

# United States Senate

October 29, 2024

Mr. Mark Zuckerberg  
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer  
Meta Platforms, Inc.  
1 Hacker Way  
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg,

I write to request information on Meta's efforts to enable independent academic research on Facebook and Instagram's impact on the 2024 presidential election. In 2020, Facebook and Instagram launched a partnership with 17 researchers to investigate social media's impact on the 2020 election.<sup>1</sup> Although that research is ongoing, it has already produced high-quality and informative studies on Facebook and Instagram's political impact. Unfortunately, I recently learned that Meta is not undertaking a similar initiative this election cycle. Following on Meta's decision to end access to a key research tool in August, this decision is disappointing. I urge Meta to reconsider any effort to limit transparency into and independent research on its platforms' impact on our political system.

Meta's decision to enable independent researchers to study Facebook and Instagram's impact on the 2020 election provided a critical window into the platforms' impact on U.S. politics and the 2020 election. Thanks to this partnership, over the past few years, researchers have released important studies on Facebook and Instagram's effect on political polarization, news knowledge, and turnout,<sup>2</sup> among other measures, and the impact of different changes to Facebook and Instagram's user experiences, such as switching certain users to a chronological feed of content, rather than an algorithmically determined feed.<sup>3</sup> Researchers are set to release additional studies in the future. This initiative represented an important step forward to understand social media's political impact and set the bar on platform transparency.

Unfortunately, Meta appears to have changed its mind on its commitment to transparency. In mid-August, over loud protestations from the research community<sup>4</sup> and

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<sup>1</sup> Press Release, Meta, *New Facebook and Instagram Research Initiative to Look at US 2020 Presidential Election* (Aug. 31, 2020), <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/08/research-impact-of-facebook-and-instagram-on-us-election/>.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Hunt Alcott et al., *The effects of Facebook and Instagram on the 2020 election: A deactivation experiment*, 121 *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 21 (2024), <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2321584121>.

<sup>3</sup> See Andrew M. Guess et al., *How do social media feed algorithms affect attitudes and behavior in an election campaign?* 38 *Science* 398-404 (2023), <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abp9364>.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Center for American Progress et al. to Mark Zuckerberg, CEO, Meta (May 7, 2024), <https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/05/CAP-ISD-letter2.pdf>.

lawmakers on Capitol Hill,<sup>5</sup> Meta shut down a tool — called CrowdTangle — that researchers used to track and analyze the dissemination of content on Facebook and other platforms. This decision represented a major loss for transparency right before the U.S. presidential election. Similarly, Meta’s decision to not renew its partnership with researchers, as it did in 2020, appears to be yet another setback for platform transparency. This shift is especially disappointing given the reach of Facebook and Instagram and Meta’s history of providing greater researcher access and transparency than its competitors.

When Meta announced the research partnership in 2020, it stated:

To continue to amplify all that is good for democracy on social media, and mitigate against that which is not, we need more objective, dispassionate, empirically grounded research. We need to better understand whether social media makes us more polarized as a society, or if it largely reflects the divisions that already exist; if it helps people to become better informed about politics, or less; or if it affects people’s attitudes towards government and democracy, including whether and how they vote.<sup>6</sup>

Four years later, although we have learned much more about social media’s impact, many questions remain unanswered, and Meta appears to have pulled back on answering them. With the presidential election just a week away, it may be too late to conduct the exact same type of research as was done under the 2020 initiative, but Meta still has significant data that can shed light on its impact on this election. Going forward, I urge Meta to once again lead the industry in transparency and ensure independent researchers have the access necessary to develop a better picture of social media’s impact on our elections, institutions, and democracy.

Given the importance of this issue, I request a response in writing by November 15, 2024 explaining Meta’s decision to not launch a research initiative in 2024 and how Meta will enable independent academic research in the future.

Thank you for your attention on this important issue.

Sincerely,



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Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator

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<sup>5</sup> Letter from Sen. Chris Coons et al. to Mark Zuckerberg, CEO, Meta (July 24, 2024), [https://www.coons.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/letter\\_to\\_meta\\_re\\_crowdtangle\\_from\\_coons\\_cassidy\\_et\\_al.pdf](https://www.coons.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/letter_to_meta_re_crowdtangle_from_coons_cassidy_et_al.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Meta, *supra* note 1.