



**Testimony of Nora Benavidez, Free Press  
Parliament of Canada, House of Commons  
December 7, 2023**

Thank you for inviting me. I'm Nora Benavidez, senior counsel at Free Press Action, a U.S.-based NGO where I run public accountability campaigns and federal policy reform efforts to ensure that tech is protecting human and civil rights and upholding democracy.

Following years of work by civil society, academics, and lawmakers documenting social media harms and urging more accountability, the largest technology companies have responded with disinterest. What's worse, increasingly they have used dangerous tactics to evade accountability.

Since the global pandemic, other crises — like the January 6th insurrection at the US Capitol, the attempted coup in Brazil in January 2023 and the current conflict in the Middle East — illustrate the critical role social-media platforms play in shaping rapidly unfolding events. The failure to vet and remove content that violates platforms' own stated terms of service harms and alienates users. Failure to moderate content inevitably leads to the migration of lies and toxicity from online platforms to mainstream media.<sup>1</sup>

Just *today*, Free Press released new research on the backsliding of big tech companies. In the last year alone, Meta, Twitter and YouTube have weakened their political ads policies creating room for lies in ads ahead of next year's U.S. elections; they have weakened their privacy policies to give AI tools access to user data.<sup>2</sup> And they have collectively laid off nearly 41,000 employees.<sup>3</sup> Massive cuts occurred across these companies' teams for trust and safety, ethical engineering, responsible innovation, and content-moderation — teams tasked with maintaining the platforms' general health and protecting their users from harm.

This dangerous backslide has come under scrutiny. Evidence comes from whistleblowers like Frances Haugen, and from research by university experts on algorithmic discrimination on platforms. The pressure also comes from campaigns like those Free Press runs, urging advertisers to leave Twitter

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Speri, "Beheaded Babies' Report Spread Wide and Fast — But Israel Military Won't Confirm it," *The Intercept*, Oct. 11, 2023, <https://theintercept.com/2023/10/11/israel-hamas-disinformation/>

<sup>2</sup> Dean Jackson, Meaghan Conry and Alex Newhouse, "Insiders' View of the January 6th Committee's Social Media Investigation," *Just Security*, Jan. 5, 2023, <https://www.justsecurity.org/84658/insiders-view-of-the-january-6th-committees-social-media-investigation/>; Cat Zakrzewski, Cristiano Lima and Drew Harwell, "What the Jan. 6 Probe Found Out About Social Media, but Didn't Report," *The Washington Post*, Jan. 17, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/01/17/jan6-committee-report-social-media/>

<sup>3</sup> Google laid off contractors from Accenture and Cognizant who had previously worked on platform services for YouTube. See Thomas Maxwell and Hugh Langley, "Google Is Downsizing Its Contract Workforce That Supports YouTube Shortly After One Contractor Team's Union Victory," *Business Insider*, May 15, 2023, <https://www.businessinsider.com/google-downsizes-contract-workforce-youtube-union-win-2023-5>

over Elon Musk's decisions that made the platform more hateful and violent. All of this points to the fact that tech companies cannot be trusted to govern themselves.

Their response has been far from collaborative. In fact, big tech companies are adopting new tactics to shut down inquiry and accountability:

1. First is cutting off researcher and API access to platform data.
  - a. Researchers suffer various limitations which make it harder to know the broader impact of harmful content on platforms and harder for lawmakers to effectively regulate opaque tech companies.
    - i. Facebook cut off the NYU Ad Observatory in 2021 from accessing the platform's services following months of university researchers attempting to analyze its ad library tools and business model.
    - ii. Twitter has made access to its API portal almost impossible for researchers given the high price tag now.
    - iii. And all of the major platforms require advanced notice from researchers, who must be affiliated with universities to get access to their API, of what they intend to publish from accessing platform data. This sets up a de facto approval process for platforms to reject research access if they don't like how it will be used.
2. Second is litigation to silence researchers and critics.
  - a. Elon Musk has adopted this tactic and gone after several research entities and NGOs studying the extent to which hate persists and grows on Twitter. Musk has sued the Center for Countering Digital Hate, the state of California, and Media Matters for America, plus threatened the ADL, which caved to his pressure in exchange for advertising and other support.
  - b. These suits are dangerous to researchers, who must think twice about investigating platform behavior even if they are not yet targeted in filed cases; but they're also dangerous for the public, which will be kept in the dark about tech companies' unethical practices. And that's the point.
3. And third are cross sector attacks abusing official power to go after researchers studying disinformation.
  - a. This past summer, U.S. House Judiciary Chairman Jim Jordan led an effort demanding documents from leading academics, accusing them of suppressing conservative speech.<sup>4</sup> These attacks have led researchers to retreat.<sup>5</sup> Big tech didn't have to go after every tech accountability researcher and campaigner because these actions already have had an extremely chilling effect on research and accountability work across the globe.

We've witnessed, in plain sight, tech companies run nearly every play in the book to avoid regulation and accountability.

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<sup>4</sup> Id.; Cat Zakrzewski and Cristiano Lima, "GOP Lawmakers Allege Big Tech Conspiracy," *The Washington Post*, Feb. 8, 2023,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/02/08/house-republicans-twitter-files-collusion/>

<sup>5</sup> Id.

Meanwhile, their platforms are undermining democracy, civil and human rights, privacy and public safety. And that's why Free Press has called on the U.S. government to compel more transparency from these companies; to minimize their data collection, use, and retention; to outlaw discriminatory algorithms and business practices; and to tax online advertising and redistribute those funds to support local, independent, non-commercial journalism.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.