

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6275

June 28, 2023

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

Re: Report of Instagram's Algorithm Facilitating Pedophile Networks

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg:

The Judiciary Committee is concerned by recent reporting that Instagram's algorithm promotes and facilitates sexual interest in and activity with children, including the production and sharing of Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). We write to ask for information about the steps Meta is taking to address this dangerous trend on one of its most popular platforms.

Recently, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Instagram's algorithm "connects pedophiles and guides them to content sellers via recommendation systems that excel at linking those who share niche interests."¹ The reporting is based upon tests of social media platforms conducted by the Stanford Internet Observatory, which produced harrowing results regarding Instagram.

Stanford researchers concluded that "Instagram's recommendation algorithms are a key reason for the platform's effectiveness in advertising" CSAM.² For instance, when researchers used a test account to view a single account promoting CSAM, Instagram's algorithm immediately suggested various other accounts used by "sellers" and "buyers" of CSAM.³ In other words, even one interaction with one account was enough to bombard the researchers' test account with further suggested content sexualizing and commodifying children.⁴ This appears to be particularly endemic to Instagram because of the platform's aggressive recommendation algorithm.⁵

We are gravely concerned that Instagram's failure to prevent this perverse use of its algorithms is not due to a lack of ability, but instead a lack of initiative and motivation. In other contexts, Meta has taken steps to map out user networks facilitated by its algorithm, and has even been able to suppress unlawful user content within those networks.⁶ Nevertheless, the Stanford experts

¹ Jeff Horwitz and Katherine Blunt, Instagram Connects Vast Pedophile Network, *THE WALL ST. J.*, (Jun. 7, 2023), https://www.wsj.com/articles/instagram-vast-pedophile-network-4ab7189?mod=Searchresults_pos1&page=1.

² DAVID THIEL ET AL., CROSS-PLATFORM DYNAMICS OF SELF-GENERATED CSAM 2 (Stanford Internet Observatory Policy Center) (2023).

³ Horwitz and Blunt, *supra* note 1.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ See THIEL ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 8 (describing Twitter's recommendation algorithm as "more conservative" than Instagram's, and thus less aggressive in suggesting other child-sex-content accounts).

⁶ Horwitz and Blunt, *supra* note 1 (describing Meta's actions after the Jan. 6 Capitol riot).

determined that Instagram has been “ineffective” in preventing the growth of Self-Generated Child Sexual Abuse Material (SG-CSAM) networks on its platform, largely because of a “general lack of resources devoted to detecting SG-CSAM and associated commercial activity.”⁷ It is alarming that online child sexual exploitation and the proliferation of CSAM, including SGCSAM, is not among Meta’s highest priorities—especially when its platform directly facilitates and bolsters the black market for child sexual abuse material.

This Committee has united across the political aisle to combat the evil of online child sexual exploitation. Tech companies cannot assist malevolent actors who seek to take advantage of children. As the experts at Stanford so succinctly articulated, “minors do not have the ability to meaningfully consent to the implications of having widely distributed explicit material and the other harms for which it puts them at risk.”⁸ We refuse to let those who traffic in CSAM subject children to these harms and alter the course of their lives. And we refuse to accept Meta’s facilitation of these crimes. We therefore urge Meta to join us in combatting this threat.

To that end, please respond to the following questions, no later than 5:00 pm on July 12, 2023:

1. The *Wall Street Journal* describes a number of instances in which Instagram’s child safety measures failed, including inaction on reported child exploitation due to a software glitch, improper enforcement by content moderators, and the continued promotion of hashtags associated with blocked content.
 - a. Why did Instagram fail to enforce its own child safety policies in these instances?
 - b. What steps has Instagram taken to ensure such failures do not happen again?
 - c. Going forward, how will Instagram respond to reported child sexual exploitation?
2. Academics with limited access were able to quickly detect huge networks promoting pedophilic content on Instagram.
 - a. Why did Instagram itself not detect this issue?
 - b. Please describe Meta’s efforts to collaborate with independent researchers studying online child sexual exploitation?
3. The *Wall Street Journal* indicates that certain features on Instagram make it uniquely useful for child sex offenders. While a Meta spokesman touted the company’s reported removal of 490,000 accounts in one month for violating Meta’s child safety policies, this is a reactive effort that fails to adequately protect children. How is Instagram proactively making its platform inhospitable to child sex offenders in the first place?

⁷ THIEL ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 11, 14.

⁸ *Id.* at 17.

⁹ *Id.* at 7.

4. When did Meta become aware that Instagram offers a “See results anyway” option allowing users to view accounts even after they have been flagged as containing CSAM?⁹
 - a. Why did Instagram offer the “See results anyway” option for such accounts?
 - b. What steps has Instagram taken to ensure users are not able to view accounts that have been flagged as containing CSAM?
5. Please provide information about the task force convened in response to the *Wall Street Journal*, including the areas of expertise of the participants, supervisory structure, measures of improvement, and implementation plans and timelines.
6. How much of Instagram’s operating budget, in dollars and as a percentage, is devoted to detecting the use of its platform to commit online child sexual exploitation, and combating the advertising and distribution of CSAM?
7. Relative to other priorities in Meta’s security objectives, what resources does Meta devote to preventing online child sexual exploitation on Instagram?
 - a. For example, does Meta have full-time employees devoted to preventing child sexual exploitation and the sharing of CSAM on Instagram? If so, how many, and how does the number compare to resources allocated to other security-related activities?
8. If Meta reviews an Instagram account for committing online child sexual exploitation or trafficking in CSAM will it also review any additional accounts referenced in the first account’s profile? If not, why not?
 - a. Does Meta conduct thoroughgoing analyses to ensure that duplicative Instagram accounts aren’t used to achieve the same unlawful objectives?
9. Does Meta scan the text of Instagram “Reels” or “Stories” for specific CSAM terms, as the Stanford researchers recommend?⁹
10. Meta claims it is “providing new training to its content moderators” to address failures of its content moderators to adequately address reports of CSAM.¹⁰ How does this new training differ from previous training practices? Why does Meta believe it will be more effective than previous training? How will Meta ensure that its training stays up to date in the future?
11. What percentage of Meta’s resources to identify and prevent CSAM, are AI-driven and human-driven, respectively?

⁹ *Id.* at 8.

¹⁰ Horwitz and Blunt, *supra* note 1.

12. What measures is Meta taking to ensure that the number of CyberTIPS sent to NCMEC's CyberTipline will not decrease if Meta adopts encryption for its Messenger service?

Thank you for your attention to this pressing matter and for your prompt response.

Sincerely,



Richard J. Durbin
Chair



Lindsey O. Graham
Ranking Member



Diane Feinstein
United States Senator



Charles E. Grassley
United States Senator



Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator



John Kennedy
United States Senator



Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



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United States Senator



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