June 21, 2023

Mark Zuckerberg
Chief Executive Officer
Meta Platforms, Inc.
1 Hacker Way
Menlo Park, California 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg,

We write regarding reports that Instagram has harbored an open-air market for the sale of child sexual abuse material and the trafficking of children, and that Instagram's own recommendation systems have actively facilitated child predators finding each other. Given Meta's repeated and egregious failures to protect children, we write to demand information about the extent of child sexual exploitation on Meta's platforms and its efforts to stop and report these heinous crimes.

According to an investigation by The Wall Street Journal, Stanford University's Internet Observatory, and University of Massachusetts Amherst's Rescue Lab, Instagram has hosted large communities of predators that openly advertised child sexual abuse material (CSAM) and access to children for sexual abuse, including material involving toddlers and animals.[1] Stunningly, the hundreds of accounts identified were able to sell and trade CSAM with little concealment, using hashtags describing underage children and sexual exploitation, which returned accounts and posts offering menus of abuse content, illicit sexual acts, and even trafficked children. Making matters worse, Instagram was not merely acting as a passive host for predators, but was found to be fostering abuse networks — when researchers followed a small number of predatory accounts, Instagram's recommendation algorithms began to "flood" the user with other child abuse communities. Essentially, Instagram was caught brokering child abuse material and helping child predators network together.

In addition to Instagram neglecting to remove illicit hashtags and recommending predatory content, researchers, victims, and child safety advocates assert that Meta routinely fails

---

[1] https://www.wsj.com/articles/instagram-vast-pedophile-network-4ab7189
https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/news/addressing-distribution-illicit-sexual-content-minors-online

to act against clear reports of CSAM and child sexual exploitation. As the Journal noted, parents and advocates have had reports about explicit images involving children rejected or go unanswered for months — in part attributed to failures in Meta's reporting systems. While Instagram appeared to recognize that certain hashtags promoted child abuse, it inexplicably still allowed users to ignore Instagram-provided warnings and view illicit material. Even when it does act, Meta does not appear to thoroughly remove linked "backup" accounts that predators advertise on their profiles and ban abusers. Meta's response to these reports suggests it cannot control its own platforms: after the Journal reported its findings, Instagram continued to recommend new abusive hashtags and accounts to researchers.

Meta's inaction has profound real life consequences for children and has contributed the abuse of its platform by predators, serving as what Rescue Lab called an "on ramp" to more explicit child abuse. The networks identified by researchers were significant, finding more than 400 accounts publicly selling CSAM, accounts with collectively tens of thousands of followers. In addition to outright illegal acts, researchers found large communities promoting pedophilia through sexualizing children, normalizing abuse, and soliciting material. According to the Journal, current and former Meta employees have estimated that the number of accounts that exist primarily to follow child abuse or pedophilia related content is in the "high hundreds of thousands, if not millions." Researchers also noted that Meta's weak enforcement and poor safeguards led to Instagram having a demonstratively worse problem with child abuse than other social media platforms. Simply, Meta's own failures have made Instagram a safe haven for child abuse.

The Journal's reporting also raises Meta's central role in an urgent issue facing young people online: exploitation involving self-generated child sexual abuse material and the growth of sextortion. Stanford found that CSAM was being sold by accounts claiming to be children or advertising that the material was created by the children themselves. As the reporting describes, the children involved often showed signs of being trafficked and sexually abused, and bore visible scars from self-harm. The accounts also showed signs of being victimized or involved in sextortion — coercion into performing other sexual acts or financial extortion based on threatening to release private images to the public, friends, or family. While sextortion is generally on the rise — with reports of sextortion and online enticement increasing by 82% in the past year alone[2] — polling of young people has shown that Instagram is one of the most common platforms for sexual predation and enticement by adults.[3] Instagram is central to the rise of sextortion, both as a hunting ground for predators and their marketplace.

Disturbingly, these child sexual exploitation networks still exist even after the Journal's report and Meta's response. Instagram has still failed to effectively block hashtags and accounts

[2] https://www.missingkids.org/cybertiplinedata
[3] https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/Responding%20to%20Online%20Threats_2021-Full-Report.pdf

associated with the pedophile networks covered in the Journal article and Stanford research. Instagram continues to host content advertising on hashtags such as "sweet tooth" and terms related to pedophilia to lead to child sexual exploitation content. As a result, despite Meta knowing about these networks, accounts portraying young teens continue to post open advertisements for CSAM on Instagram — images of underage girls and Hello Kitty images next to price lists for sexual content. These are not one-off accounts; rather, they are connected to a network of other users who have images of young teens as their profile pictures. Their posts are liked and commented on by older men leaving explicit messages and soliciting more illicit material — while those men's Instagram Stories appear to act as a trophy case of screenshots of victimized children. Additionally, Instagram rejected our report related to an underage girl selling videos under hashtags associated with pedophilia and sexually explicit content, claiming it did not violate its community guidelines. The worse abuses imaginable, all within easy reach on Instagram.

