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September 8, 2021

Andy Jassy  
CEO  
Amazon  
410 Terry Avenue North  
Seattle, WA 98109-5210

Dear Mr. Jassy:

For over a year and a half, Americans of all walks of life have made tremendous sacrifices to protect themselves, their loved ones, and their communities from the devastation of COVID-19. At each stage of this pandemic, however, insidious misinformation has wreaked havoc both on the government's and the public's efforts to combat the spread.

The scientific community has accomplished an incredible feat by providing a safe, effective COVID-19 vaccine in record time.<sup>1</sup> These vaccines are the only safe, long-term path to herd immunity and community protection. An unprecedented cooperative operation, from the federal government down to heroic local medical teams, has provided the infrastructure to get shots in arms as fast as possible.

Yet even as we see the light at the end of the tunnel, leading public health experts have cautioned that vaccination rates in the U.S. have stagnated, mainly because of vaccine hesitancy. We cannot allow the rapid and dangerous spread of anti-vaccine marketing and misinformation to keep Americans from the valid, factual information they need to protect themselves from this virus.

While I appreciate your willingness to acknowledge my letter on March 1, 2019, with your response on March 13, 2019, your answers regarding Amazon's policies left much unclear as the time since has demonstrated. It is the duty of Congress to investigate the challenges our constituents face and whether legislation is needed to ensure their safety. With the health of our communities and the lives of thousands of Americans relying on our ability to achieve herd immunity, I write to you again seeking a more thorough explanation of what Amazon is doing to mitigate the platform your company provides for the dangerous spread of vaccine misinformation.

Online platforms play a critical role in the accessibility of accurate, or inaccurate, scientific information. While many platforms, including Amazon, have taken certain steps to create removal processes for dangerous posts,

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<sup>1</sup> "COVID-19 Vaccine Effectiveness Research." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. August 11, 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/effectiveness-research/protocols.html>.

the audiences of anti-vaccine influencers have continued to grow.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Amazon has also refused to provide public policies or updated information on the reporting process and removal numbers, even when requested by your own shareholders.<sup>3</sup> This practice is unacceptable.

Particularly concerning is that, despite the current public health crisis, misinformation about vaccines still does not appear in Amazon's content guidelines.<sup>4,5</sup> In your letter, your justification for this absence is that Amazon "provide[s] our customers with access to a variety of viewpoints." This cannot possibly justify the sale of false information that directly endangers your customers. Furthermore, research has shown that combatting anti-vaccine conspiracies by posing factual and counter-factual information as opposing, but equal viewpoints is ineffective at combatting misinformation and disinformation.<sup>6,7,8</sup>

Amazon has unique influence over public information because of the trust users place in its recommendation systems. Amazon maintains a search algorithm which is supposed to provide users with the most useful products to meet their needs. Understandably, users rely heavily on this feature. They expect the products labeled "Amazon's Choice" to be reliable and factual, and to carry the endorsement of the company. Within publications in particular, they reasonably expect bestseller lists to accurately reflect their topics. Recent concerning findings, however, indicate that Amazon's recommendation systems promote dangerous misinformation on vaccines. A University of Washington study published in January 2021 found that for vaccine-related searches on Amazon, over 10% of the results contained health misinformation.<sup>9</sup>

Although your letter stated that your algorithms are not designed to favor certain points of view, the factors they do consider favor sensationalism, which may result in the over-recommendation of misinformation and conspiracy theories. Recent investigations indicate that Amazon's algorithms are boosting anti-vaccine products throughout the site over fact-based vaccine information<sup>10</sup> and pushing customers towards content bubbles of extreme disinformation.<sup>11</sup> Further, Amazon algorithms and lists have been easily manipulated by bad actors through false reviews, targeted purchasing, miscategorization, or even intentional misspellings.<sup>12,13</sup>

As long as these materials remain on the site, Amazon is directly profiting from the sensationalism of anti-vaccine misinformation, while these conspiracy theories continue to directly contribute to COVID-19 deaths.

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<sup>2</sup> "Pandemic Profiteers: The Business of Anti-vaxx." [https://252f2edd-1c8b-49f5-9bb2-cb57bb47e4ba.filesusr.com/ugd/f4d9b9\\_00b2ad56fe524d82b271a75e441cd06c.pdf](https://252f2edd-1c8b-49f5-9bb2-cb57bb47e4ba.filesusr.com/ugd/f4d9b9_00b2ad56fe524d82b271a75e441cd06c.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> The Associated Press. "Amazon Asks for Block on Shareholder Hate Speech Proposal." ABC News. January 28, 2021. <https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/amazon-block-shareholder-proposals-hate-speech-75540446>.

