



BIG TECH, HATE, AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ONLINE

A REPORT FROM
INTERFAITH ALLIANCE



INTERFAITH
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PROTECTING FAITH AND FREEDOM



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HATE AND HARASSMENT ARE URGENT THREATS TO RELIGIOUS freedom. And as a growing number of Americans find community online, many encounter the same, or increased vitriol in digital spaces as they do in person, often accompanied by threats to personal safety. Congress has failed to take meaningful action to protect religious belief and expression online, even as the Supreme Court prepares to hear two cases involving content moderation on social media.

INTERFAITH ALLIANCE IS THE ONLY NATIONAL ADVOCACY organization that brings together people of all faiths and none to protect true religious freedom. This report connects the dots between this fundamental right, our increasingly online lives, and the Big Tech business practices that incentivize hate.

BIG TECH, HATE, AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ONLINE

Our patterns of communication have changed dramatically in recent decades, as social media platforms expand our understanding of technology and suggest a future that is increasingly online. Where the reach of our ideas was previously limited by geography and infrastructure, we now communicate, advertise, and learn through channels available to anyone with an internet connection.



The power of social media is revolutionary. As the COVID-19 pandemic drove many religious communities to change when and how they gathered, online spaces opened new opportunities for connection. From Twitch Bible studies to Facebook food drives, freedom of religion is no longer confined to the physical world. For people of all faiths and none, the freedom to believe as we choose and share those views online offers incredible possibilities.

But with substantial progress in technology come new sets of challenges. As these platforms facilitate understanding and innovation, they also provide bad actors with broader means to cause division and inspire fear. Real world violence, inspired by online hate and harassment, is growing. A 2021 report from the Anti-Defamation League noted the harmful effects of online hate on communities, from an increase in physical violence against Asian Americans, to antisemitic attacks on Twitter directed at Jewish members of Congress, to the quadrupling of hateful Facebook posts against African Americans after the murder of George Floyd.¹

we are taught that every person is imbued with sacred dignity and worth. We strengthen our nation's moral foundation by advancing policies that affirm our shared humanity and ensure that all people are treated equally under law.

RECENT POLLING shows that the average teenager spends about 8 hours and 39 minutes online every day. 64% reported encountering hateful content in the past year.

It's impossible to fulfill that vision without addressing the role of social media in disseminating hate and the acts of violence they inspire. This report examines how these platforms facilitate radicalization, rejecting solutions that focus on individual users in favor of comprehensive education, accountability, and regulation.

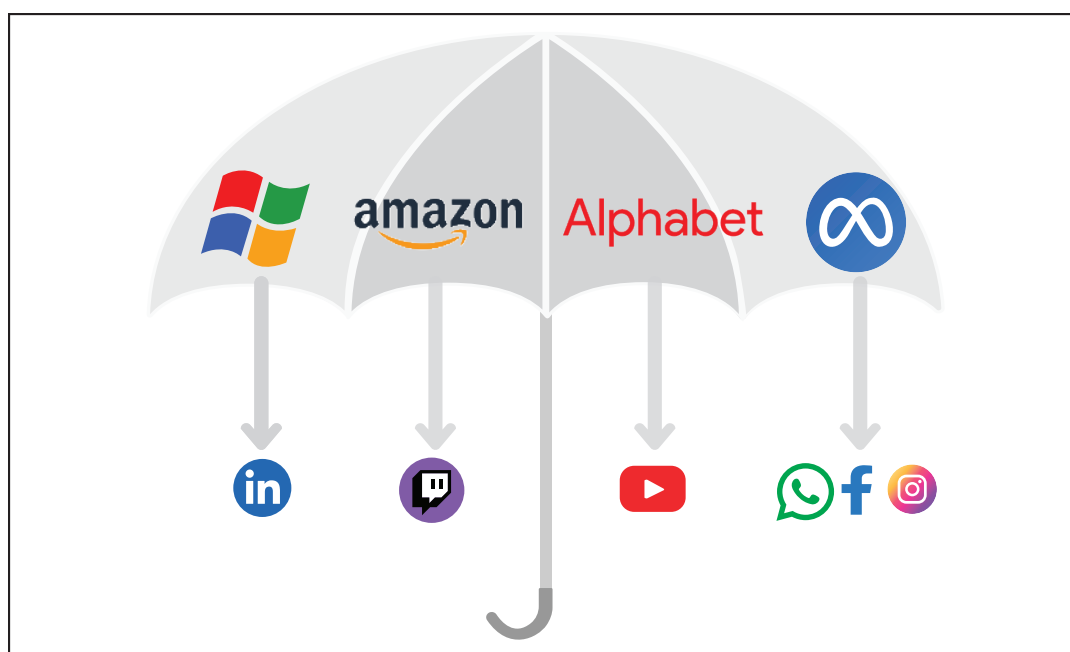
Interfaith Alliance is committed to advancing an inclusive vision of religious freedom, one where all feel safe to choose belief or non-belief. Across religious traditions,

