

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 21, 2018

The Honorable John Thune  
Chairman  
U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation  
512 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Bill Nelson  
Ranking Member  
U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation  
512 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Thune and Ranking Member Nelson:

Thank you for your leadership on the Commerce Committee in addressing critical issues facing American consumers, including the role of social media in our daily lives. I was pleased that the Committee took the opportunity in a January 2018 hearing to explore how domestic and international terrorist organizations as well as adversarial nation-states like Russia have exploited these platforms.

Since that hearing, we have learned of additional challenges social media platforms have presented across the country and in Wisconsin. The extremely concerning news regarding Cambridge Analytica's unauthorized use of millions of Facebook users' personal information, as well as reports of Russian actors exploiting Twitter to spread political and social unrest in the Sherman Park neighborhood of Milwaukee in August 2016 demand a federal response, and I call on the Committee to hold a hearing so we can get to work addressing these serious threats.

Media reports here and in the United Kingdom revealed that Cambridge Analytica obtained the private data of more than 50 million Facebook users in order to sell voter information to political campaigns. The vast majority of this activity occurred without the consent of these users. This action has already prompted the Federal Trade Commission to investigate whether Facebook made this information available to Cambridge Analytica in violation of a November 2011 consent decree governing the social media giant's privacy practices. While I applaud the FTC for promptly looking into these highly disturbing reports, I believe the Committee has an obligation to better understand Facebook's actions as well.

Beyond this story, there have been a growing number of reports of social media platforms – specifically Facebook and Twitter – having been used as a platform for Russian actors to

propagate false, divisive messages aimed at influencing the 2016 presidential election and otherwise generating division in our country. At the Committee's January hearing, I expressed significant concerns about Russia's exploitation of social media to amplify its disinformation campaign and questioned Facebook and Twitter regarding their efforts to combat this malign activity. While the companies' responses demonstrated some positive steps, they also revealed an overly optimistic assessment of the effectiveness of their policies and a concerning inability to grasp the true magnitude of the problem.

Indeed, this threat to our democracy is not going away, and we are learning more seemingly every day. For example, the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* recently reported that Russia-linked Twitter accounts, including one recently named in Special Counsel Robert Mueller's indictment of Russian nationals engaged in election interference, sought to spread racism and political attacks during the August 2016 civil unrest following a police-involved shooting in Milwaukee. This follows September media reports that revealed Russian propagandists purchased political ads and promoted fake events on Facebook and Instagram on candidates and issues during the 2016 campaign – many of them targeted at voters in Wisconsin.

I am troubled by these companies' failure both to protect their users' data and to prevent their platforms from being used to disseminate false information, pushed by a foreign power, designed to interfere with our elections and undermine our institutions. The Committee has an obligation to assess the threat to consumers and their privacy as they utilize social media platforms that have become central to everyday life and the exchange of information and ideas.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Tammy Baldwin", is written over the printed name.

Senator Tammy Baldwin