These reports reflect a dangerous and recurring pattern of Meta failing to catch vile and exploitative material targeting children, despite repeated assurances to Congress and the public that it is cleaning up its platforms. We are particularly disturbed that Instagram's recommendations systems were found to be promoting illicit and harmful accounts and hashtags — a problem we demonstrated to Meta executives during our hearings when Instagram was pushing eating disorder content onto children. While Meta has told Congress that it is "industry-leading in the fight against child exploitation" and using artificial intelligence to detect new child sexual abuse material and enticement, in practice these claims appear to be a thin veneer hiding deeply rooted problems. Once again, Meta has been caught harboring profound risks to children despite being put on notice, while hoping others do not dig further into its inaction.[4] Finally, Meta's anemic response to the Journal's findings — establishing a task force — should trouble every young person and parent in America.

We write to demand that Meta provide information regarding the prevalence of child sexual exploitation and the measures it takes to address child safety on Instagram and other platforms it operates. Congress is currently considering legislation that would address the pervasive spread of child sexual abuse material on social media, including the Kids Online Safety Act, the EARN IT Act, and the REPORT Act, and it has a significant oversight interest in effectiveness of platform's efforts to prevent the distribution of this illegal material.

Please provide answers to the following requests by July 7, 2023:

1.) Provide the following metrics, on an annual basis and separated on a per product basis (e.g. Instagram, Facebook, Whatsapp, Horizon, etc), for the past five years:
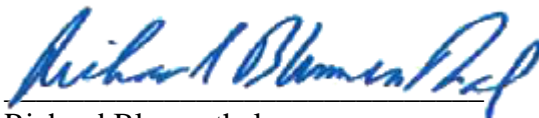
---

[4] https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Sullivan%20Testimony1.pdf

a. the number of user reports that Meta received related to child sexual abuse material;

b. the number of reports that Meta received about enticement;

c. the number of reports that Meta received about sextortion of a minor;

d. the number of reports that Meta received about content promoting pedophilia;

e. the number of accounts removed for child sexual exploitation;

f. the number of accounts removed for promoting pedophilia;

g. the prevalence of child sexual abuse material, based on number of posts and views;

h. the prevalence of material promoting pedophilia, based on number of posts and views;

i. the mean and median time that Meta takes to respond to reports of child sexual exploitation;

j. the number of reports of child sexual exploitation that Meta rejected;

k. the number of reports of child sexual exploitation that lead to the removal of an account;

2.) Why did Meta decide to allow users to view content and hashtags on Instagram that it knew to be associated with child sexual abuse material, as documented in The Wall Street Journal report?

3.) Provide a list of errors or failures in systems involving child safety for the past five years, and an assessment of the impact on its ability to address child sexual exploitation issues for each report, including the "software glitch" that Meta attributed to its failure to address reports of child abuse.

4.) Provide a full accounting Meta's policies and procedures related to the promotion of pedophilia and the sexualization of children.

5.) Provide a full accounting for why Meta failed to detect and remove the accounts and hashtags identified by the Wall Street Journal and Stanford prior to the publication of the investigation. Additionally, please provide a full accounting for why Meta did not completely remove content and hashtags after publication of the Journal's investigation.

6.) Describe all technical measures and other procedures to prevent and address crimes against children, including information related to its blocking of hashtags and removal of accounts related to illicit activities. Include information about where Meta does not match images against known CSAM databases, and where it does not take steps to detect previously-undetected images or videos sof child sexual abuse.

7.) Prior to the publication of the Journal's investigation, did Meta know that Instagram was being used to sell sexually explicit content involving children, including self-generated CSAM?

8.) Why did Meta fail to prevent Instagram's personalization and suggestion features, such as Instagram's "Suggested for You," from recommending child sexual exploitation content?

9.) What measures has Meta taken to ensure its paid subscription features (such as Instagram's subscriptions) are not used for the sexual exploitation of minors? How many reports has Meta received, or accounts has it proactively removed, due the misuse of this feature for child sexual exploitation?

Thank you for your attention to these important issues. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senate

Marsha Blackburn
United States Senate