¹ *Online Hate and Harassment: The American Experience 2021*, ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE (May 3, 2021), <https://www.adl.org/online-hate-2021>.

I. Understanding Social Media and Big Tech

The term “big tech” is often used to describe the world’s leading technology companies. The five leading tech companies - including Meta, Alphabet, Microsoft, Amazon, and Apple - earned a total of \$1 trillion in revenue in 2020 and their market cap, the total value of all shares of the companies’ stock, rose to \$7.5 trillion in the same year. Meta alone accounts for 3.5 billion users and, together with Alphabet, account for over half of global ad spending. Google remains the primary global search engine, with 90% of the search share in Brazil, Europe, and India, and 60% in the United States. Amazon runs close to a third of the internet through Amazon Web Services,² providing basic web utilities like servers, security, and storage.³

Social media platforms operate within and are directed by their parent companies, though the two should not be conflated. For example, the parent company Meta, previously known as Facebook, recently changed its name to distinguish between the platform and parent company more clearly. Facebook is now easily identifiable as a platform under the Meta umbrella, alongside Instagram and WhatsApp.⁴ Similarly, Alphabet owns Google and its subsidiaries, the most notable platform being YouTube.⁵



A 2019 study by Our World in Data tracked the start and dramatic rise of social media platforms. From the early 2000s to 2018, social media grew from a small idea to an industry that exploded globally.⁶ As of 2021, according

to the Pew Research Center, 70% of U.S. adults are on social media, with 81% of those on YouTube and 69% on Facebook.⁷ These platforms are an inextricable part of our communities, with both positive and negative effects.

² Alison Beard, *Can Big Tech Be Disrupted*, HARV. BUS. REV., Jan. –Feb. 2022.

³ Vanessa Page, *What is Amazon Web Services and Why is it So Successful*, INVESTOPEDIA (Aug. 12, 2021), <https://www.investopedia.com/articles/investing/011316/what-amazon-web-services-and-why-it-so-successful.asp>.

⁴ Nathan Reiff, *5 Companies Owned by Facebook (Meta)*, INVESTOPEDIA (Oct. 29, 2021), <https://www.investopedia.com/articles/personal-finance/051815/top-11-companies-owned-facebook.asp>.

⁵ Matthew Johnston, *7 Companies Owned by Google (Alphabet)*, INVESTOPEDIA (Mar. 12, 2022), <https://www.investopedia.com/investing/companies-owned-by-google/>.

⁶ Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, *The Rise of Social Media*, OUR WORLD IN DATA (Sept. 18, 2019), <https://ourworldindata.org/rise-of-social-media#:~:text=Social%20media%20started%20in%20the,%2C%20by%20platform%2C%20since%202004>.

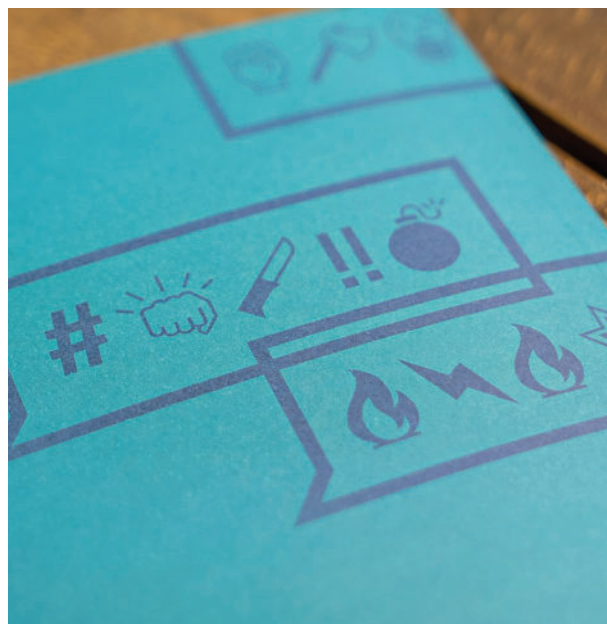
⁷ Brooke Auxier & Monica Anderson, *Social Media Use in 2021*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (Apr. 7, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/>.

