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September 8, 2021

Mark Zuckerberg  
Founder, Chairman, and Chief Executive Officer  
Facebook  
1 Hacker Way  
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg:

For over a year and a half, Americans of all walks of life have made tremendous sacrifices to protect themselves, their loved ones, and their communities from the devastation of COVID-19. At each stage of this pandemic, however, insidious misinformation has wreaked havoc on both the government's and the public's efforts to combat the spread.

The scientific community has accomplished an incredible feat by providing a safe, effective COVID-19 vaccine in record time.<sup>1</sup> These vaccines are the only safe, long-term path to herd immunity and protecting our communities. Through an unprecedented cooperative operation, from the federal government down to heroic local medical teams, millions of Americans have been vaccinated.

Yet, even as we see the light at the end of the tunnel, leading public health experts have warned that vaccination rates in the U.S. have stagnated, primarily due to vaccine hesitancy. We cannot allow the rapid and dangerous spread of anti-vaccine marketing and misinformation to keep Americans from the valid, factual information they need to protect themselves from this virus.

While I appreciate your willingness to acknowledge my letter on February 13, 2019, with your response on March 7, 2019, your answers regarding Facebook's policies left much still unclear, as the intervening time has demonstrated. It is the duty of Congress to investigate the challenges our constituents face and whether legislation is needed to ensure their safety. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, and with the health of our communities and the lives of thousands of Americans relying on our ability to achieve herd immunity, I write to you again seeking a more thorough explanation of what Facebook is doing to mitigate the dangerous spread of vaccine misinformation.

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<sup>1</sup> "COVID-19 Vaccine Effectiveness Research." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. August 11, 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/effectiveness-research/protocols.html>.

Online platforms play a critical role in the accessibility of accurate, or inaccurate, scientific information. While many platforms, including Facebook and Instagram, have taken certain steps to create removal processes for dangerous posts, the audiences of anti-vaccine influencers have continued to grow.<sup>2,3</sup>

Particularly concerning is Facebook's position that information about vaccines that has been rated false by your fact-checkers, "does not violate [your] terms of service, but [is] content that [you] recognize has the potential to cause harm." Despite the public health emergency we currently face, Facebook's Community Standards still do not include any mention of counter-factual health information or a commitment to its removal.<sup>4</sup>

Your letter goes on to describe ways Facebook reduces the spread of vaccine misinformation. Despite this plan, recent investigations have shown that anti-vaccine audiences have grown to 37.8 million followers on Facebook and Instagram.<sup>5</sup> Further, Facebook monitoring systems have been easily manipulated by bad-faith actors.<sup>6,2</sup>

It is, of course, inevitable that malicious users will attempt to propagate harmful content, and I appreciate Facebook's efforts to provide accurate information on COVID-19 when possible.<sup>7</sup> Research has shown, however, that combatting anti-vaccine conspiracies by posing factual and counter-factual information as opposing, but equal viewpoints is ineffective at combatting misinformation and disinformation.<sup>8,9,10</sup>

As long as these materials remain on your site, Facebook is directly profiting from the sensationalism of anti-vaccine misinformation, while these conspiracy theories continue to directly contribute to COVID-19 deaths. In fact, anti-vaccine audiences consume more content than other users,<sup>11</sup> and produce up to \$1.1 billion in revenue for Facebook.<sup>12</sup>

As a Member of Congress who is deeply concerned by the prevalence of vaccine hesitancy during this time of crisis, I request additional, more detailed information on Facebook's policies regarding false or misleading health information in order to identify potential needs for federal regulation.

Specifically, please provide detailed responses to the following questions:

- It is my understanding that Facebook has recently removed a selection of anti-vaccine misinformation.<sup>13</sup> Does content which provides medically inaccurate information about vaccines still not violate your

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<sup>2</sup> "Pandemic Profiteers: The Business of Anti-vaxx." [https://252f2edd-1c8b-49f5-9bb2-cb57bb47e4ba.filesusr.com/ugd/f4d9b9\\_00b2ad56fe524d82b271a75e441cd06c.pdf](https://252f2edd-1c8b-49f5-9bb2-cb57bb47e4ba.filesusr.com/ugd/f4d9b9_00b2ad56fe524d82b271a75e441cd06c.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Dwozkin, Elizabeth. "Facebook Says Post That Cast Doubt on Covid-19 Vaccine Was Most Popular on the Platform from January through March." The Washington Post. August 21, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/08/21/facebook-coronavirus-vaccine/>.

<sup>4</sup> "Community Standards." Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/introduction>.

