



*Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515*

*Anna G. Eshoo
Eighteenth District
California*

September 15, 2020

Mr. Mark Zuckerberg, CEO and Co-Founder
Facebook, Inc.
1 Hacker Way
Menlo Park, California 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg,

The Western United States is experiencing a historic wildfire season. As I write to you, over 100 large wildfires are burning across eight states, and more than 3 million acres have burned this year in California alone. At a time when states are working nonstop to contain these fires, I'm extremely troubled by reports that disinformation about the wildfires on your platform thwarted the efforts of first responders to respond to wildfires, including evacuating residents in harm's way. I'm pleased that Facebook decided to remove wildfire disinformation, but I'm disappointed at how slowly this decision was reached. Facebook must be prepared to remove harmful information more quickly.

Climate change has made California and other areas across the Western U.S. a tinderbox as increased temperatures have produced more dry fuel that leads to longer and more destructive wildfire seasons. California experienced five of its twenty largest fires on record this year, and another five occurred within the last decade.¹ Although many of the current fires were ignited by an unusual lightning siege, the immediate cause of most wildfires is human activity. Some are caused by arson, but generally most are unintentional.²

Last week, the press reported a proliferation of social media posts falsely alleging that Antifa started recent wildfires that are devastating much of the western part of our country.³ These posts have caused a deluge of 9-1-1 calls, leading to several local law enforcement agencies and the FBI to publicly plea for people to stop spreading misinformation and to stop calling 9-1-1 with rumors.⁴

The disinformation is also causing potentially violent encounters. Three journalists reporting on the wildfires in Oregon claimed they "got 3 guns pulled on us at a militia style checkpoint"⁵ by "people who legitimately think 'antifa liberals' are setting these towns on fire."⁶

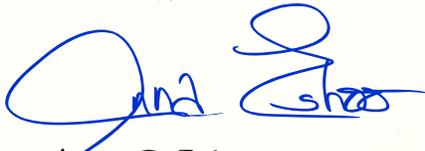
The incident is even more problematic because Russia is a key spreader of the lie that Antifa is linked to wildfires. On September 9, 2020, RT published an article with the headline, “‘Antifa are thrilled to hear this’: Portland police ask protesters not to start blazes amid statewide wildfire emergency.”⁷ The U.S. Intelligence Community identified RT (formerly known as Russia Today), as “[t]he Kremlin’s principal international propaganda outlet,” finding that RT meddled in our 2016 elections consistently in favor of then-candidate Donald Trump.⁸

This isn’t the first time disinformation about the cause of wildfire has spread on social media. In January of this year, a coordinated disinformation campaign sought to undermine the link between wildfires in Australia and climate change.⁹

Ultimately, federal¹⁰ and local law enforcement,¹¹ journalists,¹² fact-checkers,¹³ and misinformation experts¹⁴ all debunked the disinformation linking Antifa to wildfires.

I appreciate that Facebook decided to remove wildfire-related disinformation on Saturday.¹⁵ However, at least one disinformation post had “spread to hundreds of thousands of [Facebook’s] users” by Thursday evening.¹⁶ I urge you to revamp your procedure to more expeditiously remove misinformation and disinformation that directly or indirectly threatens public safety. It took Facebook days to remove posts containing wildfire disinformation. This just isn’t good enough. Facebook’s algorithm allows for disinformation to become viral in minutes. You either need to add a ‘circuit breaker’ to throttle posts from reaching virality before a human can review a post that may lead to harm, or you need to be able to more quickly reach decisions to remove disinformation.

Sincerely,



Anna G. Eshoo
Member of Congress

¹ Kellie Hwang, “Record-Smashing Year for California Fires: 5 of 20 Largest Ever Are Burning Right Now,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 11, 2020, sec. California Wildfires, <https://www.sfchronicle.com/california-wildfires/article/LNU-SCU-wildfires-skyrocket-into-top-3-largest-15508881.php>.

² Tim Arango, “Behind Most Wildfires, a Person and a Spark: ‘We Bring Fire With Us,’” *The New York Times*, August 20, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/20/us/california-wildfires-human-causes-arson.html>.