A. Incentivizing Hate

Social media, like all websites, are made from essential building blocks that create the structure and function of the platform. One of those blocks is an algorithm, or a set of rules a program must follow to run. Data scientist and author of *Weapons of Math Destruction* Cathy O’Neil explains that algorithms function by using existing knowledge about a program and its use to make predictions about the future.⁸ In the context of social media, algorithms are used to curate a user’s newsfeed, recommend content, or suggest people they may know. Sometimes a human being may be involved in this process, but algorithms provide the primary framework for social media sites.

Most platforms use a content moderation policy, programmed into the system using an algorithm and monitored in some way by human beings, to address hate speech or misinformation. The algorithm has a set of parameters for determining what speech violates the platform’s policy and takes it down automatically. Much of this process remains internal, but publicly facing policies help users understand what the algorithm is looking for when monitoring content. YouTube, for instance, removes content that encourages hatred or violence against people or groups based on disability, ethnicity, gender identity and expression, race, religion, and more.⁹

It’s important to note that algorithms are built by people, meaning they are imperfect and designed from a specific perspective. In an industry focused on profit, there are strong incentives to keep users’ attention through engaging content.¹⁰ This may result in recommending content that aligns with their existing interests and communities, including around religious affiliation. But algorithms are not especially effective at balancing the overarching goal of maximizing user engagement (and ultimately generating revenue) and purging inflammatory content that violates the moderation policy.



Twitter and Facebook have experimented with warning labels on posts containing misinformation, claims that may be false but the poster believes to be true.¹¹ The effectiveness of this approach is limited in the context of addressing the spread of hate online, as the information remains readily accessible to other users and does not distinguish it from disinformation (disseminated by a poster who knows it is false) or mal-information (true information presented in a way that would inflict harm on the subject).¹²

The discussion around online misinformation is often stymied by concerns around freedom of speech. Critics of platform self-regulation assert users’ right to express their views but frequently overlook the first words of the First Amendment: “government shall make no law...”¹³ Private companies own and operate social media platforms - not the government - placing them out of reach of First Amendment claims. Platforms can set content guidelines that foster inclusive online spaces while removing material that falls outside of those requirements. In fact, they have a moral obligation to do so.

⁸ CODED BIAS (Shalini Kantayya 2020).

⁹ *Hate Speech Policy*, YOUTUBE HELP (2022), <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/2801939?hl=en>.

¹⁰ Katherine J. Wu, *Radical Ideas Spread Through Social Media. Are the Algorithms to Blame?*, PBS ONLINE (Mar. 28, 2019), <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/article/radical-ideas-social-media-algorithms/>.

¹¹ Barbara Ortutay, *Twitter Rolls Out Redesigned Misinformation Warning Labels*, ABC NEWS (Nov. 16, 2021), <https://abc17news.com/news/ap-national-news/2021/11/16/twitter-rolls-out-redesigned-misinformation-warning-labels/>.

¹² *Misinformation, Disinformation and Mal-information*, MEDIA DEFENCE (2020), <https://www.mediadefence.org/ereader/publications/introductory-modules-on-digital-rights-and-freedom-of-expression-online/module-8-false-news-misinformation-and-propaganda/misinformation-disinformation-and-mal-information/>.

¹³ U.S. CONST. amend. I.

B. Radicalization Within and Across Platforms

It's remarkably easy to encounter hate speech or misinformation on social media platforms, no matter your personal beliefs. In the first half of 2020 alone, Facebook removed 32 million instances of hate speech and 40 million instances of violent and graphic content. YouTube removed 1.2 million videos that promoted violence and violent extremism and 1.9 million violent and graphic videos. Twitter removed 995,000 instances of hateful conduct.¹⁴ This is the content platforms have addressed. The remaining amount allowed to flourish is unthinkable.

An experiment by the Guardian illustrated how quickly an average social media user may be directed toward extremist content by creating a fake account on TikTok, identified as a male teenager. Within a week, benign content aimed at male users quickly gave way to videos by internet personality Andrew Tate and other violent misogynistic videos without any active engagement. Without "liking" or seeking it out, TikTok's algorithm quickly guided the fake male teenager toward a steady stream of extremist content.

