STATEMENT OF
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HEARING ON "MISINFORMATION, CONSPIRACY THEORIES, AND
INFODEMICS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR STOPPING THE
SPREAD ONLINE"

BEFORE THE  HOUSE PERMANENT SELECT COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE

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This summer, junk news operations, disinformation campaigns, and propaganda spun up by foreign and domestic operatives targeted people seeking information about the election, the pandemic, and protests.[1] Across Google, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter, and other minor apps like Gab and Parler, information seekers were likely to surface misinformation when looking for timely, local, and relevant updates.[2] As the Research Director at Harvard Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, I lead a research team analyzing media manipulation, adversarial media movements, and the effects of disinformation campaigns.

With or without social media, a pandemic was going to wash over the globe and take with it hundreds of thousands of lives. The deluge of emotional posts, breaking news, and crucial medical advice was jumbled with grift, hoaxes, and conspiracy in such a confusing way that the World Health Organization labelled it an infodemic. An infodemic occurs when an abundance of credible and inaccurate information are mixed together as people seek out timely, local, and relevant information on the same topic.[3] In a big shift, tech companies came together to make minor tweaks to their products to throttle the flow of grift, hoaxes, and scams, while at the same time promoting

[1] Reuters. "Russian Operation Masqueraded as Right-Wing News Site." *NBC News*, October 1, 2020. https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/russian-operation-masqueraded-right-wing-news-site-n1241710; Ken Dilanian and Kit Ramgopal. "Facebook Blocks Russia-Backed Accounts, but Other Sites Keep Churning out Content Aimed at Americans." *NBC News*, October 9, 2020. https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/facebook-blocks-russia-backed-accounts-other-sites-keep-churning-out-n1242683; Brandy Zadrozny and Ben Collins. "As Wildfires Rage, False Antifa Rumors Spur Pleas from Police." *NBC News*, September 11, 2020. https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/security/wildfires-rage-false-antifa-rumors-spur-pleas-police-n1239881.
[2] Craig Timberg. "Parler and Gab, Two Conservative Social Media Sites, Keep Alleged Russian Disinformation up, despite Report." *The Washington Post*, October 7, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/10/07/russian-trolls-graphika-parler-gab/.
[3] Joan Donovan. "Here's How Social Media Can Combat the Coronavirus 'Infodemic.'" *MIT Technology Review*, March 17, 2020. https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/03/17/905279/facebook-twitter-social-media-infodemic-misinformation/.

authoritative content from reputable medical sources.[4] But disinformers and media manipulators are adaptable and they quickly figured out different loopholes to keep misinformation on platforms.[5]

Over the last several years, I have listened to a number of arguments from tech companies suggesting that misinformation and conspiracy is not a problem of their own creation. For years, tech companies argued there is no reason to stop the viral spread of misinformation and conspiracies because everyone has a right to share their own beliefs. Data suggests the public disagrees, as the majority of users surveyed claim the platforms are not doing enough to fight abuse and disinformation on their platforms.[6]

In fact, back in 2018, I was horrified when Mark Zuckerberg told Kara Swisher that Facebook should not be held responsible for removing Holocaust denial because people may be unintentionally getting it wrong.[7] In the same interview, he said that because intent is too hard to assess, it is best to just let it alone. Motivated Holocaust denial is used to harass and intimidate Jewish people the world over. Holocaust denial is not a curiosity; it's a key feature of the international and networked white supremacist movement.[8]

And, yet, here we are two years later and under immense public pressure, Facebook is creating rules on Holocaust denial, alongside conspiracy content and medical misinformation. It should shock absolutely no one that conspiracy movements, like QAnon, advance deeply anti-semetic tropes.[9] Tech companies' inaction allowed QAnon to amass a large and dedicated following over years, where estimates of exposure are in the tens of millions.[10] Inaction allowed this networked faction to fester until it infected other communities, linking militia groups and gun advocates with anti-vaccine activists during the pandemic.[11]

I've also witnessed tech companies argue that they should not be responsible for politician's use of their products. In January 2020, Facebook published a statement, "In the absence of regulation,

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[4] Joan Donovan and Claire Wardle. "Misinformation Is Everybody's Problem Now." July 6, 2020. https://items.ssrc.org/covid-19-and-the-social-sciences/mediated-crisis/misinformation-is-everybodys-problem-now/.

[5] Joan Donovan. "Covid Hoaxes Are Using a Loophole to Stay Alive—Even after Content Is Deleted." *MIT Technology Review*, April 30, 2020. https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/04/30/1000881/covid-hoaxes-zombie-content-wayback-machine-disinformation/.

