

EDWARD J. MARKEY
MASSACHUSETTS

COMMITTEES:

ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS

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AND INTERNATIONAL CYBERSECURITY POLICY

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SUBCOMMITTEE ON SECURITY

SMALL BUSINESS AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

CHAIRMAN:

U.S. SENATE CLIMATE CHANGE TASK FORCE

United States Senate

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SUITE SD-255
DIRKSEN BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-2107
202-224-2742

975 JFK FEDERAL BUILDING
15 NEW SUDBURY STREET
BOSTON, MA 02203
617-565-8519

222 MILLIKEN BOULEVARD, SUITE 312
FALL RIVER, MA 02721
508-677-0523

1550 MAIN STREET, 4TH FLOOR
SPRINGFIELD, MA 01103
413-785-4610

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

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg,

I am writing regarding Facebook's troubling policy of allowing advertisements from state-controlled media organizations, and to better understand the company's decision to continue this practice given its implications for freedom and democracy throughout the Indo-Pacific and elsewhere.

Recently, state-controlled media organizations associated with mainland China have criticized and spread disinformation about Hong Kong protestors via social media. For example, the Xinhua News Agency — the official state-run press agency of the People's Republic of China — has depicted the protestors as cockroaches. Both China Central Television (CCTV) — the predominant state television broadcaster in mainland China and China Daily — the English-language daily newspaper owned by the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China — have shared a poem that suggests the protestors are on par with those responsible for Nazi oppression.¹ Casting protestors as destructive helps provide cover for repressive actions such as the recent arrests of political activists Joshua Wong, Agnes Chow, and Andy Chan.

Even in the China context, the problem is not limited to Hong Kong. An August 20, 2019 report found that the Global Times — a daily Chinese tabloid newspaper under the auspices of the People's Daily newspaper — is promoting content on Facebook that casts doubt on China's large-scale human rights violations in Xinjiang province.² On August 19, 2019, that state-controlled organization purchased an advertisement claiming that "if [detention] centers were set up earlier, fewer violent attacks would happen."³

¹ Mary Hui, *China's state media compared Hong Kong's protests to the Holocaust*, Quartz (Aug. 19, 2019), <https://qz.com/1690276/chinas-state-media-compared-hong-kongs-protests-to-the-holocaust/>.

² Ryan Mac, *These New Facebook Ads From Chinese State Media Want You To Believe Xinjiang's Muslim Internment Camps Are Just Great*, BuzzFeed News (Aug. 20, 2019), <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanmac/chinese-media-facebook-ads-xinjiang-uighur-propaganda>.

³ Ryan Mac, *These New Facebook Ads From Chinese State Media Want You To Believe Xinjiang's Muslim Internment Camps Are Just Great*, BuzzFeed News (Aug. 20, 2019), <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanmac/chinese-media-facebook-ads-xinjiang-uighur-propaganda>.

Under Facebook’s current policy, these and other state-run entities can pay Facebook for advertisements that promote and target sophisticated media campaigns. Targeting may be especially useful in efforts to influence elections in the United States or any other country. According to an August 21, 2019 report, Chinese state media entities are among those organizations and individuals to whom Facebook offers training to use its services.⁴

On August 19, 2019, Facebook removed several “Pages,” “Groups,” and accounts involved in “coordinated inauthentic behavior,” which were “part of a small network that originated in China and focused on Hong Kong.”⁵ I welcome this action and urge Facebook to continue to counter deceptive tactics, including efforts by individuals associated with the Chinese government to conceal their identities while spreading disinformation.

But Facebook has not followed Twitter in prohibiting advertising from state-controlled news media entities.⁶ This is a step that Facebook also should take. I recognize the difficulty in distinguishing among media organizations linked to national governments. But social media companies can consider factors including the quality of meaningful editorial controls; governance structures that protect a variety of voices; governance accountability and transparency; and meaningful legislative-branch oversight. State-sponsored efforts to influence the outcome of protests in Hong Kong only reinforce our concern that state actors will continue to exploit Facebook to interfere in U.S. elections, target minorities and political opponents in their own countries, and blunt the global outcry against gross human rights violations.