Tate, despite being removed from various platforms for violating their content moderation policies, continues to attract attention with 11.6 billion video views.¹⁵ He joins far right personalities like Proud Boys founder Gavin McInnes and influencer Jordan Peterson with strong predominantly male followings on platforms like YouTube.¹⁶ Within this ecosystem, users seeking to share hateful content move from one site to another and create echo chambers for their followers.

C. What is a Hate Crime

Hate crimes occur when prejudice, often against minority groups, escalates into violence. A hate crime is a criminal

offense like murder, arson, or vandalism that is motivated wholly or in part by the perpetrator's bias against the victim's actual or perceived race, color, disability, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, or gender identity.¹⁷ At the federal level and in many states, hate crimes are treated differently because of the unique way they impact victims and members of the broader community that they are a part of.

PEOPLE AFFECTED by violent hate crimes are more likely to experience post-traumatic stress, safety concerns, depression, anxiety, and anger than survivors of crimes that are not motivated by bias.

Any crime committed by one human being against another is a tragedy. But hate crimes are uniquely damaging, impacting those targeted, their loved ones, and the larger group they represent. Hate crimes send a message to members of the targeted group that they are unwelcome and unsafe in their community. And long after an incident occurs, people in targeted groups continue to experience the trauma and instability these acts cause. People affected by violent hate crimes are more likely to experience post-traumatic stress, safety concerns, depression, anxiety, and anger than survivors of crimes that are not motivated by bias.¹⁸



¹⁴ Anshu Siripurapu & Will Merrow, *Social Media and Online Speech: How Should Countries Regulate Tech Giants?*, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS (Feb. 9, 2021), <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/social-media-and-online-speech-how-should-countries-regulate-tech-giants>.

¹⁵ Shanti Das, *How TikTok Bombards Young Men with Misogynistic Videos*, THE GUARDIAN (Aug. 6, 2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/aug/06/revealed-how-tiktok-bombards-young-men-with-misogynistic-videos-andrew-tate>.

¹⁶ Amanda Marcotte, *Andrew Tate Shows How Fascists Recruit Online: Men Fall Victim to the Insecurity-to-Fascism Pipeline*, SALON (Aug. 23, 2022), <https://www.salon.com/2022/08/23/andrew-tate-shows-how-fascists-recruit-online-men-fall-victim-to-the-insecurity-to-fascism-pipeline/>.

¹⁷ *What We Investigate: Hate Crimes*, U.S. DEPT. OF JUSTICE, FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION (last visited Sept. 6, 2022), <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/civil-rights/hate-crimes>.

¹⁸ *The Psychology of Hate Crimes*, AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASS'N (last visited Sept. 6, 2022), <https://www.apa.org/advocacy/interpersonal-violence/hate-crimes>

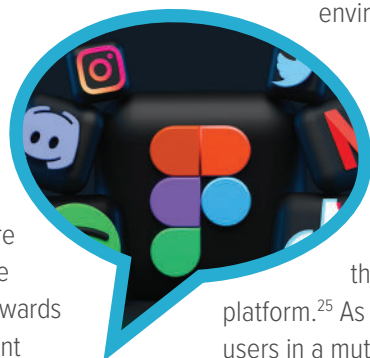


The FBI's 2019 annual hate crime report showed that these incidents reached a record high. Equally troubling is that this data may be incomplete, as fewer law enforcement agencies shared crime data with the FBI in 2019 than in the previous year. Each agency also classifies and records hate crimes differently, meaning the same incident may or may not be identified as a hate crime simply based on where it occurred. These discrepancies produce artificially low hate crimes statistics, evidenced by the more than 70 cities with populations over 100,000 that reported zero hate crimes in 2019.¹⁹

As hateful ideas spread farther and more quickly online, at times translating into physical violence, members of religious and other minority groups are concerned for their safety. If any community can't live openly and authentically without fear of harm, then the promise of religious freedom in our country remains unfulfilled for all of us.

II. Defining the Problem

The central role of social media in American life has increasingly driven calls for greater oversight and government regulation, especially in the wake of the 2016 presidential election.²⁰ At the time, claims of misinformation on Facebook tainted Donald Trump's victory. Yet despite clear indications that fake stories played a role in influencing voters,²¹ major figures in the industry were unwilling to name the issue and therefore unwilling to direct company resources towards addressing it.²² Meta, the platform's parent company, has since become more transparent about efforts to address misinformation.



