

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE,
AND TRANSPORTATION

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6125

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

June 12, 2023

Mr. Mark Zuckerberg
Chief Executive Officer
Meta
1601 Willow Road
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg:

On February 13, 2023, I announced an investigation into content moderation and censorship practices on social media platforms. As you know, my initial request letter focused on “the scope, deployment, and impact of” recommendation algorithms—*i.e.*, systems that proactively surface content and accounts to users—and the role that they play in deciding what Americans see online.¹ While I remain highly concerned by the degree to which Meta and others throttle legitimate speech in their recommendation systems, I also expressed alarm in my letter about how these algorithms can be particularly dangerous for younger users.² Specifically, I asked several questions directly relevant to the safety of these systems for children—for example, how much time spent on your platforms by users under 18 is driven by recommendation systems. You failed to answer these questions with even minimal adequacy.

Given your company’s written reassurances to me that its systems “avoid making recommendations that could be low-quality, objectionable, or particularly sensitive” or “inappropriate for younger viewers,”³ I was appalled by the *Wall Street Journal*’s recent report describing how Instagram’s recommendation systems actively facilitate the production, purchase, and possession of child sexual abuse material (CSAM).⁴ In other words, not only does this content exist on dark corners of

¹ “Sen. Cruz Launches Sweeping Big Tech Oversight Investigation,” Press Release, February 13, 2023, <https://www.commerce.senate.gov/index.php/2023/2/sen-cruz-launches-sweeping-big-tech-oversight-investigation>.

² Ranking Member Cruz Letter to Meta, February 13, 2023, stating in part: “However, recommendation systems can also fuel platform addiction by feeding users an essentially infinite stream of content. This can be especially dangerous when recommendations make it easier for vulnerable users, especially teenagers, to find objectively harmful content, such as content that promotes eating disorders and self-harm.”

³ Meta Response Letter to Ranking Member Cruz, April 11, 2023, stating in response to Question 11: “Not all content allowed on our platforms, or accounts that post content, will be eligible for recommendation. As examples, and as indicated in our Recommendation Guidelines, we work to avoid making recommendations that could be low-quality, objectionable, or particularly sensitive, and we also avoid making recommendations that may be inappropriate for younger viewers.”

⁴ Jeff Horowitz and Katherine Blunt, *Instagram Connects Vast Pedophile Network*, Wall St. Journal, June 7, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/instagram-vast-pedophile-network-4ab7189>.

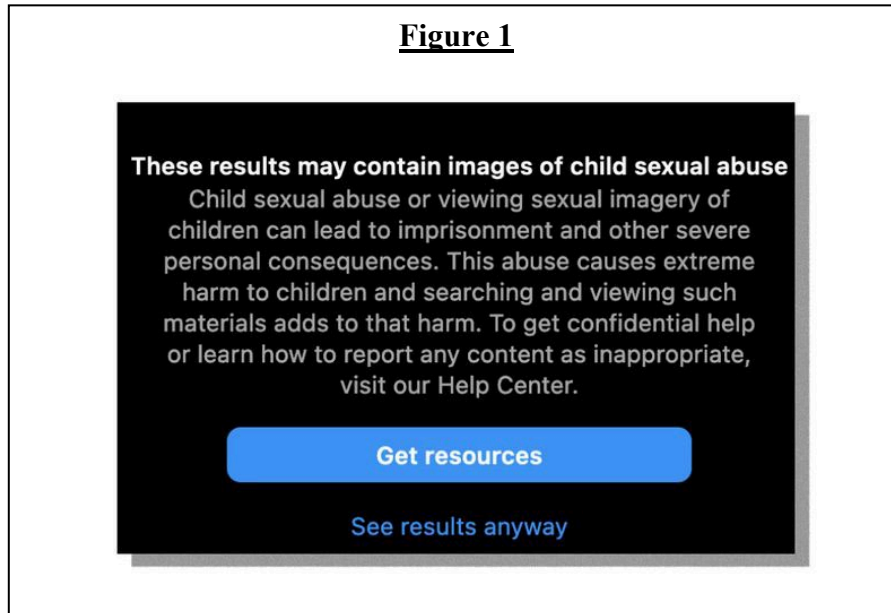
Instagram—a finding that would be horrifying in and of itself—but Meta’s own systems play a key role in helping pedophiles find and sexually exploit children.