<sup>5</sup> "Pandemic Profiteers: The Business of Anti-vaxx." [https://252f2edd-1c8b-49f5-9bb2-cb57bb47e4ba.filesusr.com/ugd/f4d9b9\\_00b2ad56fe524d82b271a75e441cd06c.pdf](https://252f2edd-1c8b-49f5-9bb2-cb57bb47e4ba.filesusr.com/ugd/f4d9b9_00b2ad56fe524d82b271a75e441cd06c.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Collins, Ben, and Brandy Zadrozny. "Anti-vaccine Groups Changing into 'dance Parties' on Facebook to Avoid Detection." NBCNews. July 21, 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/anti-vaccine-groups-changing-dance-parties-facebook-avoid-detection-rcna1480>.

<sup>7</sup> "Schiff Urges Google, YouTube, Twitter to Inform Users Who Interact With Coronavirus Misinformation." <https://schiff.house.gov/>. April 30, 2020. [https://schiff.house.gov/news/press-releases/schiff-urges-google-youtube-twitter-to-inform-users\\_who-interact-with-coronavirus-misinformation](https://schiff.house.gov/news/press-releases/schiff-urges-google-youtube-twitter-to-inform-users_who-interact-with-coronavirus-misinformation).

<sup>8</sup> Thurston, Andrew. "How To Fight Vaccine Misinformation." How To Fight Vaccine Misinformation | College of Communication. January 29, 2021. Accessed August 27, 2021. <https://www.bu.edu/com/articles/how-to-fight-vaccine-misinformation/>.

<sup>9</sup> Allington, Daniel. "Vaccine Hesitancy, and What We Can Do about It." Center for Countering Digital Hate. May 14, 2021. Accessed August 27, 2021. <https://www.counterhate.com/post/vaccine-hesitancy-and-what-we-can-do-about-it>.

<sup>10</sup> Brownstein, Joseph. "Antivaccination Parents Dig In Heels Even after Receiving Medical Info." Scientific American. March 03, 2014. Accessed August 27, 2021. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/antivaccination-parents-dig-in-heels-even-after-receiving-medical-info/>.

<sup>11</sup> Schmidt AL; Zollo F; Scala A; Betsch C; Quattrocioni W. "Polarization of the Vaccination Debate on Facebook." U.S. National Library of Medicine. June 14, 2018. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29773322/>.

<sup>12</sup> "Pandemic Profiteers: The Business of Anti-vaxx." [https://252f2edd-1c8b-49f5-9bb2-cb57bb47e4ba.filesusr.com/ugd/f4d9b9\\_00b2ad56fe524d82b271a75e441cd06c.pdf](https://252f2edd-1c8b-49f5-9bb2-cb57bb47e4ba.filesusr.com/ugd/f4d9b9_00b2ad56fe524d82b271a75e441cd06c.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Bickert, Monika. "How We're Taking Action against Vaccine Misinformation Superspreaders." Newsroom, 18 Aug. 2021, [about.fb.com/news/2021/08/taking-action-against-vaccine-misinformation-superspreaders/](https://about.fb.com/news/2021/08/taking-action-against-vaccine-misinformation-superspreaders/).

Community Standards? If so, what standard of danger or potential harm does Facebook use to consider misinformation or conspiracy theories dangerous enough to remove?

- What is the size of your content moderation operation, including numbers of staff and resources devoted, and what are your goals for depth and breadth of moderation? What is the status of progress toward meeting these goals?
- What steps are you currently taking to ensure that algorithms are not used to promote misleading or false health information?
- Facebook's Community Standards state that consequences increase for users who repeatedly violate the standards. Recent research has indicated that much of the Anti-Vaccine Industry is promulgated by a small number of influencers.<sup>14</sup> Are harmful posts of this nature also considered cumulatively?

I appreciate your timely response to these questions. Millions of Americans rely on Facebook to access health information and products, and I strongly encourage Facebook to take further immediate action to meet the demands of this public health crisis. Our health, and particularly our children's health, depends upon it.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Adam B. Schiff". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Adam" written in a smaller, more compact script, and "B. Schiff" written in a larger, more prominent cursive style.

Adam B. Schiff  
Member of Congress

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<sup>14</sup> "Pandemic Profiteers: The Business of Anti-vaxx." [https://252f2edd-1c8b-49f5-9bb2-cb57bb47e4ba.filesusr.com/ugd/f4d9b9\\_00b2ad56fe524d82b271a75e441cd06c.pdf](https://252f2edd-1c8b-49f5-9bb2-cb57bb47e4ba.filesusr.com/ugd/f4d9b9_00b2ad56fe524d82b271a75e441cd06c.pdf).