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U.S. Sen. Baldwin, Colleagues: Demand information from TikTok on algorithms promoting eating disorder content to users

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WISCONSIN – U.S. Senators Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) and Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) sent a letter to TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew demanding information about the company's algorithms that promote content glorifying eating disorders to users, particularly teenage girls.

In the letter, the senators highlighted a recent Wall Street Journal investigation that found "TikTok's algorithm has exposed numerous teenagers to videos that encourage drastic, unhealthy weight-loss measures and eating disorders…[and] over time, increasingly shows teen users unmoderated content, oftentimes related to self-harm and suicide."

"While disturbing content promoting eating disorders is not unique to TikTok and exists on other social media platforms such as Instagram, the nature of TikTok's algorithm of 'nonstop stream of videos' increases the likelihood that viewers will encounter harmful content even without seeking it out," **the senators wrote.** "We are deeply disturbed by this report and believe this content violates TikTok's policies related to self-harm, suicide, and dangerous acts."

The senators also called on TikTok to specifically address how its recently announced changes related to their algorithmic and content moderation systems would reduce the proliferation of harmful eating disorder content.

Senators Baldwin and Klobuchar are leaders in the fight to reduce online content

that may promote eating disorders. In October, they joined Senator Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV) in sending a bipartisan letter to Facebook expressing concerns over Instagram algorithms suggesting content that glorifies eating disorders, especially to teenage girls.

The two senators recently introduced the bipartisan Anna Westin Legacy Act, which provides training and technical assistance to health care workers, teachers, and parents on how to identify eating disorders and support patients in recovery. This bill builds upon Baldwin and Klobuchar's bipartisan Anna Westin Act, named in honor of the late Anna Westin of Chaska, Minnesota, which the Senate passed in 2016. The Anna Westin Act included provisions to increase training and education on eating disorders and ensure parity for insurance coverage of residential treatment of eating disorders.

The full text of the letter is available HERE and below:

Dear Mr. Chew:

We write to express our serious concerns regarding reports of content promoting eating disorders proliferating on TikTok.

Eating disorders have one of the highest mortality rates of any mental illness. In 2016, we led the Anna Westin Act because it was clear that people living with eating disorders needed more support. Today, we are coming together again to express our concern regarding the proliferation of content glorifying eating disorders on TikTok.

A Wall Street Journal investigation involving TikTok accounts registered as 13-year-olds found that TikTok's algorithm served them tens of thousands of weight-loss videos within a few weeks of joining the platform. According to this reporting, TikTok's algorithm has exposed numerous teenagers to videos that encourage drastic, unhealthy weight-loss measures and eating disorders. The investigation also found that, over time, TikTok increasingly shows teen users unmoderated content, oftentimes related to self-harm and suicide. While disturbing content promoting eating disorders is not unique to TikTok and exists on other social media platforms such as Instagram, the nature of TikTok's algorithm of a "nonstop stream of videos" increases the likelihood that viewers will encounter harmful content even without seeking it out.

We are deeply disturbed by this report and believe this content violates TikTok's policies related to self-harm, suicide, and dangerous acts.

We ask that you answer the following questions by March 9, 2022:

1. How many unique TikTok users do you estimate saw content promoting unhealthy eating in 2021? Please provide estimates for both all users and separately for teenage or younger users, broken down by age.
2. TikTok recently announced plans to change the algorithms that recommend content to users on the app with the goal to "avoid recommending a series of similar content – such as around extreme dieting or fitness, sadness, or breakups." Please answer the following questions about these planned changes.
    1. Please describe and provide copies of any studies, reports, or other documents TikTok has developed or received related to how TikTok can improve its algorithm to avoid recommending harmful videos to users.
    2. Please describe in detail how TikTok will be changing its algorithmic systems, when the changes will be rolled out, which users they will be rolled out to, and how TikTok will evaluate their impacts.
    3. Please provide copies of all documents prepared by or for any officer or director at your company that discuss, question, or analyze the Wall Street Journal's reporting from December 2021 or September 2021 about TikTok and harmful content.

3. Reports indicate TikTok prioritizes videos with high numbers of views when moderating content. This could leave millions of videos unreviewed for content violations because they do not have a high enough number of views.

    1. When moderating content, does TikTok prioritize videos with more than 10,000 views? How does TikTok moderate content with less than 10,000 views? Please describe in detail any differences in TikTok's content moderation approaches based on viewership, including how any such policies or approaches have changed in the last 18 months.
    2. In the last 12 months, how many videos with fewer than 10,000 views were removed from TikTok for violations of TikTok's content policies? How many users saw these videos before they were removed?

4. Please describe, in detail, any plans TikTok has to develop or roll out additional features for parents or teens to reduce the influence of this harmful content or

otherwise promote safe and healthy experiences on TikTok.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

An online version of this release is available here.