It is particularly ironic that Meta has gone to extensive lengths to remove completely legitimate speech—for example, content about elections and COVID-19—from its recommendation systems yet seems unable to implement basic product interventions to prevent those same systems from harming the most vulnerable members of society. As the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee may soon move to consider children’s online safety legislation, this disturbing report further calls into question whether platforms should enjoy Section 230 immunity from civil liability in cases where the design of their own systems proactively facilitates illegal and harmful activity.

So that I may investigate this matter further, I ask that you provide written responses to the following questions and requests for information no later than June 26, 2023.

1. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Meta reported that it had “blocked thousands of hashtags that sexualize children, some with millions of posts, and restricted its systems from recommending users search for terms known to be associated with sex abuse” after receiving queries from the *Wall Street Journal*.
 - a. Provide the full list of hashtags blocked. Include the number of unique posts and accounts associated with each hashtag.
 - b. Provide the full list of search terms blocked. Include the number of times Meta’s systems recommended each search term and note if any search terms were fully blocked (rather than only pulled from recommendations).
 - c. Did Meta receive any user reports regarding any posts or accounts associated with a blocked hashtag? If yes, include the number of reported posts and accounts, the number of reports filed with respect to each post or account, the user-selected reason for each report, whether a human moderator reviewed each report, and what action Meta took (if any) as a result of each report.
2. How many Instagram profiles of users believed to be under the age of 18 were accessed via a hashtag or search term covered in Question 1?
3. Has Meta taken any additional remedial actions beyond those described in Question 1? If yes, describe such actions in detail, including:
 - a. Removals of content or accounts.
 - b. Account-level restrictions, including feature limitations.
 - c. Changes to Meta’s recommendations systems, including content delivery on Instagram’s “Explore” page.

4. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that Meta “permitted users to search for terms that its own algorithms know may be associated with illegal material” and, in those cases, surfaced an interstitial screen warning users that the results might contain “images of child sexual abuse.” The interstitial screen warning, seen below as Figure 1, allowed users to select between “Get resources” or “See results anyway.”



- a. List all search terms that received this interstitial screen warning. Provide an explanation for how these search terms were selected.
- b. For each search term that received this interstitial screen warning, include the number of unique times the term was searched within the past 365 days and the number of times that the user selected “See results anyway”.
- c. For each search term that received this interstitial screen warning, did Meta’s systems ever recommend the term to a user within the past 365 days?
- d. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Meta has since removed the option for users to “See results anyway” when they search for such terms. Describe Meta’s initial rationale for providing an option to “See results anyway”.
5. Meta’s Facebook Community Standards page on Child Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Nudity states that “[we] cannot estimate prevalence for child endangerment right now.”⁵ In other words, Meta claims it cannot estimate the percentage of times that people saw child abuse content on Facebook in violation of Meta’s own policies. Explain why Meta is unable

⁵ See Meta Transparency Center, Facebook Community Standards on Child Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Nudity, <https://transparency.fb.com/policies/community-standards/child-sexual-exploitation-abuse-nudity/#data> (accessed June 12, 2023).

to determine prevalence for child endangerment material specifically, given that Meta makes this data available for other categories of violating content (e.g., Bullying and Harassment).

6. Describe in detail the resources Meta has allocated to its child safety teams over the past five years, including numbers of staff disaggregated by policy, investigators, engineering and technical teams, and content reviewers. How do these numbers compare with Meta's teams covering other content areas, such as misinformation?

This letter also serves as a formal request to preserve any and all documents and information, inclusive of e-mails, text messages, internal message system messages, calls, logs of meetings, and internal memoranda, related to the presence of child sexual abuse material in Meta's recommendation systems.

Sincerely,



Ted Cruz
Ranking Member