United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Privacy, Technology, and the Law

Testimony of Lauren Culbertson
Head of U.S. Public Policy
Twitter, Inc.

April 27, 2021

Chairman Coons, Ranking Member Sasse, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to provide testimony on behalf of Twitter at today's hearing, "Algorithms and Amplification: How Social Media Platforms' Design Choices Shape Our Discourse and Our Minds."

Twitter's purpose is to serve the public conversation. While in 2006, this meant providing a platform for people to share 140-character status updates, our service has evolved to become the go-to place for people to see what's happening in the world, share opinions and observations, and engage in conversations on topics as diverse as sports, popular culture, and politics.

While technology has changed significantly since we were founded 15 years ago, our mission has not. We remain committed to giving people the power to create and share ideas and information instantly with the world.

Many of the questions we grapple with today are not new, but the rise and evolution of the online world have magnified the scale and scope of these challenges. As a global company that values free expression, we find ourselves navigating these issues amidst increasing threats to free speech from governments around the world. We strive to give people a voice while respecting applicable law and staying true to our core principles.

We use technology every day in our efforts to automatically improve outcomes and experiences for people on Twitter. We do that, in part, through algorithms. For example, our machine learning tools help identify potentially abusive or harmful content, including content that violates Twitter's Rules, to human moderators for review. In fact, we now take enforcement action on more than half of the abusive Tweets that violate our rules before they're even reported. We think this is critical, as we don't think the burden to identify and report such content should be on those who are the subject of abusive content.

As members of Congress and other policymakers debate the future of Internet regulation, they should closely consider the ways technology, algorithms, and machine learning make Twitter a safer place for the public conversation and enhance the global experience with the Internet at large.

We've invested significantly in our systems and have made strides to promote healthy conversations. However, we believe that as we look to the future, we need to ensure that all our efforts are centered on trust. Our content moderation efforts or the deployment of machine learning can be successful only if people trust us. That's why we think it is critical that we focus on being more open and decentralized. That means we must prioritize and build into our business increased transparency, consumer choice, and competition. In my testimony, I will highlight how we are innovating and experimenting in this area through (1) expanded algorithmic choice; (2) the Twitter Responsible Machine Learning initiative; (3) the Birdwatch initiative; and (4) the Bluesky project.

Expanded Algorithmic Choice

At Twitter, we want to provide a useful, relevant experience to all people using our service. With hundreds of millions of Tweets every day on the service, we have invested heavily in building systems that organize content to show individuals the most relevant information for that individual first. With over 192 million people using Twitter each day in dozens of languages and countless cultural contexts, we rely upon machine learning algorithms to help us organize content by relevance.

We believe that people should have meaningful control over key algorithms that affect their experience online. In 2018, we redesigned the home Timeline, the main feature of our service, to allow people to control whether they see a ranked timeline, or a reverse chronological order ranking of the Tweets from accounts or topics they follow. This "sparkle icon" improvement has allowed people using our service to directly experience how algorithms shape what they see and has allowed for greater transparency into the technology we use to rank Tweets. This is a good start. And, we believe this points to an exciting, market-driven approach that provides individuals greater control over the algorithms that affect their experience on our service.

Responsible Machine Learning Initiative

We are committed to gaining and sharing a deeper understanding of the practical implications of our algorithms. Earlier this month, we launched our "Responsible Machine Learning" initiative, a multi-pronged effort designed to research the impact of our machine learning decisions, promote equity, and address potential unintentional harms. Responsible use of technology includes studying the effects that the technology can have over time. Sometimes, a system designed to improve people's online experiences could begin to behave differently than was intended in the real world. We want to make sure we are studying such developments and using them to build better products.

This initiative is industry-leading and the very first step and investment into a journey of evaluating our algorithms and working through ways we can apply those findings to make Twitter and our entire industry better. We will apply what we learn to our work going forward, and we plan to share our findings and solicit feedback from the public. While we are hopeful about the ways this may improve our service, our overarching goal is increasing transparency and contributing positively to the field of technology ethics at large.

Birdwatch

We're exploring the power of decentralization to combat misinformation across the board through Birdwatch — a pilot program that allows people who use our service to apply crowdsourced annotations to Tweets that are possibly false or misleading. We know that when it comes to adding context, not everyone trusts tech companies — or any singular institution — to determine what context to add and when. Our hope is that Birdwatch will expand the range of voices involved in tackling misinformation as well as streamline the real-time feedback people already add to Tweets. We are working to ensure that a broad range of voices participate in the Birdwatch pilot so we can build a better product that meets the needs of diverse communities. We hope that engaging the broader community through initiatives like Birdwatch will help mitigate current deficits in trust.

We are committed to making the Birdwatch site as transparent as possible. All data contributed to Birdwatch will be publicly available and downloadable. As we develop algorithms that power Birdwatch — such as reputation and consensus systems — we intend to publish that code publicly in the Birdwatch Guide.

Bluesky

Twitter is funding Bluesky, an independent team of open source architects, engineers, and designers, to develop open and decentralized standards for social media. It is our hope that Bluesky will eventually allow Twitter and other companies to contribute to and access open recommendation algorithms that promote healthy conversation and ultimately provide individuals greater choice. These standards could support innovation, making it easier for startups to address issues like abuse and hate speech at a lower cost. We recognize that this effort is complex, unprecedented, and will take time but we currently plan to provide the necessary exploratory resources to push this project forward.

Conclusion

We appreciate the enormous privilege to host some of the most important conversations happening at any given time — from real-time updates on Supreme Court rulings to information-sharing about COVID-19 vaccine clinical trials. We are proud of the open service we have built and the steps we take each day to ensure a safe venue for diverse voices and vibrant debate. Moving forward, we believe that more open and decentralized systems will increase transparency, provide more consumer control and choice, and increase competition across our industry. Our hope is that such a system will lead to the necessary innovation to meet today's needs and solve tomorrow's challenges. Most importantly, it will build trust.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share Twitter's perspective with the Subcommittee and the public.