



House Democrats pressure Facebook oversight board to address racist, voter suppression content

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A group of House Democrats on Tuesday questioned whether Facebook's independent oversight board will be fully empowered to moderate harmful content on the social media platform, including battling voter suppression and racist content.

In letters to the 20 members of Facebook's oversight board – an independent group established by Facebook to help review content moderation decisions – House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Frank Pallone (D-N.J.) and Reps. Mike Doyle (D-Penn.) and Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.) raised concerns that the group was not doing enough to moderate harmful content on the platform.

“We are concerned that Facebook’s Oversight Board — and its members — may be ill-equipped and ill-empowered to meaningfully improve the incredibly troubling behavior of the company and may simply act as a smokescreen behind which Facebook’s executives will maintain ultimate control over its content moderation decision-making process,” the lawmakers wrote in the letters.

The Democrats accused Facebook of “intentionally amplifying divisive and conspiratorial content” because it boosted advertising revenue. They called on the board to commit to “engaging with and represent the interests of civil rights, social justice organizations, and election experts” in order to protect civil rights and prevent voter suppression.

The House Democrats also asked board members to commit to resigning from their positions if Facebook did not adhere by Oct. 6 to the board’s anticipated guidance on how the platform should address “the systemic amplification of divisive, racist, and conspiratorial content on the platform.”

“If this Oversight Board is going to have any real power, Facebook itself is going to need to listen to and then act upon the Board’s policy recommendations,” the House Democrats wrote. “To that end, we believe you have the duty to use your position on the Oversight Board to pressure Facebook to change policies that you believe are not working, and if Facebook refuses to address your concerns, to resign.”

The letters were sent as pressure has mounted on Facebook to do more to moderate hate speech on the platform following hundreds of companies pulling Facebook advertisements as part of an ad boycott.

The board, which is a separate group from Facebook, is empowered to decide if Facebook and Instagram should allow or remove content. Co-chairs of the board include former Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt; Michael McConnell, a constitutional law professor at Stanford University; Jamal Greene, a Columbia law professor; and Catalina Botero-Marino, dean of Universidad de los Andes faculty of law.

Other members include Nobel Peace Laureate Tawakkol Karman, Cato Institute Vice President John Samples, and leading university professors.

The board will begin hearing cases later this year once it begins operation.

Facebook declined to comment on the letters, deferring to the board. A spokesperson for the oversight board told The Hill that the board was “eager” to begin work.

“The Oversight Board is empowered to make binding and independent decisions on many of the most challenging content issues on Facebook and Instagram, and we are committed to protecting users and holding Facebook accountable,” the spokesperson said in a statement. “Just like Chairman Pallone and his colleagues, our board members are eager to begin our formal work later this year and are on schedule to do so.”

In the wake of a wave of protests in the U.S. following the death of George Floyd, and President Trump’s divisive posts on Twitter and Facebook threatening violence against protestors, the board put out a statement noting that posts by public figures were within its scope of authority.

“How Facebook treats posts from public figures that may violate their community standards are within the scope of the Board, and are the type of highly challenging cases that the Board expects to consider when we begin operating in the coming months,” the Board wrote in June.