[6] Daniel Funke. "Americans Don't Think the Platforms Are Doing Enough to Fight Fake News." *Poynter*, August 15, 2018. https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2018/americans-dont-think-the-platforms-are-doing-enough-to-fight-fake-news/.

[7] Joan Donovan and Brian Friedberg. "What Mark Zuckerberg Doesn't Get: Facebook Is Amplifying Hate by Letting Conspiracy Theorists Sell Their Wares." *NY Daily News*, July 20, 2018. https://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/ny-oped-what-mark-zuckerberg-doesnt-get-20180720-story.html.

[8] Joan Donovan, Becca Lewis, and Brian Friedberg. "Networked Nationalisms: White Identity Politics at the Borders," *Medium,* July 11, 2018. https://medium.com/@MediaManipulation/networked-nationalisms-2983deae5620.

[9] Brian Friedberg. "The Dark Virality of a Hollywood Blood-Harvesting Conspiracy." *Wired*, July 31, 2020. https://www.wired.com/story/opinion-the-dark-virality-of-a-hollywood-blood-harvesting-conspiracy/.

[10] Ari Sen and Brandy Zadrozny. "QAnon Groups Have Millions of Members on Facebook, Documents Show." *NBC News*, August 10, 2020. https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/qanon-groups-have-millions-members-facebook-documents-show-n1236317.

[11] Joan Donovan. "Protest Misinformation Is Riding on the Success of Pandemic Hoaxes." *MIT Technology Review*, June 10, 2020. https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/06/10/1002934/protest-propaganda-is-riding-on-the-success-of-pandemic-hoaxes/.

Facebook and other companies are left to design their own policies. We have based ours on the principle that people should be able to hear from those who wish to lead them, warts and all…"[12] They go on to stipulate that paid advertising will have to abide by community standards.

But, what happens when a user has reached such a level of connectivity that advertising isn't a necessary condition for spreading lies to millions when all they need is the platform to work as designed?[13] Who, then, is supposed to provide the context explaining why the consumer is exposed to certain falsehoods? Who is responsible for critical public corrections?

The cost of doing nothing about misinformation and conspiracy is now so high that social media companies are finally forced to abandon their most coveted value of unmoderated "free speech," and recognize that socially and scientifically harmful campaigns have used their platforms as infrastructure. The hoaxes, lies and deception so prevalent during this infodemic of 2020 can no longer be conflated with first amendment protections. There is no such personal right to be misinformed, and the public should no longer suffer this lie to help these massive companies salvage their brand's reputations.

More than simply networking people, social media connects people to content in ways that can bring about positive social change. But, this same system can be turned against an open society by exploiting vulnerabilities in the design of our mass communication infrastructure by kicking off cascades of junk news and political disinformation.[14]

At Harvard Kennedy's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, the Technology and Social Change research team has identified four clear impact zones that are charged with cleaning up after the damage caused by unmoderated, unregulated, and unmanageable misinformation. Journalists, public health and medical professionals, civil society leaders, and law enforcement personnel and first responders are bearing the true cost of unrelenting misinformation.

- Journalists
  - In 2017, researchers and journalists revealed the enormous extent of the Russian Internet Research Agencies's operations to disrupt US politics. In response to this, platform companies have responded by creating teams to seek out coordinated influence operations using their services. However, journalists still play a vital role in discovering influence operations and deceptive misuse of platforms.

[12] Rob Leathern. "Expanded Transparency and More Controls for Political Ads." Facebook, January 9, 2020. https://about.fb.com/news/2020/01/political-ads/.

[13] Joan Donovan. Why Trump's Viral Covid and Flu Misinformation Is Hard for Facebook and Twitter to Stop." *NBC News*, October 9, 2020. https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/why-trump-s-viral-covid-flu-misinformation-hard-facebook-twitter-ncna1242665.

[14] Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral. "The Spread of True and False News Online." *Science Magazine* 359, no. 6380 (March 9, 2018): 1146–51. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559.

As newsrooms adapted over the last four years to the normalization of misinformation on social media, they developed a "misinformation beat." These journalists have written thousands of articles debunking misinformation and conspiracies because they see how audiences are repeatedly targeted by sensational and scandalous content online. It's a drain on resources, which could be much better spent on sustaining journalism rather than moderating content on platforms.[15]

- Public Health and Medical Professionals
  - Increasingly, public health and medical professionals, including the World Health Organization, have turned to my team for assistance in dealing with medical misinformation. Doctors are especially perplexed by how the social media ecosystem, politicians, and some news organizations have influenced patients' assessment of the risk of the pandemic. *The American Journal of Public Health* published a special issue to aid their field in spotting, monitoring, and combating misinformation about COVID-19.[16] However, once someone has been subject to medical misinformation, it can be extremely difficult to correct the damage. Particularly when conspiracy theories link up with medical misinformation, like we saw this summer with claims that the Gates Foundation is microchipping people through vaccines, it can mobilize people to take risks they would not otherwise have taken.[17] Frontline public health advocates are then tasked with coming up with ways to reach the public and counter-message disinformers pushing miracle cures and bogus medical advice.[18]

