

December 21, 2021

Mark Zuckerberg  
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer  
Facebook, Inc.  
1601 Willow Road  
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Sundar Pichai  
Chief Executive Officer  
Google, LLC  
1600 Amphitheater Way  
Mountain View, CA 94043

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg and Mr. Pichai:

We write to express our ongoing concern that your companies are facilitating the spread of climate disinformation on your social media platforms. In July 2020, we called on Mr. Zuckerberg to “take immediate steps to combat the spread of climate disinformation on its social media platforms.” Despite your public commitments to do so, a November 2021 report entitled by the Center for Countering Digital Hate (“the Center”) shows Facebook and Google still fail to counter climate misinformation and profit from its spread.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the Center finds that ten fringe sites fuel a staggering 69 percent of climate disinformation on Facebook.<sup>2</sup> We ask that Google remove these sites from its AdSense platform; that Facebook comprehensively label climate disinformation or deplatform it; and that both companies cease profiting from ads run against content by sites that deny climate change.

The climate crisis poses an existential threat. The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warns that some effects of global temperature increases are already irreversible for centuries or millennia. As the UN found, we are in a “code red” for humanity.<sup>3</sup> We need drastic action to prevent the most catastrophic effects of the climate crisis, including significant changes to global food, energy, and water infrastructure. Disinformation that downplays the crisis or rejects climate change threatens the potential for humankind to act collectively to pull itself back from the brink. Your content moderation decisions can either galvanize an effort to save our planet or quash it.

Research indicates that climate deniers “have been remarkably successful in confusing public opinion and delaying decisive action” and that they “receive considerable media attention and enjoy access to key Washington power brokers.”<sup>4</sup> Special interests spend millions of dollars to lobby against climate action. Social media facilitates the spread of this disinformation. Groups like the Union of Concerned Scientists and the Environmental Defense Fund have documented the unique nature of climate disinformation relative to other content, because –

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<sup>1</sup> “The Toxic Ten,” *Center for Countering Digital Hate*. November 2, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> “IPCC report: ‘Code red’ for human driven global heating, warns UN chief,” *UN News*. August 9, 2021. Accessed: November 1, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> *European Journal of American Studies*, “The Ideology of Climate Change Denial in the United States,” Jean-Daniel Collomb, January 2014, <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10305>.

unlike an election with a short timeline and definitive end date – Facebook fails to treat climate change as the imminent threat that it is.<sup>5</sup>

In July 2020, we wrote you in response to reports that Facebook created fact-checking exemptions for people and organizations who spread disinformation about the climate crisis on its social media platform. As we noted then, “Allowing the spread of climate disinformation on Facebook is wholly inconsistent with your company’s . . . claims that it is ‘committed to fighting the spread of false news on Facebook and Instagram’ – and represents another unfortunate example of Facebook’s refusal to fully combat the deliberate spread of misinformation.”

Despite your public promises to take action, climate disinformation remains a persistent problem on your platforms. In a May 2021 post, Facebook promised to “expan[d] our informational labels to some posts about climate change in Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, Nigeria, South Africa and the U.S.” and to direct users to science-based news.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, this has proven to be empty rhetoric. Up to 92 percent of climate disinformation surveyed carried no label whatsoever, according to the Center’s report.<sup>7</sup> As for Google, Mr. Pichai has said that combating climate change is a “fundamental value.”<sup>8</sup> Yet the company runs ads – some perversely related to corporate environmental responsibility – next to articles that sow fear about pro-climate policies. One sample found that Google Ads still works with *The Western Journal*, which questions authoritative and accurate climate information from the UN right alongside Google Ads for Chevrolet.<sup>9</sup>

The “toxic ten” spreading rampant climate denial information Facebook and Google include groups with ties to the oil and gas industry, and even foreign adversaries. Specifically, Townhall Media and the Media Research Center have financial ties to ExxonMobil.<sup>10</sup> Russia Today, the ninth largest climate denial site, is a Russian media company responsible for sowing disinformation. The company has a strong interest in climate denial given its reliance on its state owned gas company currently under sanctions, Gazprom.<sup>11</sup> Google has earned \$5.3 million from the “toxic ten.”

Despite years of rhetoric to the contrary, your companies have not only allowed climate disinformation to flourish on your platforms, but have profited from it. As the climate crisis worsens, it is essential that Facebook and Google make good on their commitments to combat climate disinformation on their platforms. We ask that Google remove the eight of ten toxic sites on AdSense and that Facebook refuse to profit from publishers that are major spreaders of climate denial. Further, we ask that Facebook do what it said it would do six months ago and comprehensively label climate denial.

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<sup>5</sup> Kurt Wagner, “Facebook’s New Target in the Misinformation War: Climate Lies,” *Bloomberg*. April 13, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> “Connecting People With Credible Climate Change Information,” *FB Newsroom*. February 18, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> “The Toxic Ten,” 10.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/07/15/google-ceo-bar-none-climate-is-young-peoples-top-concern.html>

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> “The Toxic Ten,” 5.

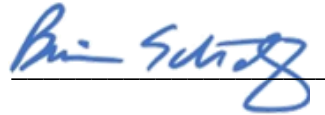
<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

Facebook and Google must take responsibility for their role in the climate crisis and immediately pledge to stop profiting from the misery that accompanies global climate change. We would welcome further discussion with you about how your companies can be constructive partners in the fight against climate disinformation and climate change.

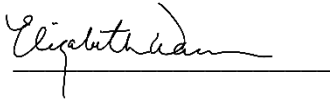
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Sheldon Whitehouse", written over a horizontal line.

Sheldon Whitehouse  
U.S. Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Brian Schatz", written over a horizontal line.

Brian Schatz  
U.S. Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Elizabeth Warren", written over a horizontal line.

Elizabeth Warren  
U.S. Senator