**HEARING BEFORE**
**THE UNITED STATES SENATE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE**
**SUBCOMMITTEE ON PRIVACY, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE LAW**

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## I. Introduction

Chairman Coons, Ranking Member Sasse, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Monika Bickert, and I am the Vice President of Content Policy at Facebook. Prior to assuming my current role, I served as lead security counsel for Facebook, working on issues ranging from children's safety to cybersecurity. And before that, I was a criminal prosecutor with the Department of Justice for eleven years in Chicago and Washington, DC, where I prosecuted federal crimes, including public corruption and gang violence.

Facebook is a community of more than two billion people, spanning countries, cultures, and languages across the globe. Every day, members of our community use Facebook to connect and share with the people they care about. These personal interactions are at the core of our mission to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together.

It is important to us that people find content that is meaningful to them on our platform, and our algorithms help them do just that. We also understand that people have questions about how these algorithmic systems work. I look forward to discussing today the ways in which Facebook is already working to provide greater transparency and the additional steps we are taking to put people even more firmly in charge of the content they see.

## II. Algorithmic Ranking on Facebook

Facebook uses algorithms for many of our product features, including to enable our search function and to help enforce our policies. But when people refer to Facebook's "algorithm," they are often talking about the content ranking algorithms that we use to order a person's News Feed.

The average person has thousands of posts in her News Feed each day. This includes the photos, videos, and articles shared by the friends and family she chooses to connect to on the platform, the Pages she chooses to follow, and the Groups she chooses to join. Most people don't have time to look at all of this content every day, so we use a process called ranking to sort this

content and put the things we think you will find most meaningful closest to the top of your News Feed. This ranking process is personalized and is driven by your choices and actions.

To make sure you don't miss meaningful content from your friends and family, our systems consider thousands of signals, including, for example, who posted the content; when it was posted; whether it's a photo, video, or link; and how popular it is on the platform. The algorithms use these signals to predict how likely content is to be relevant and meaningful to you: for example, how likely you might be to like it or find that viewing it was worth your time. The goal is to make sure you see what you find most meaningful—not to keep you on the service for a particular length of time.

Notably, in 2018, we changed the way we approached News Feed rankings to focus not only on serving people the most relevant content, but also on helping them have more meaningful social interactions—primarily by doing more to prioritize content from friends, family, and Groups they are part of. We recognized that this shift would lead to people spending less time on Facebook, because Pages—where media entities, sports teams, politicians, and celebrities, among others, tend to have a presence—generally post more engaging (though less personally meaningful) content than a user's personal friends or family. The prediction proved correct; the change led to a decrease of 50 million hours' worth of time spent on Facebook per day, and we saw a loss of billions of dollars in the company's market cap. But we view this change as a success because it improved the experience of our users, and we think building good experiences is good for the business in the long term.

## III. Increasing Transparency and Control

This sifting and ranking process results in a News Feed that is unique to each person. Naturally, users don't see the computer code that makes up the algorithm, but we do share information about how the ranking process works, including publishing blog posts that explain the ranking process and announce any significant changes.

Of course, not everyone is going to read our blogs about how the systems work, so we're also doing more to communicate directly to people in our products. For some time, people on Facebook have been able to click "Why Am I Seeing This?" on any ad they see to learn why that ad was placed in their News Feed, and they're also able to change their advertising preferences. This real-time transparency and control approach has helped improve the Facebook experience for many people. Starting in 2019, we launched a similar "Why Am I Seeing This?" tool to help people understand why a particular post showed up where it did in their News Feed. To access it, people simply needs to click on the post itself, then click on "Why am I seeing this post?," and they will see information about why that post appears where it does. This tool also provides easy access to their News Feed Preferences, so they can adjust the composition of their News Feed.

We have increased the control that people have over their News Feed so that they know they are firmly in charge of their experience. For instance, we recently launched a suite of product changes to help people more easily identify and engage with the friends and Pages they care most about. And we're placing a new emphasis not just on creating such tools, but on ensuring that they're easy to find and to use.

A new product called Favorites, which improves on our previous See First control, allows people to select manually the friends and Pages that are the most meaningful to them. Posts from people or Pages that the user selects will then be shown higher in that user's News Feed and marked with a star. A person can even choose to see a feed of only the content that comes from those Favorite sources in a new version of News Feed called the Favorites feed.

