



## COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

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### Hearing Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

#### *Examining Social Media Companies' Efforts to Counter Online Terror Content and Misinformation*

June 26, 2019

In March, a white supremacist terrorist killed 51 people and wounded 49 more at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. Our thoughts and prayers continue to be with the victims and their families. The motive behind the attack is not in question—the terrorist had written an extensive manifesto outlining his white supremacist, white nationalist, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and fascist beliefs. His act was horrifying beyond words, and it shook the conscience. Shockingly, the terrorist was able to live-stream the attack on Facebook, where the video and its gruesome content went undetected initially. Instead, law enforcement officials in New Zealand had to contact the company and ask that it be removed. When New Zealand authorities called on all social media companies to remove these videos immediately, they were unable to comply. Human moderators could not keep up with the volume of videos being reposted, and their automated systems were unable to recognize minor changes to the video. So, the video spread online spread around the world.

The fact that this happened nearly two years after Facebook, Twitter, Google, Microsoft and other major tech companies established the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, or GIFCT, is troubling to say the least. The GIFCT was created for tech companies to share technology and best practices to combat the spread of online terrorist content. Back in July 2017, representatives from GIFCT briefed this Committee on this new initiative. At the time, I was optimistic about its intentions and goals, and acknowledged that its members demonstrated initiative and willingness to engage on this issue while others have not. But after a white supremacist terrorist was able to exploit social media platforms in this way, we all have reason to doubt the effectiveness of the GIFCT and the companies' efforts more broadly. On March 27th of this year, representatives of GIFCT briefed this Committee after the Christchurch massacre. Since then, myself and other Members of this Committee have asked important questions about the organization and your companies, and we have yet to receive satisfactory answers.

Today, I hope to get answers regarding your actual efforts to keep terrorist content off your platforms. I want to know how you will prevent content like the New Zealand attack video from spreading on your platforms again. This Committee will continue to engage social media companies about the challenges they face in addressing terror content on their platforms. In addition to terror content, I want to hear from our panel about how they are working to keep hate speech and harmful misinformation off their platforms. I want to be very clear—Democrats respect the free speech rights enshrined in the First Amendment, but much of the content I am referring to is either not protected speech or violates the social media companies' own terms of service.

We have seen time and time again that social media platforms are vulnerable to being exploited by bad actors, including those working at the behest of foreign governments, who seek to sow discord by spreading misinformation. This problem will only become more acute as we approach the 2020 elections. We want to understand how companies can strengthen their efforts to deal with this persistent problem. At a fundamental level, today's hearing is about transparency. We want to get an understanding of whether—and to what extent—social media companies are incorporating questions of national security, public safety, and the integrity of our democratic institutions into their business models.

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