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Re: Social media platforms must act against election-related violence, disinfo, hate

As we approach the midterm elections, it remains painfully clear that social media companies are still failing to protect candidates, voters, and elected officials from disinformation, misogyny, racism, transphobia, and violence.

After the 2020 presidential election, Trump backers and MAGA Republicans attacked the United States Capitol in the hopes of undermining the democratic process and stopping electoral vote certification. Before the violent attack on the U.S. Capitol, social media platforms like Twitter and Meta knew that white supremacist misogynists were using their platforms to organize violent actions, spread false information claiming Trump had won, and threaten election workers, mostly Black women in places like Georgia. Yet social media companies did little to protect us.

In fact, according to *The New York Times*, the phrase "Storm the Capitol" was used 100,000 times on social media platforms in the month preceding the attack.¹ Facebook groups had 650,000 posts questioning the validity of the election between Election Day and the January 6 insurrection, including many posts that called for executions and other violence.² Most of this violence, both online and at the Capitol, was driven by racist, misogynistic men, and many of them had records of domestic violence or sexual harassment and assault. Similarly, insurrectionists made numerous threats on social media against women leaders in Congress, including threatening to kill Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.³ These threats were in addition to the regular threats and harassment endured by women of color congressional leaders: A study by ISD Global of 2020 candidates found that women of color candidates receive more abusive messages on social media, with Reps. Ilhan Omar and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez getting the most.⁴

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/09/us/capitol-rioters.html>

²

<https://www.propublica.org/article/facebook-hosted-surge-of-misinformation-and-insurrection-threats-in-months-leading-up-to-jan-6-attack-records-show>

³

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2021/01/23/fbi-charges-capitol-rioter-threat-kill-alexandria-ocasio-cortez/6687691002/>

⁴ <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/public-figures-public-rage-candidate-abuse-on-social-media/>

Despite making promises to address electoral disinformation, dangerous conspiracy theories, and violence--and having two years to act on those promises--little has changed. Claims of election fraud are already spreading ahead of the 2022 midterms, and again, social media companies are failing to address them. Instead, social media platforms are undermining our freedoms by allowing the spread of extremism, racism, misogyny, transphobia, lies, and violence--and making a huge profit from it.

In the time remaining before the midterm elections on November 8, Meta, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube must take seriously these threats to our freedoms and our lives and immediately take action to stop the spread of disinformation, violence, and hate by:

- Removing false information and violence, including racist and sexist hate speech, threats against candidates and election workers, and hateful or violent political advertisements--even when that hateful content is posted by a public figure or celebrity.
- Addressing widespread false medical information on abortion since it is a hot-button election issue.
- Removing and deplatforming users, including candidates and celebrities, who spread anti-LGBTQ+ lies and hate speech regarding "grooming."
- Depolarizing social media by encouraging users to engage more frequently with legitimate, well-researched news and peer-reviewed articles--not disinformation, conspiracies, opinion posts, or claims that are not backed by science.
- Increasing transparency around moderation decisions, staffing, and use of user data.

The New York Times recently reported that the three biggest themes of election disinformation on social media are claims about election fraud, anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech,⁵ and threats against election officials--more than 80% of whom are women.⁶

A recent report by the Stern Center for Business and Human Rights at New York University found that social media companies amplify "election denialism" and bear responsibility for false beliefs that the 2020 election was a fraud. The report also found that the promises social media companies made regarding the 2022 election have been inadequately enforced, ineffective, or too limited. Facebook reported that its "approach this year will be 'largely consistent with the policies and safeguards' from 2020." Those alleged safeguards failed miserably and violently in 2020--false election information not only thrived in 2020 but has continued to spread. Facebook also said that it would ban ads that claim the upcoming election will be fraudulent, but it exempted politicians from this ban. Candidates and other influential leaders are free to undermine confidence in the election by posting patently false information.

A separate study from the NYU Center for Social Media and Politics found that YouTube kept recommending videos promoting election denialism to people susceptible to this false

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/23/technology/midterm-elections-misinformation.html>

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/23/technology/midterm-elections-misinformation.html>

conspiracy theory, thereby, furthering their exposure to conspiracy theories and false information.⁷

A whistleblower at Twitter revealed that the platform has only two experts on false information, a woefully inadequate staffing level considering that “stolen election” was mentioned 325,589 times on Twitter in a month-long period this summer and has held fairly steady throughout the year. This volume is up nearly 900 percent from the same period in 2020⁸-- **indicating that social media platforms aren't simply failing to address the problem, but are in fact adding fuel to the fire.**

The exception that fails to hold political figures to the same rules the rest of us must follow has also enabled hate and violence against the LGBTQ+ community to spread and become a heated and violent issue ahead of the midterms.

