AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

August 2, 2020

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

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg:

I am writing on behalf of the American Psychological Association (APA) to urge Facebook, as the dominant social platform in the Internet age, to help stop the spread of hate. APA is the largest scientific and professional organization representing psychologists in the United States with more than 121,000 members and affiliates who are researchers, educators, clinicians, consultants, and students. While we recognize that hate speech is protected speech under the First Amendment, leaders in academia and industry, including social media platforms, can restrict hate speech if they so choose. We are asking Facebook to recognize and utilize the science that demonstrates hate speech causes significant psychological harm to the welfare of consumers, observers, and society as a whole. We ask that you immediately move to ban the use of hate speech on your online platform.

We applaud Facebook's recognition of the need to change through the series of audits designed to ensure that important civil rights laws and principles are respected, embraced, and robustly incorporated into the work at the company. The recently released *Facebook Civil Rights Audit – Final Report* recognized actions that Facebook has already taken, such as: taking steps to build greater civil rights awareness and accountability; changing various content moderation practices; investing in a dedicated team to focus on studying responsible artificial intelligence methodologies; and more.[1] Yet, the auditors advocated for the company to "go further to address civil rights concerns in a host of areas that are described in detail," including those related to more visible and consistent prioritization of civil rights; increased investment of resources to study and address organized hate; increased commitment to go beyond banning explicit references to white separatism and white nationalism; and addressing concerns about algorithmic bias or discrimination. Clearly Facebook needs to stand up and do more.

Based on decades of psychological research, we know that racial discrimination, and specifically hate speech, can cause significant psychological harm. Experiencing racial discrimination can undermine core executive functions and may have significant negative implications for performance in educational, employment, and other settings.[2] And this damage can be experienced by those who are the direct targets of the hate speech, as well as those who are observers. Furthermore, the effects are seen whether the hate speech is verbal, written, or on social media platforms. For example, in the context of Twitter, an online experiment conducted with Black Americans showed that hate tweets from multiple sources, when compared to the identical hate messages from a single source, led to greater emotional distress.[3]

Psychological research also tells us that the use of hateful language against others in national issue campaigns and venues, such as online platforms, can have devastating consequences. For

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example, a study on the effects of Proposition 8 in California highlighted that people who are LGB had to contend not only with the results of the passage of an anti-gay marriage law but also with the stress of the campaign itself. The study found that participants experienced many negative emotions due to "media campaigns that disparage gay and lesbian people, seeing yard signs and bumper stickers of individuals who are against same-sex marriage, and/or having stressful conversations with people regarding the ballot measure."[4]

Furthermore, not only does hate speech affect the target audience and observers, but also society writ large and even those who are engaging in the hateful speech itself. International research has shown that derogatory language about immigrants and minority groups can lead to extremism and the breaking down of relationships between disparate groups.[5] In a study where people were exposed to frequent and repetitive hate speech, the more often the hateful speech was heard, the more prejudiced toward hate speech victims the participants became.[6] The findings also revealed that experiencing hate speech multiple times and persistently leads to people becoming numb to its use and lowers the perceived value and worth of the victims, increasing prejudice. In fact, researchers believe that repeated exposure to hate speech actually "dampen(s) the response of neural mechanisms of pain empathy to (and thereby reduces empathy for)" targets.[7]

While there is often an assumption that those engaging in hate speech are adults, adolescents have been known to engage in similar behaviors with very damaging effects. In a study that examines the associations among being bystanders of online hate, being perpetrators of online hate, and the disregard of social online norms found that 53.7% of the youth had observed at least one online hate incident, 11.3% reported having perpetrated at least one incident of online hate, and 16.9% reported being victimized at least once by online hate.[8]

When businesses or organizations allow for discrimination of any form to take place, it also impacts the discrimination target and those who witness it inside and outside of the organization. Discrimination allowed within workplace and educational contexts communicates to targets the extent to which the representatives of the business respect their group and implicates the morality of the larger group or organization in which it occurs.[9,10, 11,12] The threat to the organization's perceived moral code can have a broad and adverse impact on observers.

In other words, Facebook's sharing of hate speech not only traumatizes both the intended victims and observers but may also prompt those who see it to become more prejudiced. By not taking needed corrective action, Facebook is knowingly harming the welfare of consumers, employees, and its shareholders.

Psychologist Dr. Ervin Staub has dedicated his life to the psychology of mass violence and genocide, having been the founding director of the doctoral program on the psychology of peace and violence at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. His research concludes that hate speech can change the norms of an organizational/community, which is inclusive of a virtual community and the people it represents.

Specifically, he found that people and communities change as a result of harmful actions, which has the ability to start "an evolution of increasingly harmful and violent actions."[13] As stated earlier, the perpetrators of such actions justify their stances by dehumanizing the targeted group and systematically excluding them from moral and social realms, thus changing social norm and establishments.[14]

When bystanders are silent or passive, it encourages harmful behavior.

Facebook must take a leadership role to be proactive in reversing this trend.

We are asking for Facebook to act as a leader and intervenor as opposed to a bystander. Taking action such as: establishing and empowering permanent civil rights infrastructure; creating an internal mechanism to automatically flag hateful content; and enabling individuals facing severe hate and harassment to connect with a live Facebook employee, have been recommended strategies to develop proactive actions that are inclusive and embracing of all groups that provides hope for people who are targets. Taking these actions will stop spreading fear and feelings of low self-worth of the targets of hate speech by Facebook. And taking such actions have been shown to have positive outcomes in educational settings where high schools that had developed robust, inclusive, and supportive school climates through practices, such as having a point person for LGBT student issues, discussing bullying based on sexual orientation, and providing professional development around LGBT inclusion and LGBT student issues, saw drastic reductions in rates of bullying.[15]

School administrators determined there was a problem and took proactive steps to move from being a bystander to being an intervenor by creating positive school climates. Being a witness and intervening has a positive impact on individuals and target groups as well as on the customs of the "community."

This is our request of Facebook -- to recognize the serious psychological harm caused by hate speech if unaddressed and to utilize the psychological science on the effects of hate speech presented in this letter as the basis for doing what is morally right - eliminating hate speech from your online platform.

Thank you for your consideration on this critically important matter.

Sincerely,



Arthur C. Evans, Jr., PhD
Chief Executive Officer

Footnotes

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