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David L. Sifry, Vice President of ADL's Center on Technology & Society Testimony to California's Senate Judiciary Committee

November 9, 2021

Mr. Chairman, Vice Chair Borgeas, Members of the Committee, good morning. My name is David Sifry and I serve as Vice President of ADL's Center for Technology and Society. It is my pleasure to speak to the committee today about the urgent need to address extremism and radicalization that occurs on social media platforms.

For more than a century, ADL's mission has been to 'stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment to all.' We are a leading voice in fighting hate in all forms. My team at ADL works to protect victims and targets of online hate and to hold social media platforms accountable for their actions - and deliberate inaction - **in fostering hate and fomenting extremism and violence.** We publish data-driven applied research, build technical tools that measure and analyze identity-based online hate, and provide recommendations to policymakers for creating a safer and more equitable internet.

Before joining ADL in 2019, I spent my career as an entrepreneur and executive in the tech sector. A trained computer scientist, I founded six technology companies and served as an executive at Lyft and Reddit. **I have been on the inside.** And I know firsthand how tech companies work and how business incentives drive product, policy, and strategy.

It is no secret that big social media companies struggle to moderate content on their platforms— and that users are harmed as a result. According to our 2021 nationally representative survey of adult internet users in the US, 41 percent of respondents have experienced some sort of online harassment and 27 percent reported experiencing severe online harassment, including sexual harassment, stalking, physical threats. That's more than **one in four** of your friends and coworkers. And only 14 percent of those who experienced a physical threat said the platform deleted the threatening content.

The business models of social media companies are built in a way that amplifies hate.

These platforms maximize profits by providing hyper-targeted advertisements to an audience – us – that spend large parts of our lives online. Core product mechanics—like virality and recommendations—are built around keeping you, your friends, and your family engaged to gather even more data and sell even more advertisements. The problem is that misinformation, and hate-filled and polarizing content is highly engaging, so algorithms promote that content. As ADL's own research has long suggested, and Facebook leaks confirm, these platforms exploit people's proclivity to interact more with incendiary content and tech companies do so with full knowledge of the harms that result.

Ultimately, these companies neglect our safety and security because it is good for their bottom line. They may tell you that it's too difficult to fix and outside of your legal jurisdiction. Nonsense! With no accountability, no regulation, and no incentives beyond growth and increasing ad revenue, they are creating a haven for extremists to reach, recruit, and radicalize. Platform algorithms take advantage of these behaviors, especially our attraction to controversial and extremist narratives. As a result, some users get trapped in a rabbit hole of toxic content, pushing them towards extremism.

This cycle puts social media companies in a position where they play an unprecedented role hosting and promoting hate, racism, disinformation, and extremism. The research bears it out: according to a 2018 study from MIT, false news stories on Twitter were 70 percent more likely to be shared than true ones.

Once fringe ideologies that existed within a minority are now being amplified—normalizing racist, hateful, and extremist content, as it shows up right next to posts from friends and family. Mainstream platforms serve as a gateway for extremists to recruit curious and disaffected individuals with great impact.

With billions of users worldwide, the influence cannot be understated. **The existence and viral amplification of hate content and disinformation is a feature, not a bug, of social media platforms.**

Here are just a few examples of the harms that have resulted from allowing social media to go unchecked.

Just last month, whistleblower Frances Haugen made it clear that Facebook was aware of both the role its platform played in the January 6th insurrection and the broader role the platform plays in the spread of disinformation, extremism, and hate. Facebook documents stated that the company had evidence that hate speech, divisive political speech, and misinformation on Facebook and its other products were fracturing societies around the world. This is not a surprise. Civil Society groups have been reporting for years on the irresponsible choices that these platforms are taking with our safety.

Let me be clear: antisemitic, racist and hateful images reverberating on big social media platforms result in offline hate and violence directed at marginalized communities. In the United States, calls to violence in the name of white supremacy and 'The Great Replacement' inspired fatal shootings like those in Poway, El Paso, and Pittsburgh, and led to injuries and death at the white supremacist attack in Charlottesville in 2017.

We have seen how Facebook's amplification and recommendations of extremist groups like Boogaloo has led directly to offline violence—including right here in California. In May 2020, Dave Patrick Underwood, a Federal Protective Services Officer from Oakland, was killed in a drive-by shooting allegedly carried out by two Boogaloo adherents who were connected through Facebook and discussed the idea to commit the crime in a Facebook group. These were not long lost friends or students from the same high school that Facebook helped reunite the way many of



us have reignited old connections. These alleged assailants had never met prior to being connected online. Facebook brought them together because of their shared attraction to extremist content.

Finally, when marginalized communities in particular are targeted online, we consistently see offline implications. Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are still being blamed for creating and spreading the coronavirus, resulting in an uptick of both online harassment and physical assaults. ADL's Online Hate and Harassment Survey found that Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders experienced the largest single rise in severe online harassment year-over-year in comparison to other groups. Similarly, according to Stop AAPI Hate, there have been over 1200 physical assaults against AAPI individuals nationwide since March 2020. **Online harm and offline violence are undeniably intertwined - especially for our underserved communities.**

Senators, self-regulation is clearly not working.

These billion-and trillion-dollar social media companies have the resources to improve systems, hire additional staff, and provide real transparency. Yet they claim it is too burdensome. Without a clear understanding of what is really going on inside of these companies, we cannot begin to address the real danger posed to the public. Without changes to their incentive systems, they will continue to focus on generating record profits at the expense of our safety and the security of our republic.

So ADL advocates strongly for transparency, and a whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach including established initiatives like Stop Hate for Profit, Backspace Hate, and the REPAIR plan so that we can all live safely in online and offline spaces. Transparency will serve at least two important purposes: First, it acts as a deterrent, ensuring that these platforms don't create hidden systems, policies, and procedures and then hide them from the public. And second, it allows policy makers and the public deeper insight into what's really going on, so we can make better informed policy.

I came to ADL from the tech industry because I became increasingly concerned about the normalization of extremist and bigoted narratives happening in our society and being amplified by social media algorithms. Keeping us engaged—clicking, sharing, and commenting in our newsfeeds, is at the heart of most of these platforms' business models. And since misinformation and incendiary content gets that engagement, we see the amplification of fringe ideologies alongside pictures of our kids—on mainstream social media platforms.

I am the son of a holocaust survivor. My family knows firsthand how hate, bigotry, and conspiracy theories have horrific consequences. We know that genocides don't come out of nowhere. As it has famously been said, 'History doesn't repeats itself, but sure does rhyme.' While the platforms' stated intention may be different, the impact is real and measurable, and the stakes couldn't be higher. We cannot make the same mistake again. We need transparency from these platforms on their policies, enforcement, and activities to bring an end to the cycle of extremism, and we need your help to do this. Thank you for your leadership in working on a solution to this important issue."