Facebook users can also choose to reject the personalized ranking algorithm altogether and instead view their News Feed chronologically, meaning that their News Feed simply shows them the most recent posts from their eligible sources of content in reverse chronological order.

So that people can seamlessly transition among standard News Feed, Favorites feed, and the chronological Most Recent feed, Facebook now provides a bar on the site where users can select which version of News Feed they want to see.

As we work to enhance transparency and control, we're also continuously improving the way our ranking systems work so that people see what's most meaningful to them. Just last week, we announced that we are expanding our work to survey people about what's most meaningful to them and worth their time. These efforts include new approaches to take into account whether people find a post inspirational, whether they are interested in seeing content on a particular topic, or whether certain content leaves people feeling negative. We are also making it easier to give feedback directly on an individual post. We believe that continuing to invest in new ways to learn more about what people want (and don't want) to see in News Feed will help improve the ranking process and the user experience. We'll continue to incorporate this feedback into our News Feed ranking process in the hopes that Facebook can leave people feeling more inspired, connected, and informed.

## IV. Working to Combat Harmful Content and Misinformation

Of course, News Feed ranking isn't the only factor that goes into what a person might see on Facebook. There are certain types of content we simply don't allow on our services. Our content policies, which we call our Community Standards, have been developed over many years with ongoing input from experts and researchers all over the world. We work hard to enforce those standards to help keep our community safe and secure, and we employ both technology and

human review teams to do so. We publish quarterly reports on our work, and we've made significant progress identifying and removing content that violates our standards.

We recognize that not everyone agrees with every line in our Community Standards. In fact, there is no perfect way to draw the lines on what is acceptable speech; people simply do not agree on what is appropriate for discourse. We also recognize that many people think private companies shouldn't be making so many big decisions about what content is acceptable. We agree that it would be better if these decisions were made according to frameworks agreed to by democratically accountable lawmakers. But in the absence of such laws, there are decisions that need to be made in real time.

Last year, Facebook established the Oversight Board to make an independent, final call on some of these difficult decisions. It is an external body of experts, and its decisions are binding—they can't be overruled by Mark Zuckerberg or anyone else at Facebook. Indeed, the Board has already overturned a number of Facebook's decisions, and we have adhered to the Board's determinations. The Board itself is made up of experts and civic leaders from around the world with a wide range of backgrounds and perspectives, and they began issuing decisions and recommendations earlier this year.

If content is removed for violating our Community Standards, it does not appear in News Feed at all. Separately, there are types of content that might not violate Facebook's Community Standards and are unlikely to contribute to a risk of actual harm but are still unwelcome to users, and so the ranking process reduces their distribution. For example, our algorithms actively reduce the distribution of things like clickbait (headlines that are misleading or exaggerated), highly sensational health claims (like those promoting "miracle cures"), and engagement bait (posts that explicitly seek to get users to engage with them). Facebook also reduces distribution for posts deemed false by one of the more than 80 independent fact-checking organizations that evaluate the accuracy of content on Facebook and Instagram. So overall, how likely a post is to be relevant and meaningful to you acts as a positive in the ranking process, and indicators that the post may be unwelcome (although non-violating) act as a negative. The posts with the highest scores after that are placed closest to the top of your Feed.

Facebook's approach goes beyond addressing sensational and misleading content post by post. When Pages and Groups repeatedly post misinformation, Facebook reduces their overall distribution. If Groups or Pages repeatedly violate our Community Standards, we restrict or remove them.

The reality is that it's not in Facebook's interest—financially or reputationally—to push users towards increasingly extreme content. The company's long-term growth will be best served if people continue to use and value its products for years to come. If we prioritized trying to keep a

person online for a few extra minutes, but in doing so made that person unhappy or angry and less likely to return in the future, it would be self-defeating. Furthermore, the vast majority of Facebook's revenue comes from advertising. Advertisers don't want their brands and products displayed next to extreme or hateful content—they've always been very clear about that. Even though troubling content is a very small proportion of the total content people see on our services (hate speech is viewed 7 or 8 times for every 10,000 views of content on Facebook), Facebook's long-term financial self-interest is to continue to reduce it so that advertisers and users have a good experience and continue to use our services.

## V. Conclusion

Facebook's algorithms are a key part of how we help people connect and share, and how we fight harmful content and misinformation on our platform. We will continue to do more to help people understand how our systems work and how they can control them. This is an area where we are investing heavily, and we are committed to continuing to improve.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.