Furthermore, although prohibiting advertising from state-controlled news media entities is needed, additional protective measures are necessary. An August 22, 2019 report detailed how, after one private media organization detected public scrutiny of content posted by its account, the organization created shell entities through which it continued to post and promote the same content. That behavior violated Facebook’s policy regarding inauthentic activity, yet it appears that the shell advertisements ran for a significant period.⁷ State-run media organizations, whether or not they are allowed themselves to advertise, are even better equipped to create inauthentic account networks and to supply them with sophisticated content.

In light of these issues, I request that you provide answers to the following questions no later than September 13, 2019:

⁴ Shelly Banjo and Sarah Frier, *Twitter Helps Beijing Push Agenda Abroad Despite Ban in China*, Bloomberg (Aug. 21, 2019), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-08-21/twitter-helps-china-push-agenda-abroad-despite-ban-in-mainland>.

⁵ Nathaniel Gleicher, *Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior From China* (Aug. 19, 2019), <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2019/08/removing-cib-china/>.

⁶ Twitter, *Updating our advertising policies on state media* (Aug. 19, 2019), https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/advertising_policies_on_state_media.html.

⁷ Brandy Zadrozny and Ben Collins, *Facebook bans ads from The Epoch Times after huge pro-Trump buy*, NBC News (Aug. 22, 2019), <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/epoch-times-begins-hiding-its-connection-huge-pro-trump-ad-n1045416>.

1. A Facebook spokesperson stated that the company “continue[s] to look at our policies as they relate to state-owned media.”⁸ Although I understand the challenges associated with crafting a restriction, time is of the essence. Why does Facebook still allow advertisements from state-controlled media organizations?
2. How does Facebook assess the implications of permitting Chinese state-controlled media campaigns, as they affect both public perception of the Hong Kong protests and the protests themselves?
3. How does Facebook assess the implications of permitting Chinese state-controlled media campaigns for public perception of the Xinjiang internment camps?
4. In public comments on June 26, 2019 regarding state-led influence operations, you stated: “As a private company, we don’t have the tools to make [a foreign government] stop.”⁹ How is allowing advertisements from state-controlled media organizations consistent with Facebook’s effort to use every tool available to limit influence operations by foreign governments?
5. When Facebook removes Pages, Groups, and accounts involved in coordinated inauthentic behavior, how does it decide which associated *content* to remove? Specifically, in the Hong Kong context, does any content associated with those Pages, Groups, or accounts remain accessible on the platform?
6. Does Facebook have in place procedures to detect similarities across content promoted by different accounts that pay for advertising?
7. Does Facebook have in place procedures to detect similarities between the content posted by state-controlled media organizations — even if not in advertisement form — and advertisements paid for by other accounts?
8. A Facebook spokesman confirmed that the company has conducted training in China for government and state media personnel.¹⁰ Please describe the nature of this training including what, if any, guidance is provided with respect to targeting promoted content.

⁸ Elizabeth Culliford and Paresh Dave, *YouTube finds influence campaign tied to Hong Kong protests*, Reuters (Aug. 22, 2019), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-protests-youtube/youtube-finds-influence-campaign-tied-to-hong-kong-protests-idUSKCN1VC2KO>.

⁹ Kristin Lam, *Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg on election interference: Feds have ‘tools to apply pressure to Russia, not us’*, USA Today (Jun. 26, 2019), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2019/06/26/facebook-mark-zuckerberg-feds-stop-interference/1577512001/>.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Culliford and Paresh Dave, *YouTube finds influence campaign tied to Hong Kong protests*, Reuters (Aug. 22, 2019), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-protests-youtube/youtube-finds-influence-campaign-tied-to-hong-kong-protests-idUSKCN1VC2KO>.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. Should you have any questions about this request please contact Zachary Hosford of my staff at 202-224-2742.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Edward J. Markey". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent "E" and "M".

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator