

August 7, 2020

Senator Elizabeth Warren  
309 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Sheldon Whitehouse  
530 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Brian Schatz  
722 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Thomas Carper  
513 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators,

Thank you for your letter of July 15 inquiring about Facebook's policies around fact-checking and climate change.

Facebook's mission is to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together. We recognize the urgency of climate change and are committed to help tackle this global challenge. We are taking action by minimizing our emissions, using renewable energy and reducing our energy and water usage, protecting workers and the environment in our supply chain, and partnering with others around us to develop and share solutions for a more sustainable world.

We are doing our part to fulfill the spirit of the Paris Agreement through our support of We Are Still In coalition and ramping up our own efforts. We have set an ambitious goal to reduce our operational greenhouse gas emissions by 75 percent by the end of 2020 compared to 2017 levels. In 2019, we reduced our greenhouse gas emissions 59 percent compared to our base year of 2017— equivalent to 364,000 metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub>e or nearly 79,000 passenger cars taken off the road for one year. You can read more in our 2019 sustainability report.<sup>1</sup>

We understand that climate change is an issue that affects us all, not just those who utilize our platform and services. We believe that fighting climate change is something we can only do together as a global community, and that it's a problem that demands immediate action. Facebook takes its role and responsibility seriously as a platform to connect people to information and as a company that feels passionately about climate action.

Our independent third-party fact-checking partners **do** review and rate climate misinformation. There has **never** been a prohibition against them doing so. In fact, we have a fact-checking partner specifically dedicated to reviewing science content, and many of the other partners in our network of over 70 global fact-checking partner organizations rate this content as well. As with all claims debunked by our partners, we

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<sup>1</sup> <https://sustainability.fb.com/reports/sustainability-report-2019/>

reduce the distribution of posts rated “false” or “partly false” in News Feed and apply a warning label on top of them on Facebook and Instagram so people understand that the content has been rated and what the ratings mean.

With this context in mind, please find answers to your questions below.

1. **A press report from June 2020 indicated that Facebook’s fact-checking process allowed climate denial to be categorized as “opinion,” creating a loophole in its fact-checking process.**
  - a. **Is this report correct?**
  - b. **If so, how was the decision made to categorize false information about climate change as “opinion,” and who was involved in this decision?**
    - i. **Please provide a list of each issue that has been categorized as “opinion.” For each such issue, please indicate the process by which the categorization was made, including the name and affiliation of any entity requesting that such a categorization be made and the manner in which Facebook evaluated the request.**
  - c. **Do you believe that allowing false information on the climate crisis to spread unchallenged on your platform provides weight to efforts to deny climate science?**
  - d. **What other scientific issues are treated in this fashion by Facebook?**

As background, all of our third-party fact-checking partners are certified through a non-partisan International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) and follow IFCN’s Code of Principles. The IFCN’s Code of Principles includes a series of commitments that organizations must adhere to in order to promote excellence in fact-checking: nonpartisanship and fairness; transparency of sources; transparency of funding and organization; transparency of methodology; open and honest corrections policy. We rely on the International Fact-Checking Network to set guidelines for these high standards.

It has long been our guidance to independent fact-checkers that clear opinion content is not subject to fact-checking on Facebook. However, when someone presents content based on underlying false information as opinion – even in the form of an op-ed or editorial – it is still eligible for fact-checking. If a publisher wishes to dispute a fact-check rating, they can do so directly with the fact-checker. We provide this guidance to fact-checkers in our public Help Center, which we recently updated to help fact-checkers better exercise their judgment as to whether content presented as opinion is actually based on underlying false information. We do not consider climate change content, or content relating to any other topic, to always constitute opinion. Fact-checkers evaluate content on a case-by-case basis.

As noted above, our independent third-party fact-checking partners do review and rate climate misinformation, and there has never been a prohibition against them doing so. This year, our partners have fact-checked and rated “false” many claims in the U.S. and around the world, including a claim that human activities

have not increased atmospheric CO2 levels--causing imbalances in the global carbon cycle<sup>2</sup>; a meme with a doctored Time magazine cover intending to cast doubt on climate change<sup>3</sup>; a viral image claiming that there hasn't been a rise in sea level in Sydney Harbour in 140 years<sup>4</sup>; and a claim that climate conditions were improving as a direct result of reduced economic activity brought on by COVID-19.<sup>5</sup> As with all claims our partners debunk, we greatly reduced the distribution of these posts in News Feed and applied a warning label on top of them on Facebook and Instagram so people understand that the content has been rated and what the ratings mean.

2. **In April 2017, Facebook stated: “False news is harmful to our community, it makes the world less informed, and it erodes trust. It's not a new phenomenon, and all of us — tech companies, media companies, newsrooms, teachers — have a responsibility to do our part in addressing it.”**
  - a. **Is the spread of false information on the climate crisis included in Facebook’s understanding of false news?**

Yes. Please see response to question (1), above, for examples of climate-related content that has been subjected to fact-checking by our third-party fact-checking program and under our false news policy.