A recent SEC complaint filed by the nonprofit representing Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen, however, suggests that Meta continues to obscure its operations. Based on her time with the company, Haugen claims the platform willfully misled investors on the effectiveness of its misinformation policy, if a clear policy was even in place.²³

Following its election missteps, Facebook created a COVID-19 information center with articles by independent fact-checker partners. It also automatically identified posts that include misinformation and directed users to reliable sources. Twitter prioritized content from reliable, authoritative sources when users searched for COVID-19-related terms. Like Facebook, it relied on its algorithm to automatically identify and display a warning label on untrustworthy, previously debunked content. YouTube has taken similar steps.²⁴

These major platforms have also recognized the existence of hate speech by defining unacceptable content. While there is enormous room for improvement, some platforms like Parler, Gab, and Gettr make no efforts to mitigate hate speech and actually create environments that encourage it. Parler, for example, claims that it does not use an algorithm to organize users' feeds. But it also has virtually no content moderation policies and uses a "community jury" to decide whether something is inappropriate, allowing for the most heinous content to remain on the platform.²⁵ As a result, Parler and platforms like it trap users in a mutually affirming space where ideologies and false narratives, however outlandish they may be, become the truth.

¹⁹ 2019 Hate Crime Statistics, U.S. DEPT. OF JUSTICE, FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION (2019), <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2019>

²⁰ Daniel Trotta, *Wall Street Critic Warren Vows to Break Up Amazon, Facebook, Google*, REUTERS (Mar. 8, 2019), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-elizabethwarren-technology/wall-street-critic-warren-vows-to-break-up-amazon-facebook-google-idUSKCN1QP1M0>.

²¹ Alexandre Bovet & Hernán Makse, *Influence of Fake News in Twitter During the 2016 US Presidential Election*, NATURE COMMUNICATIONS (Jan. 2, 2019), <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-018-07761-2>.

²² Abby Ohlheiser, *Mark Zuckerberg Denies that Fake News on Facebook Influenced the Elections*, THE WASHINGTON POST (Nov. 11, 2016), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2016/11/11/mark-zuckerberg-denies-that-fake-news-on-facebook-influenced-the-elections/>.

²³ Cat Zakrzewski, *Facebook Whistleblower Alleges Executives Misled Investors About Climate, Covid Hoaxes in New SEC Complaint*, THE WASHINGTON POST (Feb. 18, 2022), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/02/18/whistleblower-facebook-sec-climate-change/>.

²⁴ Spandana Singh & Koustubh Bagchi, *How Internet Platforms Are Combating Disinformation and Misinformation in the Age of COVID-19: Recommendations*, NEW AMERICA (last updated June 1, 2020), <https://www.newamerica.org/oti/reports/how-internet-platforms-are-combating-disinformation-and-misinformation-age-covid-19/recommendations>.

²⁵ Rebecca Heilweil, *Parler, the "Free Speech" Social Network, Explained*, VOX (Jan. 11, 2021), <https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/11/24/21579357/parler-app-trump-twitter-facebook-censorship>.

A. Profit Margins v. Public Good

Social media platforms operate within an industry focused on innovation, progress, and ultimately financial gain. These incentives shape the very architecture of these sites, as a Bloomberg News report recently revealed. Their investigation found the driving factor behind YouTube's algorithm, and by extension, company ethos: engagement.²⁶ Emphasis on engagement, or keeping people on the platform for as long as possible, is a near universal goal throughout algorithms.

Engagement translates directly to profit, as social media companies make most of their money from advertisements on their platforms.²⁷ Outrage equals engagement, as controversial content is more likely to capture and sustain users' attention. YouTube's algorithm capitalizes on this dynamic, often leading viewers toward increasingly extreme content through recommendations and auto play functions.

Former YouTube employee Guillaume Chaslot has described the shift from measuring total 'clicks,' meaning the number of times people clicked on videos, to total watch time. Chaslot describes redesigning the algorithm based on "the idea...to maximize watch time at all costs. To just make it grow as big as possible." The result was suggesting controversial video after video to viewers, increasing their watch time and sending them deeper into extremist content.²⁸

In revealing a company driven by engagement, and ultimately profit, Chaslot shines a light on the people behind performance expectations. Social media platforms provide community and connection for many of us, but for the companies that run them they are ultimately a source of revenue. When their product has such a deep effect on our lives and on the safety of people off platforms, the pursuit of profit must be balanced by the public good.

