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## United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE,  
AND TRANSPORTATION

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6125

WEBSITE: <http://commerce.senate.gov>

NICK ROSSI, STAFF DIRECTOR  
KIM LIPSKY, DEMOCRATIC STAFF DIRECTOR

May 10, 2016

Mark Zuckerberg  
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer  
Facebook, Inc.  
1 Hacker Way  
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg:

This week, the press is reporting claims by former Facebook staffers that employees of Facebook routinely suppressed conservative political viewpoints on the social network.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, according to media reports, “news curators” responsible for managing Facebook’s “Trending Topics” section frequently targeted news stories on conservative political topics for exclusion.<sup>2</sup> Launched in January 2014, this product purports to list the top news stories Facebook users are currently sharing.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the reported exclusion of conservative viewpoints, news curators also allegedly “injected” stories into the section that were not actually trending in order to raise awareness of issues the curators believed were deserving.<sup>4</sup> If true, these allegations compromise Facebook’s “open culture” and mission “to make the world more open and connected.”<sup>5</sup>

Social networks such as Facebook are an increasingly important source of news for many Americans and people around the world. The ability to connect with others to discuss and debate the issues of the day that such services offer has created a powerful platform for civic engagement. Indeed, with over a billion daily active users on average, Facebook has enormous influence on users’ perceptions of current events, including political perspectives. If Facebook

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Nunez, *Former Facebook Workers: We Routinely Suppressed Conservative News*, GIZMODO, May 9, 2016, available at <http://gizmodo.com/former-facebook-workers-we-routinely-suppressed-conser-1775461006?rev=1462799465508>; see also, Philip Bump, *Did Facebook bury conservative news? Ex-staffers say yes*, WASH. POST, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/05/09/former-facebook-staff-say-conservative-news-was-buried-raising-questions-about-its-political-influence/>.

<sup>2</sup> Facebook, Help Center: How does Facebook determine what topics are trending?, <https://www.facebook.com/help/737806312958641> (last visited May 10, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Chris Struhar, Engineering Manager, Finding Popular Conversations on Facebook, <http://newsroom.fb.com/news/2014/01/finding-popular-conversations-on-facebook/> (Jan. 16, 2014) (“Today we’re announcing Trending, a new product that’s designed to surface interesting and relevant conversations in order to help you discover the best content from all across Facebook.”).

<sup>4</sup> Nunez, *supra* note 1.

<sup>5</sup> Facebook, Our Mission, <http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/> (last visited May 10, 2016).

presents its Trending Topics section as the result of a neutral, objective algorithm, but it is in fact subjective and filtered to support or suppress particular political viewpoints, Facebook's assertion that it maintains a "platform for people and perspectives from across the political spectrum" misleads the public.<sup>6</sup>

Pursuant to the Committee's oversight authority, please provide responses to the following:

- 1) Please describe Facebook's organizational structure for the Trending Topics feature, and the steps for determining included topics. Who is ultimately responsible for approving its content?
- 2) Have Facebook news curators in fact manipulated the content of the Trending Topics section, either by targeting news stories related to conservative views for exclusion or by injecting non-trending content?
- 3) What steps is Facebook taking to investigate claims of politically motivated manipulation of news stories in the Trending Topics section? If such claims are substantiated, what steps will Facebook take to hold the responsible individuals accountable?
- 4) In a statement responding to the allegations, Facebook has claimed to have "rigorous guidelines in place for the review team" to prevent "the suppression of political perspectives" or the "prioritization of one viewpoint over another or one news outlet over another."<sup>7</sup>
  - a. When did Facebook first introduce these guidelines?
  - b. Please provide a copy of these guidelines, as well as any changes or amendments since January 2014.
  - c. Does Facebook provide training for its employees related to these guidelines? If so, describe what the training consists of, as well as its frequency.
  - d. How does Facebook determine compliance with these guidelines? Does it conduct audits? If so, how often? What steps are taken when a violation occurs?
- 5) Does Facebook maintain a record of curators' decisions to inject a story into the Trending Topics section or target a story for removal? If such a record is not maintained, can such decisions be reconstructed or determined based on an analysis of the Trending Topics product?

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<sup>6</sup> Josh Constine & Sarah Buhr, *Facebook responds to claims of biased Trends, says it has neutrality guidelines*, TECHCRUNCH, May 9, 2016, <http://techcrunch.com/2016/05/09/facebook-workers/>.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

Mr. Mark Zuckerberg

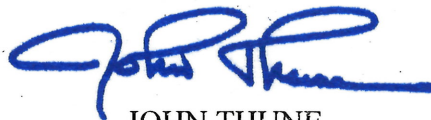
May 10, 2016

Page 3

- a. If so, how many stories have curators excluded that represented conservative viewpoints or topics of interest to conservatives? How many stories did curators inject that were not, in fact, trending?
- b. Please provide a list of all news stories removed from or injected into the Trending Topics section since January 2014.

Please provide the requested information as soon as possible, but by no later than May 24, 2016. In addition, please arrange for your staff, including employees responsible for Trending Topics, to brief Committee staff on this issue. If you have any questions, please have your staff contact Ashok Pinto or David Quinalty of the Commerce Committee's Majority staff at (202) 224-1251. Thank you in advance for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



JOHN THUNE  
Chairman

cc: The Honorable Bill Nelson, Ranking Member