3. **In March 2019, Facebook announced steps to “tackle vaccine misinformation on Facebook by reducing its distribution and providing people with authoritative information on the topic.” In Facebook’s announcement, the company stated: “We will reduce the ranking of groups and Pages that spread misinformation about vaccinations in News Feed and Search.” It also stated that “[w]hen we find ads that include misinformation about vaccinations, we will reject them;” and “[w]e are exploring ways to share educational information about vaccines when people come across misinformation on this topic,” among other measures.**
  - a. **Please provide information on how Facebook reached its decision to tackle vaccine disinformation on its social media platforms.**
    - i. **Please explain how disinformation on vaccination differs from the disinformation on the climate crisis, which Facebook has permitted by designating false information as “opinion.”**
  - b. **Has Facebook considered taking similar measures to prevent the spread of climate disinformation on its social media platforms? If so, please provide additional information.**

<sup>2</sup> <https://climatefeedback.org/claimreview/human-activities-have-dramatically-increased-atmospheric-co2-levels-causing-imbalances-in-the-global-carbon-cycle/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://factcheck.afp.com/misleading-meme-includes-doctored-time-magazine-cover?fbclid=IwAR0R8Wl2L7ZRpRZjbpgbEzrD04nFJ0fn67ZxSdKGkRiUyk\\_I51QOS5LGAEQ](https://factcheck.afp.com/misleading-meme-includes-doctored-time-magazine-cover?fbclid=IwAR0R8Wl2L7ZRpRZjbpgbEzrD04nFJ0fn67ZxSdKGkRiUyk_I51QOS5LGAEQ)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.aap.com.au/fort-denison-pics-no-indicator-of-sea-level-rise/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://factual.afp.com/segun-expertos-el-confinamiento-no-provoco-ni-provocara-una-reduccion-del-agujero-de-ozono-de-la>

Last year, as you know, we commenced an effort to supplement the work of our third-party fact-checkers for misinformation about vaccines. Specifically, we rely on the publicly available work of leading health organizations on the issue of vaccines, such as the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization, to identify verifiable hoaxes on the topic. An example of a claim that has been widely disproven by these organizations is the assertion that vaccines cause autism. As your question notes, we take a number of different steps to substantially reduce the distribution of such publicly identified hoaxes across our platform and provide users with additional context on the topic. For example, we have launched educational modules that pop up for U.S.-based users when they engage with content (including misinformation) about vaccines. The educational modules appear on Instagram as well as in Facebook Search, invitations to join Groups, and on Pages. They provide U.S. users with authoritative context and other resources from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

This supplemental approach to our robust fact-checking program is still relatively new. The decision to use this approach to address misinformation about vaccinations was made in early 2019 and was based on a wide range of inputs, including the availability of public information from expert groups that could be used to debunk claims and the value of having supplemental sources over and above the work of third-party fact checkers. In March of this year, we expanded our use of this supplemental approach and applied it to certain types of misinformation about COVID-19, relying on guidance from the World Health Organization and other health authorities.<sup>6</sup>

4. **In June 2020, in reference to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Facebook announced measures to support “the global public health community’s work to keep people safe and informed during the coronavirus public health crisis.” The company’s announcement stated that it would better connect “people to credible information,” combat “COVID-19 misinformation across our apps,” and prohibit “exploitative tactics in ads,” among other actions.**
  - a. **Please provide information on how Facebook reached its decision to tackle COVID-19 disinformation on its social media platforms.**
    - i. **Please explain how disinformation on COVID-19 differs from the disinformation on the climate crisis, which Facebook has permitted by designating false information as “opinion.”**
  - b. **Has Facebook considered taking similar measures to prevent the spread of climate disinformation on its social media platforms? If so, please provide additional information.**

Since January when COVID-19 was declared a public health emergency, we’ve taken aggressive steps to limit the spread of misinformation about the virus and connect people with reliable information. As part of a previously-existing policy to remove misinformation that could lead to imminent physical harm, we remove

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<sup>6</sup> See <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/03/combating-covid-19-misinformation/>

COVID-19-related misinformation such as claims like drinking silver or bleach can cure the virus, or that wearing masks or physical distancing are ineffective in preventing the virus from spreading. In developing the standard for imminent physical harm as relates to COVID-19, we consulted the WHO, the CDC and other governmental health experts to assess whether a false claim, if believed by an individual, would increase the likelihood that the individual would contract or spread the virus. We regularly update the claims that we remove based on guidance from the WHO and other health authorities. For other false claims that don't meet our threshold for imminent danger, such as conspiracy theories about the origins of the virus, we leverage our third-party fact-checking program to reduce the distribution of false and misleading content. Another key piece to this work is the effort we're making to connect people with authoritative sources of information through our COVID-19 Information Center, including pop-ups on Facebook and Instagram that have led to over 600 million people clicking through to learn more.

We will continue to evaluate our policies, enforcement, and products with respect to climate information. Currently, our independent third-party fact-checking partners do review and rate climate misinformation, and there has never been a prohibition against them doing so.

5. **As announced in October 2019, Facebook has included the far-right website Breitbart, "a far-right website known for misinformation," alongside news outlets in its news section.**
  - a. **Please explain why this website was included, particularly given its long history of climate denial and spread of disinformation on the climate crisis.**

Facebook News was built to bring people closer to the stories that affect their lives--prioritizing content that informs readers with original reporting, diverse perspectives, and stories that are relevant to their communities. To be eligible for inclusion in Facebook News, news publishers must satisfy certain criteria, including admission onto Facebook's News Page Index ("NPI"), serving a sufficiently large audience, and a satisfying a set of integrity policies over and above those governing admission onto the NPI, including assessing repeated and recent violations of our Community Standards and misinformation policies. Publishers who meet the eligibility requirements for content that they post on our platform are included in Facebook News. Should any publisher fail to meet any of these criteria at any time, they are removed.

- b. **Please provide a list of news outlets and other organizations included in Facebook's news section.**

We strive to have a diverse, personalized experience for users of Facebook News. We also offer a robust array of user controls to allow users to opt in or out of including specific articles, sections or publishers from their Facebook News experience. We do not share the list of news publishers in Facebook News because it changes frequently - publishers are added and removed based on whether they meet our criteria, including integrity criteria, at any given time.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to answer your questions. We look forward to working with your offices going forward.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kevin J. Martin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Kevin Martin  
Vice President, U.S. Public Policy