

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 6, 2019

Ms. Susan Wojcicki
CEO
YouTube
901 Cherry Ave.
San Bruno, CA 94066

Dear Ms. Wojcicki:

We write with concern that YouTube has repeatedly failed to address child sexual exploitation and predatory behavior on its platform. Since February, bloggers, journalists, and child safety organizations have raised alarm over a chilling pattern of pedophiles and child predators using YouTube to sexualize and exploit minors.¹ Despite promises of change, the *New York Times* now reports that YouTube's recommendation mechanism continues to actively and automatically push sensitive videos involving children. The sexualization of children through YouTube's recommendation engine represents the development of a dangerous new kind of illicit content meant to avoid law enforcement detection. Action is overdue; YouTube must act forceful and swiftly to end this disturbing risk to children and society.

In February, video blogger Mark Watson published a series of videos demonstrating that the platform is being used for "facilitating pedophiles' ability to connect with each-other, trade contact info, and link to actual child pornography in the comments."² At that time, YouTube's video recommendation system was found to promote increasingly sexualized content involving minors. Below those videos were often comments attempting to contact and groom children.³ Shockingly, those comments also concealed a network of predators, providing each other timestamps and links to sensitive and revealing moments within videos – such as those of children wearing bathing suits or dressing. Effectively, YouTube's comments have fostered a ring of predators trafficking in the sexualization and exploitation of innocent videos of minors. In response, YouTube disabled comments for videos involving children.⁴

¹ MattsWhatItIs. "Youtube Is Facilitating the Sexual Exploitation of Children, and It's Being Monetized (2019)." YouTube. February 17, 2019.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=4&v=O13G5A5w5P0.

² Alexander, Julia. "YouTube Still Can't Stop Child Predators in Its Comments." The Verge. February 19, 2019. <https://www.theverge.com/2019/2/19/18229938/youtube-child-exploitation-recommendation-algorithm-predators>.

³ Orphanides, K.G. "On YouTube, a Network of Paedophiles Is Hiding in Plain Sight." WIRED. June 03, 2019. <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/youtube-pedophile-videos-advertising>.

⁴ Wakabayashi, Daisuke. "YouTube Bans Comments on Videos of Young Children in Bid to Block Predators." The New York Times. February 28, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/28/technology/youtube-pedophile-comments.html?module=inline>.

Recent research has found that even without the pedophilic comments on videos involving minors, YouTube's recommendation system is guiding child predators to find sensitive and at-risk videos of children. Researchers from the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society found when users started with one risky video, the recommendation system would start "showing the video to users who watched other videos of prepubescent, partially clothed children."⁵ Researchers found that YouTube viewers would be provided increasingly extreme recommendations over time – more sexualized content and younger women, including partially-clothed children. This pattern appears to be related to how YouTube learns recommendations: if a subset of viewers are using the platform to seek suggestive videos of children, it will begin to reproduce that pattern to find and recommend other suggestive videos. With YouTube asleep at the wheel, predators have taken the reins.

As members of the Senate Judiciary Committee and the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, we are dismayed at YouTube's slow and inadequate response to repeated stories about child exploitation of its platform. Once again, YouTube has promised change, including to reduce the risk from its recommendation system.⁶ However, despite past promises to address its recommendation system, YouTube has continued steering of users into exploitative content.⁷ This is not merely an issue with algorithms, YouTube has failed to take down videos from child abusers, even highly-visible cases and after repeated reports.⁸ YouTube must do all it can to prevent the exploitation of children, starting with the design of its algorithms and administration of its products.

Given the sensitivity and seriousness of the matter, we request a written response to the following questions by June 25, 2019:

1. Who at YouTube is in charge of coordinating its efforts to combat child sexual exploitation and protect the safety of minors on the platform? How is that individual included in design decisions and the product lifecycle?
2. What specific criteria (such as the correlation of previously watched or liked videos) does YouTube's content recommendation system use in order to recommend videos involving children? Does it take any measures to prevent content involving minors from being recommended after sexualized videos or based on patterns from predatory users?
3. In its June 3, 2019 announcement, YouTube offers that it will reduce recommendations for "videos featuring minors in risky situations." How will YouTube deem whether a video puts a child at risk? What steps will be taken when it identifies such a video?

⁵ Fisher, Max, and Amanda Taub. "On YouTube's Digital Playground, an Open Gate for Pedophiles." *The New York Times*. June 03, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/03/world/americas/youtube-pedophiles.html>.

⁶ "An Update on Our Efforts to Protect Minors and Families." Official YouTube Blog. June 03, 2019. <https://youtube.googleblog.com/2019/06/an-update-on-our-efforts-to-protect.html>.

⁷ "Continuing Our Work to Improve Recommendations on YouTube." Official YouTube Blog. January 25, 2019. <https://youtube.googleblog.com/2019/01/continuing-our-work-to-improve.html>.

⁸ Pilon, Mary. "Larry Nassar's Digital Ghosts." *The Cut*. May 29, 2019. <https://www.thecut.com/2019/05/why-wouldnt-youtube-remove-a-disturbing-larry-nassar-video.html>.

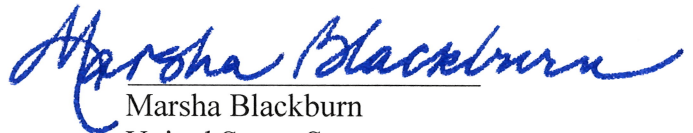
4. Will YouTube disable recommendations for videos involving minors until it can ensure its systems no longer facilitates the sexualization and exploitation of children?
5. Will YouTube commit to an independent audit of how its content recommendation systems and other functions of its platform addresses and prevents predatory practices against children?
6. What policies does YouTube have or is considering to proactively address videos involving known child sexual predators or individuals on publicly available sex-offender databases?

Thank you for your attention to these important issues. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senate



Marsha Blackburn
United States Senate