

NEWS MEDIA ALLIANCE

June 4, 2018

The Honorable John Thune
Chairman
Committee on Commerce, Science, and
Transportation
United States Senate
511 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Bill Nelson
Ranking Member
Committee on Commerce, Science, and
Transportation
United States Senate
716 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Greg Walden
Chairman
Energy and Commerce Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
2185 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Frank Pallone
Ranking Member
Energy and Commerce Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
237 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Chuck Grassley
Chairman
Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate
135 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein
Ranking Member
Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate
331 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Bob Goodlatte
Chairman
Committee on the Judiciary
U.S. House of Representatives
2309 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Jerrold Nadler
Ranking Member
Committee on the Judiciary
U.S. House of Representatives
2109 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Members of Congress,

I am writing on behalf of the News Media Alliance, which represents 2,000 news organizations across the United States and globally. In an effort to create a more transparent advertising ecosystem, Facebook has imposed a new policy for registering and labeling political ads. While we understand the reasons for the new policy and support its goals, we believe that the new policy sweeps within its scope materials that are not “political ads” but are instead promotion of news coverage of political issues, and that thus the impact of the policy will jeopardize the news media’s ability to play its critical role in society as the fourth estate by improperly characterizing such news coverage as political advertising.

Facebook has become one of the primary sources of news and information for current events and politics around the world. Because voters rely on Facebook for news, including political coverage, Congress has rightfully become concerned over its influence on state and federal elections, and Facebook is attempting to respond to these concerns. However, Facebook has hastily overcorrected with a system that throws any and all sources of content into a political advocacy archive. A thoughtful response to the concerns would have taken into account the significant differences between political advertising and news/editorial coverage of political events and would have excluded the latter from the reach of the new rules.

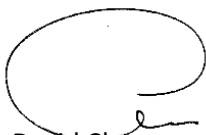
News publications are only categorized as advertising in the first place because of Facebook's decision earlier this year to prioritize posts from friends and deprioritize content from news publishers. This decision contradicts Facebook's own claims that 56% of their users say they want more news, yet it still remains unclear why the algorithm would be adjusted to work adverse to those interests. Nevertheless, in light of this new policy, many news publishers now find it necessary to promote their articles through paid advertising so that they can reach their readers with valuable content.

Facebook is forcing publishers to make a choice between labeling that is fundamentally counter to who we are and what we do, or to walk back our presence on a dominant platform for news consumption and discovery. By conflating "reporting" and "politics," Facebook is further contributing to the erosion of trust of the news media, and potentially reducing access to critical insights by depriving people from independently assessing and ultimately understanding key issues. Facebook is undermining the core outcome it is trying to strengthen.

We cannot and will not engage in any process that conflates legitimate news-reporting with political advocacy. We ask you to support the news media industry by holding a set of hearings that will cover these issues and possible solutions, similar to the series of hearings that have been held in UK to uncover these abuses. Topics should include examining the issue raised in this letter and treatment of news as political advocacy; consideration of legislation that would allow for news media to collectively negotiate with the tech platforms and avoid decisions like the one identified in this letter; and a look at the algorithm's lack of transparency that veils bad behavior.

We are deeply concerned about this new policy to treat reputable news as political advocacy and we call upon your leadership to engage on this issue and to help us course correct what could be an irreparable moment in the history of news.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Chavern". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "D".

David Chavern
President and CEO
News Media Alliance