Facebook Post Data: A Primer for Educational Research” (Aug. 17, 2023), available at <https://osf.io/preprints/edarxiv/274yv/download>.

¹⁰ Nick Clegg, “New Tools to Support Independent Research” (Nov. 21, 2023), available at <https://about.fb.com/news/2023/11/new-tools-to-support-independent-research/>.

¹¹ Letter to Mark Zuckerberg from Center for American Progress, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, et al (May 7, 2024), available at <https://www.isdglobal.org/press-releases/isd-co-authors-a-sign-on-letter-to-meta-executives-urging-them-to-delay-the-closure-of-crowdtangle/> [hereinafter, “CAP/ISD Letter”] at 3.

¹² CAP/ISD Letter at 2-3; Mozilla, Open Letter to Meta, available at <https://foundation.mozilla.org/en/campaigns/open-letter-to-meta-support-crowdtangle-through-2024-and-maintain-crowdtangle-approach/> (last accessed July 2024) [hereinafter “Mozilla Letter”]; Sarah Grevy Gotfredsen, Kaitlyn Dowling, “Meta Is Getting Rid of CrowdTangle – and Its Replacement Isn’t As Transparent or Accessible”, *Proof News* (July 9, 2024), available at <https://www.proofnews.org/meta-is-getting-rid-of-crowdtangle-and-its-replacement-isnt-as-transparent-or-accessible/> [hereinafter “Proof News”].

¹³ Proof News.

¹⁴ Mozilla Letter.

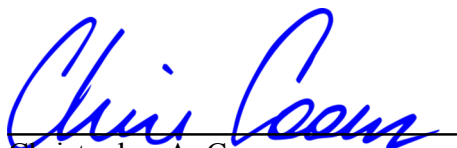
updated.¹⁵ Meta has to date not provided information about how many organizations have access to Meta Content Library compared to those with access to CrowdTangle, or how many have proven able actually to use it effectively.

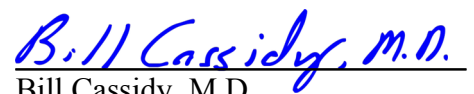
These usability and access concerns raise significant questions as to why Meta is pulling the plug on this tool at such a critical time. We thus ask you to respond in writing to the following in advance of any end of CrowdTangle access and no later than August 12, 2024:

1. Will Meta delay the end of CrowdTangle access by at least six months while it continues to develop functionality and access to Meta Content Library? If not, why not?
2. Will Meta commit to ensuring that Meta Content Library retains at least the functionality available in CrowdTangle (including to allow for reproducible historical research with time-series data)? If not, why not?
3. Please provide more information about, and the raw numbers of, US-based organizations who now have access to Meta Content Library compared to those with access to CrowdTangle, and provide information about how many are in the application process.
4. Will Meta add functionality to ensure that Meta Content Library indicates whether content is AI-generated or fact-checked as false/misleading? If not, why not?
5. Please provide information about Meta's efforts to ensure independent researchers and journalists can study content as to the following topics:
 - a. Misleading election information;
 - b. Coordinated foreign influence campaigns;
 - c. Mental health; and
 - d. Proliferation of generative AI.

Thank you for your attention to these issues.¹⁶ We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,


Christopher A. Coons
United States Senator


Bill Cassidy, M.D.
United States Senator

¹⁵ CAP/ISD Letter at 4; Mozilla Letter; Proof News.

¹⁶ We also greatly appreciate the cooperation of your staff, who met with staff of some of us and addressed some of our questions.



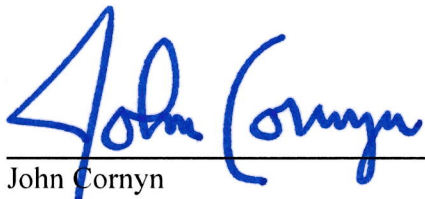
Lori Trahan
Member of Congress



Neal P. Dunn, M.D.
Member of Congress



Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



John Cornyn
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



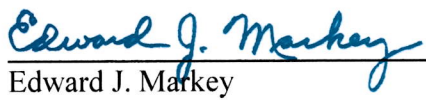
Anna G. Eshoo
Member of Congress



Peter Welch
United States Senator



Sean Casten
Member of Congress



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Adam B. Schiff
Member of Congress



Alex Padilla
United States Senator



Seth Moulton
Member of Congress



Mark R. Warner
United States Senator



John Hickenlooper
United States Senator

Ben Ray Luján

Ben Ray Luján
United States Senator