- Civil Society Leaders
  - We are now in a position where racialized disinformation is a seasoned tactic of domestic and foreign influence operations. Racialized disinformation refers to campaigns that either impersonate the identities of communities of color or use racism to boost polarization on wedge issues. For example, *MIT Tech Review* recently published about the ways in which Latino voters have been targeted by misinformation,[19] where the use of impersonation and false association are key tactics across online forums. *Channel 4 News* in the UK obtained the database used by the Trump campaign in 2016, which exposed that 3.5 million Black Americans were

[15] Joan Donovan and danah boyd. "Stop the Presses? Moving From Strategic Silence to Strategic Amplification in a Networked Media Ecosystem." *American Behavioral Scientist*, September 29, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764219878229.

[16] Joan Donovan. "Concrete Recommendations for Cutting Through Misinformation During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *American Journal of Public Health*, October 1, 2020. https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2020.305922.

[17] Philip Ball and Amy Maxmen. "The Epic Battle against Coronavirus Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories." *Nature*, May 27, 2020. https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01452-z.

[18] Joan Donovan. Social-Media Companies Must Flatten the Curve of Misinformation." *Nature*, April 14, 2020. https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01107-z.

[19] Tate Ryan-Mosley. "'It's Been Really, Really Bad': How Hispanic Voters Are Being Targeted by Disinformation." *MIT Technology Review*, October 12, 2020. https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/10/12/1010061/hispanic-voter-political-targeting-facebook-whatsapp/.

labeled for "deterrence."[20] Facebook embedded staff on the Trump campaign, but has never clearly accounted for the ways their platform was used to deliver suppression messaging to communities of color.

Since 2016, philanthropy has spent tens of millions to ready civil society groups to defend their organizations from the negative impacts of misinformation, especially media manipulation attacks that adopt forged identities to exploit and inflame US politics on race. Brandi Collins-Dexter recently testified about these issues at a hearing in June 2020, where she highlighted how tech companies have hidden behind clarion calls to protect free speech at all costs without doing enough to protect people of color who are subject to hate speech, incitement, and harassment daily on social media.[21] Collins-Dexter's recent research shows that COVID-19 conspiracy theories spreading through Black communities online are contributing to the ways Black communities assess the risks of the pandemic and the precautions individuals are willing to take.[22]

Platforms must address how medical misinformation and conspiracy can both bubble up from the depths of anonymous posts, but also come from celebrities, politicians, and other notable individuals with large and trusting audiences.

- Law enforcement personnel and first responders
  - In recent months, armed groups began patrolling neighborhoods for "outsiders" after rumors circulated that antifa protesters were being bussed and flown around the country.[23] Investigative journalists have shown that loosely networked vigilante groups are organizing across social media platforms, where flashpoints for violence are premeditated by calls to action online, including the tragic events in Kenosha.[24] In several Facebook groups and event pages, serious calls for violence against protesters are motivating some militia-style groups to show up armed and prepared to fight.[25]

[20] "Revealed: Trump Campaign Strategy to Deter Millions of Black Americans from Voting in 2016." *Channel 4 News*, September 28, 2020. https://www.channel4.com/news/revealed-trump-campaign-strategy-to-deter-millions-of-black-americans-from-voting-in-2016

[21] Brandi Collins-Dexter. Hearing on "A Country in Crisis: How Disinformation Online is Dividing the Nation." Subcommittee on Communications and Technology and the Subcommittee on Consumer Protection and Commerce and United States House Committee on Energy and Commerce (2020). https://docs.house.gov/meetings/IF/IF17/20200624/110832/HHRG-116-IF17-Wstate-Collins-DexterB-20200624.pdf.

[22] Brandi Collins-Dexter. "Canaries in the Coal Mine: COVID-19 Misinformation and Black Communities." *Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy*, June 2020. https://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Canaries-in-the-Coal-Mine-Shorenstein-Center-June-2020.pdf.

[23] Joan Donovan. "How an Overload of Riot Porn Is Driving Conflict in the Streets." *MIT Technology Review*, September 3, 2020. https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/09/03/1007931/riot-porn-right-wing-vigilante-propaganda-social-media/.

[24] Ryan Mac and Craig Silverman. "How Facebook Failed Kenosha." *Buzzfeed News*, September 3, 2020. https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanmac/facebook-failed-kenosha.