B. A Toolkit for Sowing Division

The very tools that draw everyday users to sites like Facebook and Twitter, including anonymity, and broader reach, are used by extremist groups to spread their ideas and engage new followers online. And by tying profit to engagement, social media platforms continue to create echo chambers for hate and misinformation. A study by the Center for American Progress (CAP) explains the many ways these platforms have aided the proliferation of hate and supported the growth of hate groups.²⁹

Government and political operatives have used platforms to push hate as well. Evidence of the Russian government's efforts to manipulate United States elections is significant, but CAP's research emphasizes Russia's use of hate-based messages. Social media and ads, targeted at users based on their ethnicity and search histories, worked to sow division and mistrust.

CAP chose to direct its policy recommendations towards internet companies, including social media platforms. But the study establishes that the user-focused measures companies currently employ are not enough to mitigate the range of issues. Companies already have policies that outline acceptable user conduct but hate and extremist groups still utilize their platforms to expand their reach. By training and dedicating staff to removing hateful content, testing new technology for bias, and building in layers of oversight, meaningful progress can be made to address the proliferation of harmful material online. By failing to effectively intervene, their parent companies enable real world harm against individuals and communities.



²⁶ Mark Bergen, *YouTube Executives Ignored Warnings, Letting Toxic Videos Run Rampant*, Bloomberg (Apr. 2, 2019), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2019-04-02/youtube-executives-ignored-warnings-letting-toxic-videos-run-rampant>.

²⁷ In Q4 of the 2021 fiscal year, 97% of Meta's revenue was [from advertising](#).

²⁸ *Rabbit Hole*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (last updated May 28, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/podcasts/rabbit-hole-prologue.html>.

²⁹ Henry Fernandez, *Curbing Hate Online: What Companies Should Do Now*, THE CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS (Oct. 25, 2018), <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/curbing-hate-online-companies-now/>.



C. It's Time to Think Big

Hate is neither a religious nor American value. With dramatic unanimity, the sacred scriptures of diverse religious traditions vehemently condemn hate. In accordance with our beliefs, we have the responsibility to join in solidarity with our community members and neighbors who face discrimination. Now more than ever, we must all come together to actively root out hate where it exists.

There are too many examples of real-world violence, committed by young social media users who encountered increasingly extremist content online. The perpetrator of the devastating attack at a supermarket in a predominantly Black neighborhood in Buffalo,

New York, streamed the massacre on Twitch. The shooter wrote a manifesto on Google Docs filled with white supremacist ideology, stating that he was radicalized on 4chan in 2020. The Twitch livestream was taken down in just two minutes, but the video remained on Facebook for over 10 hours, allowing 46,000 people to share it.³⁰ His actions, and the failure of platforms to identify and take down content like this immediately, created further extremist material for other users to view.

Social media platforms and their parent companies must be held accountable for their role in the spread of hateful content. When one industry wields such an enormous amount of power over how we connect, we must address critical failures in content moderation to protect the safety and wellbeing of our communities.

³⁰ Nathan Grayson, *How Twitch Took Down Buffalo Shooter's Stream in Under Two Minutes*, THE WASHINGTON POST (May 20, 2022), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2022/05/20/twitch-buffalo-shooter-facebook-nypd-interview/>.

III. Policy Proposals

Social media has changed our relationships with one another in complex ways. Nuanced, multi-pronged solutions are needed to ensure that these platforms serve the public good. Various levels of government have made efforts to regulate the tech industry. Some state governments have taken significant steps to protect users, like the 2018 passage of California’s Consumer Privacy Act.³¹ The Justice Department,³² the Federal Trade Commission,³³ and members of Congress are attempting to tackle this issue by focusing on antitrust actions.³⁴ But a patchwork of state laws and federal investigations cannot effectively address the urgent need for comprehensive, consistent oversight.

The Supreme Court has also recognized the timeliness of this issue. In May 2022, the Court struck down a Texas law that would prevent platforms from removing posts based on their content.³⁵ Each branch of the federal government and various state legislatures have indicated interest in regulating platforms, but little action has been taken to meaningfully mitigate the harms of an unchecked industry. That’s why our policy recommendations begin on the local level, with substantive education on identifying misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information online.