A [study](#) by the Human Rights Campaign and the Center for Countering Digital Hate found that 10 far-right leaders were largely responsible for spreading lies claiming that LGBTQ+ people and allies are pedophiles--a claim that is not only false but is clearly hate speech that violates policies of all the major social platforms. For example, tweets on “grooming” from Reps. Lauren Boebert of Colorado and Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia were viewed an estimated 48 million times. In May, one of Boebert's tweets alleging “grooming” was shared nearly 2,000 times and liked nearly 10,000 times. Twitter failed to remove this hateful and violence-inducing content, instead allowing it to spread. At the same time, Meta's platforms, Facebook and Instagram, accepted up to \$24,987 for the ads promoting the claims of “grooming. which were shown to users over 2.1 million times. Media Matters recently found 134 ads on Meta's platforms that used “groomer” rhetoric. Meta removed only 40 of those ads for violating policies, and since then, Meta has allowed at least 19 new ads using “groomer” rhetoric to run.⁹

This online hate doesn't simply disappear after Election Day. It continues to affect the real lives and safety of LGBTQ+ people, as well as doctors and other medical staff and patients.

Online hate and threats of violence can and do easily manifest into offline threats. This past summer, the Boston Children's Hospital received bomb threats and death with extensive protests because the hospital provides gender-affirming care for transgender children. No child, parent, or doctor should have to worry that they will face violence while seeking or providing care of any kind at a hospital.

Social media content is also responsible for threats against election workers, the majority of whom are women, all over the country. In 2020, an election worker in Georgia, a Black woman, had to go into hiding for her safety after a video spread on social media with false claims that she was throwing away ballots.

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<https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2022/september/youtube-more-likely-to-direct-election-fraud-videos-to-users-alr.html>

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/23/technology/midterm-elections-misinformation.html>

⁹

<https://www.mediamatters.org/facebook/meta-profiting-ads-baselessly-slandering-lgbtq-people-groomers-despite-companys-ban-slur>

The FBI recently warned of increased threats against election workers ahead of the midterms and revealed that a Nebraska man was sentenced for posting threats on Instagram against an election official.^{10,11} In August, the entire elections office of Gillespie County, Texas, resigned, citing threats and dangerous misinformation. In fact, one-third of Texas election administrators have left their jobs in the past two years.

It's critical that Meta, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube take immediate action to:

- Remove false information and threats.
- Address widespread disinformation about LGBTQ+ people and abortion.
- Eliminate exceptions that exempt candidates and celebrities from following rules that apply to everyone else.
- Prioritize sharing of fact-based content.

If social media platforms fail to take additional steps to protect election workers, volunteers, voters, marginalized communities, and our democracy in the next few weeks, they will be responsible for any resulting violence or threats.

Signed,

UltraViolet
#ShePersisted
#VOTEPROCHOICE
2+ Abortions Worldwide
Abortion Access Front
Abortion On Our Own Terms
ACCESS Reproductive Justice
Accountable Tech
All-Options
Austin Womens Health Center
Blue Mountain Clinic
Catalist
Center for Countering Digital Hate
Center for Disability Rights
Center for LGBTQ Economic Advancement & Research
Cobalt
DemCast USA
Dr. Elise Berlan, Physician
Dr. Nika Vizcarra, Physician
Dr. Pratima Gupta, Physician
Dr. Stacy De-Lin, MD, Physician

¹⁰ <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/man-sentenced-prison-threatening-election-official>

¹¹

<https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/infrastructure-security/fbi-cautions-about-threats-to-election-workers-ahead-of-the-november-2022-midterm-elections/>

FL National Organization for Women
Florida Rising
Forward Midwifery
Free Speech For People
Friends of the Earth
Fund Texas Choice
GLAAD
Global Justice Center
Global Project Against Hate and Extremism
Grandmothers for Reproductive Rights (GRR!)
Greater Orlando National Organization for Women
GreenLatinos
Healthy and Free Tennessee
Ibis Reproductive Health
Indivisible Miami
Jane Rioseco Consulting
Kairos
LB/OC Women Rising
Liberate Abortion
Los Angeles LGBT Center
Miami Coalition to Advance Racial Equity
Muslim Advocates
National Hispanic Media Coalition
National Organization for Women
National Women's Political Caucus
Nebraska Abortion Resources
Plan C
Pro-Choice North Carolina
Pro-Choice Washington
Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice
REPRO Rising Virginia
Reproaction
Reproductive Health Access Project
South Texans for Reproductive Justice
SumOfUs
Supermajority
The Sparrow Project
The Tech Oversight Project
Unitarian Universalist Association
Virginia National Organization for Women
We Testify