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Dear Members of the Oversight Board:

We write to you today to express serious concerns regarding Meta's June 2022 Policy Advisory Opinion Request on the removal of Covid-19 misinformation from its platforms. While public health experts and scientists around the globe have made major strides in understanding, combatting, and building resiliency against Covid-19, the virus continues to pose a grave public health threat. Any action to roll back the existing – and notably limited – guardrails that protect Facebook and other Meta users from mis-and-disinformation related to Covid-19 would have immense public health consequences.

We strongly urge the Oversight Board to recommend that Meta continue or strengthen their current health misinformation policy to ensure the health and safety of the platform's users.

Despite the scientific and public health communities' relentless efforts to contain and combat the virus, Covid-19 continues to pose a significant risk to the health and safety of the global population. Thousands of infected individuals around the world are still losing their lives each day, with recent data showing a 24 percent increase in Covid-19 deaths over the past 14 days.¹ Further, the spread of new, highly contagious variants will continue to challenge our current understanding of effective public health safety measures. As the virus continues to evolve and spread anew, it is critical that the public have access to the latest, scientifically based public health guidelines and recommendations that address new and emerging variants – and actively combat misinformation that can cost lives.

As we all know, the health community has been battling misinformation and disinformation long before the Covid-19 pandemic. We have shared these concerns for years, and Facebook has been contacted by our offices over the course of several years regarding anti-vaccine disinformation campaigns on their platform, and widespread Covid-19 misinformation. Although we appreciated their actions to combat Covid-19 misinformation and disinformation throughout the past two years, Meta has not done enough to combat the false, and potentially harmful, information on Facebook. With the virus still enduring, now is not the time to move backwards on life-saving policies.

Reversing disinformation policies during a continued public health emergency would also be irresponsible, as Meta is aware of the harm that can spread on its platform. Meta has taken important steps in the past two years to combat the spread of Covid-19 disinformation on

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/world/covid-cases.html>

Facebook and repealing their policies would allow these bad-faith actors to return. The Center for Countering Digital Hate released a report in 2021, finding that up to 65 percent of anti-vaccine content on social media originates from just 12 individuals – the so called, “disinformation dozen.”² On the same day the report was published, internal Facebook research confirmed that “this is a head-heavy problem with a relatively few number of actors creating a large percentage of the content growth.”³ In response to this report, Meta stated that “any amount of COVID-19 vaccine misinformation that violates our policies is too much by our standards — and we have removed over three dozen pages, groups and Facebook or Instagram accounts linked to these 12 people, including at least one linked to each of the 12 people, for violating our policies.”⁴ However, to date members of the disinformation dozen continue to reach millions of followers on Facebook and Instagram.

The real-world implications of online vaccine information are clear, with a recent survey finding that a majority of health care workers cite vaccine misinformation as, “the single most important factor influencing unvaccinated patients’ decision not to get the COVID-19 vaccine.”⁵ By reversing their disinformation policies, Meta would be allowing these and other individuals with harmful intent to return to the platform and once again spread false information.

As Meta noted in their filing, they are seeking this ruling as “many, though not all, countries around the world seek a return to more normal life.” That return to a more normal life should not lead to a return, or worse escalation, of health mis-and-dis information, particularly at a time when monkeypox is emerging as a global threat that some online users have been quick to exploit with disinformation. Surely after the last two years, we can all agree on that basic principle. Combatting the Covid-19 pandemic will require continued effort and attention from all those involved, including social media platforms and most prominently Meta.

We urge the Facebook Oversight Board to consider the stakes involved in this case, as the spread of Covid-19 misinformation and disinformation can impact the spread and intensity of the virus. We must all continue to do our part to protect each other from this continued deadly pandemic and learn the right lessons from the last two years. We appreciate your time and attention.

Sincerely,



Adam B. Schiff
Member of Congress



Lori Trahan
Member of Congress

² <https://counterhate.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Disinformation-Dozen-The-Sequel.pdf>

³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/10/28/facebook-covid-misinformation/>

⁴ <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/08/taking-action-against-vaccine-misinformation-superspreaders/>

⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/why-biden-has-eased-up-facebook-over-covid-misinformation-2022-02-03/>