

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 28, 2020

Mark Zuckerberg  
Chief Executive Officer  
Facebook  
1 Hacker Way  
Menlo Park, CA, 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg,

We write to express concern about Facebook's failure to address climate change disinformation and request information about your company's policies and actions in this important area.

Statements made by Facebook's leadership in a July 14, 2020 *New York Times* article<sup>1</sup> have caused us great concern. The article highlights how Facebook has labeled climate change content as "opinion content," thereby disavowing any responsibility of fact-checking these posts. Andy Stone, Facebook's policy communication director told the *New York Times* that, "All opinion content on the platform — including op-ed articles or posts that express the views or agendas of politicians, businesses, and nongovernmental organizations — is exempt from fact-checking."

Leaving aside concerns with Facebook's fact-check policies more generally, categorizing climate change science as "opinion" is wrong, and does great harm. Denial or misrepresentation of scientific facts regarding climate change puts millions of individuals' lives at risk. The scientific consensus is clear: global warming and climate change are real, and they are caused by humans.<sup>2</sup> Especially given Facebook's massive reach, we urge you to review your current fact-checking procedures and reassess how climate change posts are reviewed.

On Facebook's Sustainability page it states, "We're committed to reducing our greenhouse gas footprint by 75% and reaching 100% renewable energy in 2020. We recognize the urgency of climate change and Facebook is committed to help tackle this global challenge."<sup>3</sup> If Facebook is genuinely committed to these important goals, we urge you to back up these statements with real action, including to prevent climate change disinformation on your platform.

One particularly egregious example of this issue on your platform regards an August 2019 column in the *Washington Examiner* written by Pat Michaels, a well-known climate denier, in which he falsely claimed that climate models were dramatically wrong. The column was shared more than 2,000 times on Facebook, and was rated "false" by Science Feedback, a content-checker for Facebook.<sup>4</sup> The CO2 Coalition, a group affiliated with Michaels, said they were then helped by a "conservative contact" at Facebook who was able to get the "false" rating reversed.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/14/climate/climate-facebook-fact-checking.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://climate.nasa.gov/faq/17/do-scientists-agree-on-climate-change/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://sustainability.fb.com/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.prwatch.org/news/2020/06/13593/facebook-creates-fact-checking-exemption-climate-deniers>

There have also been reports that The Heartland Institute, a think tank that has received funding from fossil fuels companies to oppose regulations, has spent \$20,000 alone promoting questionable claims on Facebook over the past few years.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, Facebook flagged the posts of Dr. Katharine Hayhoe, of Texas Tech University, a leading climate scientist, as “political.” Because Dr. Hayhoe’s posts were labeled as political, Facebook now requires her to provide personal information which she believes could expose her to personal attacks by climate deniers. All of these decisions and actions are inconsistent with Facebook’s posted goals on climate change and fact-checking.

We ask that you respond to the following requests as soon as possible, and no later than August 7th, 2020:

1. Please describe the process used to determine whether a post is “opinion content.”
2. Please describe the process used to determine whether a post is “political.”
3. If a post is determined to be “opinion content,” but is based on or conveys false facts, please describe Facebook’s method for flagging that to its users.
4. Please describe Facebook’s process for overturning a fact-checking rating of “false” or a designation as “opinion content” or “political.”
5. Please describe how the previously mentioned “internal conservative contact” at Facebook was able to intervene to overturn the flagging of the Michaels’ column as “false.”
  - a. Did that intervention violate any internal Facebook policies?
  - b. If a violation occurred, did Facebook conduct any assessment, evaluation, or review of Facebook’s internal fact-checking policies or procedures?
    - i. If yes, what changes if any, did Facebook identify, implement, or consider in order to prevent future out-of-policy interventions?
  - c. If the intervention did not violate any Facebook policies, did Facebook change any policies or procedures to prevent or prohibit like interventions from occurring in the future? If yes, please describe any findings and actions considered or taken as a result of those findings?
6. Why is science-based climate content classified as opinion content?
7. What actions will Facebook take to fact-check scientifically provable inaccurate opinion pieces?
8. How many ads, articles and posts that are flagged by fact checkers for misinformation have been overturned since Facebook began their fact-checking program? What amount of revenue has Facebook generated off of those flagged items whose flags were overturned?

We look forward to learning more about what actions Facebook is taking to combat these dangerous climate change denial posts. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/climate-denial-spreads-on-facebook-as-scientists-face-restrictions/>

Sincerely,

Margaret Wood Hassan  
United States Senator

Dianne Feinstein  
United States Senator

Martin Heinrich  
United States Senator

Tina Smith  
United States Senator

Elizabeth Warren  
United States Senator

Richard Blumenthal  
United States Senator

Kamala D. Harris  
United States Senator

Mazie K. Hirono  
United States Senator

Chris Van Hollen  
United States Senator