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# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-2509

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September 15, 2020

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

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg:

On September 3, Facebook announced it would be implementing a new policy of banning political advertising on its platform during the seven days leading up to the November 2020 election, as well as attaching “informational labels” to posts that “seek[] to delegitimize the outcome of the election or discuss the legitimacy of voting methods.”<sup>1</sup> I urge you and your company to reconsider these policies.

According to Facebook, the advertising blackout does not merely extend to overt political content. It also applies to advertising linked to “social issues” which Facebook has defined as “sensitive topics that are heavily debated, may influence the outcome of an election or result in/relate to existing or proposed legislation.”<sup>2</sup> In a culture in which virtually every issue—from knitting<sup>3</sup> and yoga<sup>4</sup> to sushi<sup>5</sup> and young-adult fiction<sup>6</sup>—has become aggressively politicized, any topic can be deemed “sensitive” in the right context. Given Facebook’s sweeping powers to shape the news and information that Americans receive, clarity on Facebook’s understanding of these terms is critical.

In light of the high stakes involved in this issue, I request a response to the following questions no later than September 23, 2020:

- How does Facebook specifically define a “political” or “issue” ad? Would an advertisement explaining how citizens can protect themselves against mob violence, or an ad for concealed-carry firearms training, run afoul of Facebook’s blackout?
- Will all news and opinion websites be permitted to publish and promote stories pertaining to the election or to “sensitive” topics during the “political advertising”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/09/additional-steps-to-protect-the-us-elections/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/09/03/facebook-political-ads/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://quillette.com/2019/02/17/a-witch-hunt-on-instagram/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://coloradosun.com/2020/06/29/kindness-yoga-closure-during-black-lives-matter/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/12/21/oberlin-college-sushi-disrespectful-to-japanese/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.vulture.com/2017/08/the-toxic-drama-of-ya-twitter.html>

blackout? If not, what criteria will Facebook use in determining whether a source is “political” in nature?

- Will Planned Parenthood, NARAL, and other abortion advocacy groups be permitted to advertise on Facebook during the blackout, notwithstanding the fact that their work is the epitome of a “sensitive topic” that is “heavily debated”?

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Josh Hawley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "J".

Josh Hawley  
United States Senator