

Statement of Chairman Richard Burr

November 1, 2017

I'd like to welcome our witnesses today, Colin Stretch, Vice President and General Counsel at Facebook; Sean Edgett, General Counsel at Twitter; and, Kent Walker, Senior Vice President and General Counsel at Google. For several months now, the media has been fixated on the role that social media platforms played in spreading disinformation and discord during the 2016 U.S. elections. This is an opportunity for each of you to tell your respective stories and, if necessary, correct the record. My sense is that not all aspects of those stories have been told accurately.

I'll note for the record that this is the Committee's 17th open hearing this year, and the 12th at which we'll be discussing Russia and Russian activities.

Today, I'm hopeful you can provide the American people an informed and credible assessment of how foreign actors used your platforms to circulate lies and agitate unrest during last year's elections. I'm also hopeful you'll share with us what your companies are doing to make it harder for foreign actors to use your platforms, automated accounts, and falsified news stories, to sentiment in the United States. Very clearly, this kind of national security vulnerability presents an unacceptable risk, and your companies have a responsibility to reduce that vulnerability.

While we're on the topic of responsibility, I want to use this forum to push back on some narratives that have sprung up around this subject. A lot of folks, including many in the media, have tried to reduce this entire conversation down to one premise: foreign actors conducted a surgically executed covert operation to help elect a United States president. I'm here to tell you, this story does not simplify that easily. It is short-sighted and dangerous to selectively focus on just one piece of information and think that somehow tells the whole story. We've heard from the media how a "series of Russian-linked Facebook ads were specifically aimed at Michigan and Wisconsin during the lead-up to last year's presidential election," and that "some of those ads targeted specific demographic groups in the two states." The narrative here is that ads linked to Russia were targeted at pivotal states and directly influenced the election's outcome.

What you haven't heard is that almost 5 times more ads were targeted at Maryland, than Wisconsin. Maryland, which was targeted by 262 ads in comparison to Wisconsin's 55, wasn't up for grabs; it was a state the Democratic candidate carried by 26 percent.

Or that 35 of the 55 ads targeted at Wisconsin ran prior to the Wisconsin primary – *before* there was an identified Republican candidate,

and moreover, that not one of those 55 ads mentioned President Trump by name.

Or that the key election state of Pennsylvania had fewer ads targeted at it than Washington, D.C., where 86 percent of the electorate voted for Hillary Clinton. Or that the three most heavily targeted states, Maryland, Missouri, and New York, were all determined by at least an 18% margin – and 2 of them in favor of Hillary Clinton.

One point the media has gotten correct is that more of these geographically targeted ads ran in 2015, than in 2016 – again, before President Trump was identified as the Republican candidate for president – but some of the context surrounding the “more than \$100,000 worth of divisive ads on hot-button issues” purchased by Russian actors, is missing.

To add some detail here where the media has failed to, and put that \$100,000 into a frame of reference: the total ad spend for Wisconsin was \$1,979, with all but \$54 spent *prior* to the primary – again, before the emergence of a Republican candidate. The ad spend for Michigan: \$823. Pennsylvania? \$300. To believe the narrative, you have to accept that these sophisticated, well-resourced Russian actors studied our processes, assessed what states would be critical to the election’s result, then snuck in and invested all of \$300 to execute their plan in Pennsylvania. \$300. More

than 5 times as much money was spent on advertising in California, a state that hasn't voted Republican in a presidential election since 1988.

Even with the benefit of numbers and what can be calculated and measured, this is an incredibly complex story. We can look at the amount of money spent and the number of ads purchased and draw conclusions about priorities. We can look at the divisive content of the ads and the pages they directed people toward, and the numbers of tweets and retweets, and the manipulated search results, and draw inferences about the intent of this information operation. What we cannot do however, is calculate the impact that foreign meddling and social media had on this election, nor can we assume that it must be the explanation for an election outcome that many people did not anticipate.

I understand the urge to make this story simple. It's human nature to make the complex manageable, find explanations, and interpret things in ways that confirm your conclusions. But that's bias. Pointing to a state and saying that no ads ran there after the election doesn't prove intent or even motive. It just shows that no ads ran there after the election. This subject is complicated. There's a whole new vocabulary that comes with this stuff. Impressions are different from views, and views are different from clicks. But there's one thing I am certain of and it's this: given the complexity of

what we've seen, if anyone tells you they've got this all figured out, they're kidding themselves – and we can't afford to kid ourselves about what happened last year, and continues to happen today.

That complexity, I'll note, is exactly why we depend on you for expert insights and reliable information. 60 percent of the U.S. population uses Facebook. A foreign power using that platform to influence how Americans see and think about one another is as much a public policy issue as it is a national security concern. Crafting an elegant policy solution that is effective but not overly burdensome demands good faith and partnership between your companies and this Committee. Just recently, on the basis of a more complete and sophisticated analysis, the original estimate that 10 million Americans were exposed to Russian origin content on Facebook was increased to 126 million. That tells me that your companies are just beginning to come to grips with the scale and depth of the problem here. That's encouraging, but know this: we do better, when you do better. I'd urge you to keep that in mind, and work with us proactively to find the right solution to this challenge.

I'll take a moment here to stress what this hearing is and is not about. This isn't about re-litigating the 2016 U.S. presidential election. This isn't about who won or who lost. This is about national security. This is about

corporate responsibility. And this is about the deliberate and multi-faceted manipulation of the American people by agents of a hostile foreign power.

I'll say that again: agents of a hostile foreign power reached into the United States using our own social media platforms, and conducted an information operation intended to divide our society along issues like race, immigration, and Second Amendment rights. What's even more galling, is that to tear us apart they're using social media platforms Americans invented in connection with the First Amendment freedoms that define an open and democratic society.

While it is shocking to think that foreign actors used the social networking and communication mediums that are so central to our lives today in an effort to interfere with the core of our democracy, what is even more troubling to me, is the likelihood that these same platforms are still being used today to spread lies, provoke conflict, and drive Americans apart.

Your three companies have developed platforms that have tremendous reach and, therefore, influence. That reach and influence is enabled by the enormous amount of data you collect on your users and their activities. The American people now need to understand how Russia

used that information and, what you are doing to protect it. Your actions need to catch up with your responsibility.