<sup>4</sup> "Prohibited Product Claims." Amazon. 2011. [https://sellercentral.amazon.com/gp/help/external/G202024200?language=en\\_US](https://sellercentral.amazon.com/gp/help/external/G202024200?language=en_US).

<sup>5</sup> "Offensive and Controversial Materials." Amazon. 2011.

[https://sellercentral.amazon.com/gp/help/external/help.html?itemID=200164670&language=en\\_US&ref=efph\\_200164670\\_cont\\_200164330](https://sellercentral.amazon.com/gp/help/external/help.html?itemID=200164670&language=en_US&ref=efph_200164670_cont_200164330).

<sup>6</sup> Thurston, Andrew. "How To Fight Vaccine Misinformation." How To Fight Vaccine Misinformation | College of Communication. January 29, 2021. <https://www.bu.edu/com/articles/how-to-fight-vaccine-misinformation/>.

<sup>7</sup> Allington, Daniel. "Vaccine Hesitancy, and What We Can Do about It." Center for Countering Digital Hate. May 14, 2021. <https://www.counterhate.com/post/vaccine-hesitancy-and-what-we-can-do-about-it>.

<sup>8</sup> Brownstein, Joseph. "Antivaccination Parents Dig In Heels Even after Receiving Medical Info." Scientific American. March 03, 2014. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/antivaccination-parents-dig-in-heels-even-after-receiving-medical-info/>.

<sup>9</sup> Juneja, Perna, and Tanushree Mitra. "Auditing E-Commerce Platforms for Algorithmically Curated Vaccine Misinformation." May 6, 2021. <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2101.08419.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Juneja, Perna, and Tanushree Mitra. "Auditing E-Commerce Platforms for Algorithmically Curated Vaccine Misinformation." May 6, 2021. <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2101.08419.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Silverman, Craig. "Amazon Is Pushing Readers Down A "Rabbit Hole" Of Conspiracy Theories About The Coronavirus." BuzzFeed News. March 15, 2021. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/amazon-covid-conspiracy-books>.

<sup>12</sup> Pasternack, Alex. "How Amazon Became an Engine for Anti-vaccine Conspiracy Theories." Fast Company. June 09, 2021. Accessed August 27, 2021. <https://www.fastcompany.com/90640389/amazon-anti-vaccine-misinformation-moderation>.

<sup>13</sup> Gilbertson, Annie. "Unlike Other Tech Giants, Amazon Won't Say How Many Workers Review Posts – The Markup." The Markup. July 9, 2020. Accessed August 27, 2021. <https://themarkup.org/banned-bounty/2020/07/09/amazon-content-moderation-banned-items>.

As a Member of Congress who is deeply concerned by the prevalence of vaccine hesitancy during this time of crisis, I request additional, more detailed information on Amazon's policies regarding false or misleading health information in order to identify potential needs for federal regulation.

Specifically, please provide detailed responses to the following questions:

- Does content which provides medically inaccurate information about vaccines still not violate your terms of service? If so, what standard of danger or potential harm does Amazon use to consider misinformation or conspiracy theories dangerous?
- What is the size of your content moderation operation, including numbers of staff and resources devoted, and what are your goals for depth and breadth of moderation? What is the status of progress toward meeting these goals?
- What steps are you currently taking to ensure that filters and recommendations are not used to promote misleading or false health information?
- How do you identify abuse of recommendation systems, such as topic-based bestseller lists and "Amazon's Choice" labels, and what steps do you take to prevent sellers from continuing to abuse these systems?
- In your response letter, you noted that Amazon has identified books opposed to vaccination using misleading categorizations and that Amazon was "actively working to resolve this." Has this issue been resolved, and how is Amazon mitigating and preventing further abuse?
- What review process do you currently conduct before bestowing a product or seller with the "Amazon's Choice" label? Do you take into consideration false or misleading claims made by the seller in other products before awarding the label?

I appreciate your timely response to these questions. Millions of Americans rely on Amazon to access health information and products, and I strongly encourage you to take further immediate action to meet the demands of this public health crisis. Our health, and particularly our children's health, depends upon it.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Adam B. Schiff". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Adam" and last name "Schiff" being more legible than the middle initial "B".

Adam B. Schiff  
Member of Congress