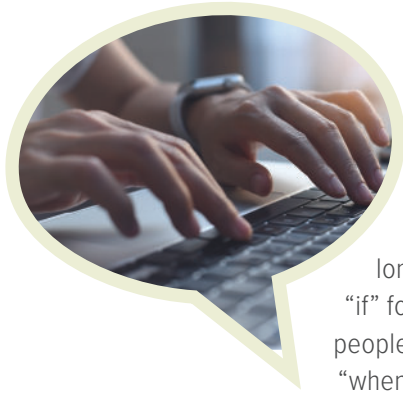
³¹ California Consumer Privacy Act of 2018, CAL. CIV. CODE § 1798.198(a) (2018).

³² Press Release, Department of Justice, Justice Department Sues Google for Violating Antitrust Laws (Oct. 20, 2020), <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-sues-monopolist-google-violating-antitrust-laws>.

³³ *Facebook, Inc., FTC v.*, FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION (last updated Nov. 17, 2021), <https://www.ftc.gov/legal-library/browse/cases-proceedings/191-0134-facebook-inc-ftc-v>.

³⁴ Jane Bambauer & Anupam Chander, *Bills Meant to Check Big Tech’s Power Could Lead to More Disinformation*, THE WASHINGTON POST (June 6, 2022), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/06/06/antitrust-bills-big-tech-hate-speech-disinformation/>.

³⁵ Adam Liptak, *Supreme Court Blocks Texas Law Regulating Social Media Platforms*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (May 31, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/us/politics/supreme-court-social-media-texas.html>.



A. Social Media Literacy

Social media is no longer a question of “if” for children and young people, but a question of “when.” From 2019 to 2021,

average daily screen use went from 4 hours and 44 minutes to 5 hours and 33 minutes for children ages 8 to 12. For children ages 13 to 18, average use increased from 7 hours and 22 minutes to 8 hours and 39 minutes.³⁶ A significant amount of time spent online, coupled with emotional and situational factors like loneliness and isolation, make children particularly vulnerable to extremist content.

And hate online is not hard to find, as algorithms vie for users’ attention by pushing inflammatory content. 64% of teens report that they’ve encountered hateful content on social media.³⁷ While many may report what they see or just keep scrolling, some young users are drawn in. All young people should have the tools they need to thoughtfully engage with what they see online. By drawing on educational frameworks for traditional media literacy, which teach students to apply critical thinking to media messages and in turn create thoughtful and conscious media,³⁸ young people can develop social media literacy.

Similar to the state of legislation addressing the tech industry, only a handful of states currently promote media literacy. The federal government should take steps to ensure media literacy - and particularly social media literacy - is a part of public education across the country. The Department of Education has begun exploring innovative programs through the Digital Literacy Accelerator.³⁹ By offering incentives to districts that pilot these ideas and others, developing further resources for schools looking to build a social media literacy program, and more the Department can ensure

that young people are building the critical skills they need to identify misinformation.

Educating students about navigating online content provides protection against radicalization. The more equipped they are about the existence of hateful ideologies and misinformation, the easier it will be to shape their media consumption to fit their interests.

B. Holding Platforms Accountable for Hate Speech

Platform accountability has been stymied in part by Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996.⁴⁰ This provision has been interpreted to shield social media companies from prosecution for hateful content or misinformation on their platforms, placing the legal burden entirely on the user. But this provision is mistreated by platforms as a catch-all defense against responsibility. If there are no further laws or regulations clarifying accountability, platforms will continue to ignore algorithmic ethics and their responsibility to users and our democracy.

Although platforms often use Section 230 as a bulwark against calls for reform, repealing it is not the best path to combating hate and misinformation. Due to the sheer volume of content being produced every minute on social media platforms, attempting to prosecute platforms themselves for that speech would ignore the real issue at hand: algorithms driven by engagement at all costs.

Frances Haugen’s testimony to the Senate Sub-Committee on Consumer Protection, Product Safety, and Data Security from October 2021 exemplifies this issue. Haugen, who worked on the platform’s algorithmic products, revealed that Facebook was

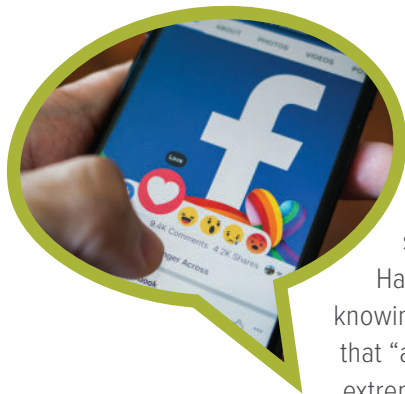
³⁶ *The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens*, COMMON SENSE MEDIA (2021), https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/8-18-census-integrated-report-final-web_0.pdf.