[25] Jason Wilson and Robert Evans. "Revealed: Pro-Trump Activists Plotted Violence Ahead of Portland Rallies." *The Guardian*, September 23, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/23/oregon-portland-pro-trump-protests-violence-texts.

These groups will sometimes draw their weapons and shine their laser sights on targets, raising tensions between law enforcement and peaceful protesters.

Law enforcement personnel and first responders are at a serious disadvantage when attempting to do their jobs amid rumors and conspiracy theories spreading like digital wildfire online. For example, law enforcement and first responders in Oregon are pleading with residents to stop calling in false rumors, because, while it might be well intentioned, it is wasting scarce time and resources.[26]

We do not need to accept any technology as an inevitable outcome of innovation and progress. Often, technology scales because people with a large amount of resources prioritize their values over all others and image a virtuous user, who is certainly not motivated by spreading hate and chaos. Technologists are often guided by a set of values that they believe are universally held and, when confronted by the potential harms, they weigh them not in terms of morals, but of profit margins. Exposing social media consumers to misinformation and conspiracy "warts and all" reflects more about how social media companies view society than it does about making knowledge more accessible or expressing duty of care to the communities that use these services.

Recently, Facebook's former director of monetization, Tim Kendall, gave testimony before Congress that suggested a new framework for assessing social media's negative effects on society.[27] Kendall compared social media to the tobacco industry, because both focused on increasing the capacity for addiction by slowly modifying their products over time. He wrote, "Allowing for misinformation, conspiracy theories, and fake news to flourish were like Big Tobacco's bronchodilators, which allowed the cigarette smoke to cover more surface area of the lungs." Legislation about smoking had to move beyond the rationale that it was an individual choice and accept that secondhand smoke had public health effects. Interestingly, those charged with shouldering the expenses of smoking habits were families, insurance companies, employers, and businesses who had to adapt to the increasing prevalence of smoking in public.

Like secondhand smoke, misinformation and conspiracy damages the quality of public life. The expense of not responding to misinformation and conspiracy can grow exponentially over time. Since the 2016 US election, newsrooms, technology companies, civil society organizations, politicians, educators, and researchers have been taxed with advocating for truth in a social media ecosystem that rewards sensationalization and scandal.[28] These are the sectors paying for the true costs of misinformation.

[26] Jason Wilson. "Social Media Disinformation on US West Coast Blazes 'spreading Faster than Fire'." *The Guardian*, September 14, 2020.
https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/sep/14/disinformation-oregon-wildfires-spreading-social-media.

[27] Tim Kendall. Hearing on "Mainstreaming Extremism: Social Media's Role in Radicalizing America," § House Committee on Energy and Commerce, Consumer Protection & Commerce (2020).
https://energycommerce.house.gov/committee-activity/hearings/hearing-on-mainstreaming-extremism-social-media-s-role-in-radicalizing.

[28] Joan Donovan. "Trolling for Truth on Social Media." *Scientific American*, October 12, 2020.
https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/trolling-for-truth-on-social-media/.

As of right now, the design of social media is having an outsized negative impact on the public's trust in government, journalism, and medicine. One plan, the ACCESS Act, put forward by Senators. Mark R. Warner (D-VA), Josh Hawley (R-MO) and Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), would introduce competition by standardizing interoperability and data portability between platforms. This is a worthwhile effort, because social media users would be able to switch platforms without losing their extended networks.[29] However, it is not a solution for stopping the infodemic.

Herein lies the issue: this act may not do much to prevent the flows of misinformation and conspiracy currently surging through our media ecosystem and threatening the integrity of the 2020 election with allegations of rigged ballots.[30] Doing that requires regulation to descale technology that monetizes networks so that media manipulators do not continue to negatively affect other professional sectors.

We must also recognize that years of doing nothing to stop misinformation and conspiracy has created a dire situation where people's lives and health are at stake. There is nothing more important politically in this moment than public health, which is why there must be swift action against those repeatedly pushing medical misinformation on social media. Lastly, rather than hold on to technostalgia for a time when it was not this bad, sometimes it is worth asking what it would take to *uninvent social media*, so that we can chart a course for the web we want -- a web that promotes safety, equity, and democracy.

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[29] Mark Whitehead. "Why People Leave Facebook – and What It Tells Us about the Future of Social Media." *The Conversation*, January 8, 2020.
https://theconversation.com/why-people-leave-facebook-and-what-it-tells-us-about-the-future-of-social-media-128952.
[30] Benkler, Yochai and Tilton, Casey and Etling, Bruce and Roberts, Hal and Clark, Justin and Faris, Robert and Kaiser, Jonas and Schmitt, Carolyn, Mail-In Voter Fraud: Anatomy of a Disinformation Campaign (October 2, 2020). Berkman Center Research Publication No. 2020-6, Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3703701 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3703701