³ See, e.g., Kate Conger, Davey Alba, and Mike Baker, “False Rumors That Activists Set Wildfires Exasperate Officials,” *The New York Times*, September 10, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/10/us/antifa-wildfires.html>; Brandy Zadrozny and Ben Collins, “As Wildfires Rage, False Antifa Rumors Spur Pleas from Police,” *NBC News*, September 11, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/security/wildfires-rage-false-antifa-rumors-spur-pleas-police-n1239881>; Ali Breland, “Right-Wing Conspiracists Linked Antifa to the Wildfires. Then They Got a Big Boost from

Russian Media.," *Mother Jones*, September 12, 2020, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2020/09/wildfires-antifa-russian-state-media-right-wing-reddit-facebook-conspiracy/>; Mia Jankowicz, "People Are Spreading Rumors That the Oregon Wildfires Were Lit by Radical Activists. Twitter Still Hasn't Taken Them Down.," *Business Insider*, September 11, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/oregon-wildfires-arson-rumors-antifa-proud-boys-twitter-2020-9>; Dell Cameron, "Debunked 'Antifa' Wildfire Rumors Spread on Facebook Overload 911, Spur Calls to Violence," *Gizmodo*, September 11, 2020, <https://gizmodo.com/debunked-antifa-wildfire-rumors-spread-on-facebook-over-1845029629>.

⁴ Robert Mackey, "Oregon Police Beg Public to Stop Calling In False Reports Blaming Antifa for Wildfires," *The Intercept*, September 11, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/09/10/oregon-police-beg-public-stop-calling-false-reports-blaming-antifa-wildfires/>.

⁵ Alissa Azar (@R3volutionDaddy), Tweet ("We got 3 guns pulled on us at a militia style checkpoint. I'm with @MrOlmos and @PDocumentarians none of us are white."), September 10, 2020 <https://twitter.com/R3volutionDaddy/status/1304147303066869762>

⁶ Alissa Azar (@R3volutionDaddy), Tweet ("We're safe. It's scary knowing there are people who legitimately think "antifa liberals" are setting these towns on fire... we are very clearly documenting and interviewing folks. Our pictures were taken and so was the car and license plate"), September 10, 2020 <https://twitter.com/R3volutionDaddy/status/1304152099580571649>

⁷ "'Antifa Are Thrilled to Hear This': Portland Police Ask Protesters Not to Start Blazes amid Statewide Wildfire Emergency," *RT*, September 9, 2020, <https://www.rt.com/usa/500224-portland-police-plead-antifa-fires/>.

⁸ "Background to 'Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections': The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution" (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, January 6, 2017), 3, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf.

⁹ Christopher Knaus, "Bots and Trolls Spread False Arson Claims in Australian Fires 'Disinformation Campaign,'" *The Guardian*, January 7, 2020, sec. Australia news, <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jan/08/twitter-bots-trolls-australian-bushfires-social-media-disinformation-campaign-false-claims>.

¹⁰ FBI Portland (@FBIPortland), Tweet ("Reports That Extremists Are Setting Wildfires in Oregon Are Untrue. Help Us Stop the Spread of Misinformation by Only Sharing Information from Trusted, Official Sources."), September 11, 2020, <https://twitter.com/FBIPortland/status/1304485033210769409>.

¹¹ See, e.g., Jackson County Sheriff's Office - Oregon (@JacksonCountySheriff), Facebook Post ("There are numerous FALSE reports of arrests and other situations over the past days that are the content of postings, fake stories and gossip.."), September 10, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/JacksonCountySheriff/posts/3378597262202778>.

¹² See note 1.

¹³ See, e.g., Bethania Palma, "Is 'Antifa' Setting Wildfires in Oregon?," *Snopes*, September 10, 2020, <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/antifa-starting-fires-oregon/> ("False" rating); Daniel Funke, "PolitiFact - Antifa Activists Did Not Start the West Coast Wildfires," *PolitiFact*, September 10, 2020, <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2020/sep/10/facebook-posts/antifa-activists-did-not-start-west-coast-wildfire/> ("FALSE" rating).

¹⁴ See, e.g., Matt Binder, "Antifa Didn't Start the Fires," *Misinfo (on Substack)*, Sep 10, <https://misinfo.substack.com/p/antifa-didnt-start-the-fires>.

¹⁵ Mila Mimica, "Facebook Takes down Antifa Wildfire Rumors Days after They Start," *KGW News*, September 12, 2020, <https://www.kgw.com/article/news/local/wildfire/antifa-facebook-wildfires-oregon/283-a4688f59-1692-43a4-894b-4c561d274052>.

¹⁶ Dell Cameron, "Debunked 'Antifa' Wildfire Rumors Spread on Facebook Overload 911, Spur Calls to Violence."