³⁷ Erin Walsh & David Walsh, *Why Kids Need Adults to Talk to Them About Extremism Online*, PSYCHOLOGY TODAY (June 2, 2022), <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/smart-parenting-smarter-kids/202206/why-kids-need-adults-talk-them-about-extremism-online>.

³⁸ *What is Media Literacy?*, MEDIA LITERACY NOW (2022), <https://medialiteracynow.org/what-is-media-literacy/>.

³⁹ *Digital Literacy Accelerator*, OFFICE OF EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY (2022), <https://tech.ed.gov/dla/>.

⁴⁰ 47 U.S.C. § 230.



made aware of threats to user safety during development, but repeatedly chose profits over safety. Facebook, Haugen revealed, knowingly created a system that “amplifies division, extremism, and polarization

– and [undermines] societies around the world.”⁴¹

Congress should take action to hold platforms accountable for the harm they knowingly cause to users. As studies show the impact of misinformation on our elections and beyond, social media platforms and their parent companies owe a duty to balance their profits against user safety. What happens online doesn’t always stay online. Platforms should be held accountable when they choose profits over the public good.

C. Regulating Big Tech

The role of social media in promoting false and even hateful material in pursuit of engagement highlights the urgent need for regulation of the larger tech industry. Congress should not have to rely on whistleblowers to inform the public about company decisions; our leaders must take proactive steps to create oversight over tech and ensure the amount of power they wield is not harming users.

The Center for American Progress study on online extremism offered several meaningful steps internet companies can take to regulate themselves, like creating dedicated teams to assess technology for its impact on hate and increasing transparency around content moderation. These recommendations are important, and companies should take steps to self-regulate. But our government must take an active role in setting guidelines for an industry with tremendous influence.

A regulatory agency specifically focusing on Big Tech could tackle these challenges by applying expertise in artificial intelligence, data science, and algorithmic ethics. Platforms should be subject to regular audits that ensure they are keeping user safety at the forefront of decision making, with specific support for industry whistleblowers. Just as healthcare companies impact our physical health, platforms impact the health of our children, communities, and democracy. They should be subject to the same level of scrutiny.

Oversight is an essential means of protecting and promoting user safety. The federal government must be equipped to regulate the highly dynamic field of Big Tech. By subjecting social media platforms and their parent companies to rigorous monitoring, our leaders can secure the accountability that Facebook and others have failed to provide on their own.



⁴¹ *Protecting Kids Online: Testimony from a Facebook Whistleblower*, 117th Cong. (2021) (statement of Frances Haugen), <https://www.commerce.senate.gov/services/files/FC8A558E-824E-4914-BEDB-3A7B1190BD49>.



Hate Online Threatens Our Communities and Our Democracy

Interfaith Alliance is committed to advancing an inclusive vision of religious freedom, protecting the right of all Americans to believe as we choose without fear of discrimination or harm. And as we increasingly find community online, the ability to explore our religious beliefs and practices through social media offers incredible opportunities for connection.

But with substantial progress in technology comes new sets of challenges. As these platforms facilitate understanding and innovation, they also provide bad actors with broader means to cause division and inspire fear. Real world violence, inspired by online hate and harassment, is growing. It's impossible to fulfill our inclusive vision of religious freedom without addressing the role of social media in disseminating hateful ideologies and the acts of violence they inspire.

Together, through education and action, we can make clear that hate has no home in our communities on and offline. Urgent action is needed around three key policy areas to protect our communities and our democracy: social media literacy, platform accountability, and government regulation of Big Tech. Cultivating social media literacy in young people gives them the tools to think critically about the misinformation and hate they will encounter online.

Platform accountability will correct the current imbalance between profit-driven business models and user safety while continuing to facilitate innovation. Regulating Big Tech provides essential checks on an industry that has disproportionate influence in our lives.

These solutions ensure promotion of the public good in an increasingly online world. Big Tech is only getting started - we must ensure that this industry's progress does not come at the cost of our most sacred freedoms.

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only national interfaith organization dedicated to protecting the integrity of both religion and democracy in the United States. With tens of thousands of members across the country, including more than 75 different faith traditions as well as those of no faith, Interfaith Alliance represents a diverse network of Americans united by our commitment to the Constitution's promise of religious freedom.

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