

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

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August 14, 2024

Sundar Pichai
Chief Executive Officer
Google LLC
1600 Amphitheatre Parkway
Mountain View, CA 94043

Dear Mr. Pichai:

The Committee on Oversight and Accountability is investigating recent concerning reports on how Google Search's Autocomplete function returned results for searches concerning the assassination attempt of President Donald Trump in Butler County, Pennsylvania on July 13th.¹ Google users report that autocompleted search prompts related to the assassination attempt of President Trump produced results for failed assassination attempts of former Presidents, including Harry Truman, Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan—or even assassinations of historical figures such as Archduke Franz Ferdinand—but omitted from the list of automatically generated search suggestions the recent attempt on President Trump's life.

The Committee appreciates Google's prompt cooperation with the Committee's initial inquiry into this matter, including providing a staff-level briefing last week. The briefing, however, raised additional questions especially against the backdrop of an alarming pattern of speech suppression and censorship peddled through technology and social media companies. The Committee now writes to request certain documents and information to assist its investigation of this matter to better understand how Google designs its Search product and Autocomplete feature.

In response to preliminary staff inquiries, Google contends that the Autocomplete results omitted the Trump assassination attempt due to a safety protocol concerning predicted assassination attempts of current political leaders, and Google had not yet updated the Autocomplete feature to reflect that an assassination attempt of President Trump had occurred. The Committee has long been concerned with how large technology companies leverage their businesses to influence public opinion—especially the design and use of content moderation policies within private sector social media companies—and how company policies are shaped and influenced by Executive Branch officials.

¹ See James Franey, *Google slammed after search for 'Trump rally' yields pro-Kamala Harris results, faces accusations of political interference*, N.Y. POST (Aug. 2, 2024).

For instance, in August 2022, Mark Zuckerberg confirmed that Facebook’s censorship of the *New York Post* story about Hunter Biden’s laptop followed warnings from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) that Facebook should be cautious of misinformation and foreign interference ahead of the 2020 election.² Twitter’s decision to censor the *New York Post* story about Hunter Biden’s laptop followed the company’s close relationship with state and federal officials—including the FBI.³ On February 8, 2023, the Committee held a hearing titled “Protecting Speech from Government Interference and Social Media Bias, Part 1: Twitter’s Role in Suppressing the Biden Laptop Story” to investigate how and why Twitter suppressed the *New York Post* story in the lead up to the 2020 Presidential election and how internal content moderation policies at Twitter had been regularly enforced.⁴ This was no trivial matter. For instance, a poll of Biden voters in seven swing states found that 17 percent of them would have switched their votes if they had been aware of the Hunter Biden laptop story that was suppressed.⁵

Following on this investigative effort, the Committee advanced, and the U.S. House passed, H.R. 140, the Protecting Speech from Government Interference Act, to expressly prohibit federal employees from using their authority to influence or coerce a private sector entity to censor any lawful speech posted on its service by a person or entity.⁶ The Committee remains wary about the potential for Executive Branch officials to exert pressure on technology companies to remove, suppress, and restrict newsworthy content.

Americans rely upon prominent internet search engines such as Google to gather news and information critical to their understanding of national politics and events—and never more so than during a Presidential election season. Judge Amit P. Mehta recently recognized that “The brand [Google] is synonymous with search.” He noted that:

In 2009, 80% of all search queries in the United States already went through Google. That number has only grown. By 2020, it was nearly 90%, and even higher on mobile devices at almost 95%.⁷

On behalf of the American people, the Committee is dedicated to fully understanding when and how information is being suppressed or modified, whether it be due to technical error, a policy intended to ensure safety, or a specific intent to mislead.

² Jared Gans, *Zuckerberg Tells Rogan Facebook Suppressed Hunter Biden Laptop Story after FBI Warning*, THE HILL (Aug. 26, 2022).

³ *Protecting Speech from Government Interference and Social Media Bias, Part 1: Hearing Before H. Comm. On Oversight & Accountability*, 118th Cong. (Feb. 8, 2023).

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Tim Murtaugh, *Media’s suppression of Hunter Biden’s laptop was election interference*, WASHINGTON TIMES (Mar. 24, 2022).

⁶ Protecting Speech from Government Interference Act, H.R. 140, 118th Cong. (2023).

⁷ Memorandum Opinion in *U.S. et al. v. Google LLC*, No. 20-cv-03010 (Aug. 5, 2024).

To assist its investigation, the Committee requests that Google produce the following documents and information, covering the time period January 1, 2023, to the present unless otherwise indicated, as soon as possible, but no later than August 28, 2024:

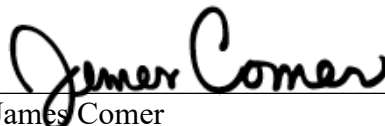
1. All internal policies or any other documents related to how Google Search is designed, reviewed, managed, and updated to take into account and incorporate recent newsworthy events;
2. All internal policies or any other documents related to how Google Search's Autocomplete feature is designed, trained, managed, reviewed, and updated to take into account and incorporate recent newsworthy events; and
3. All internal policies or any other documents related to how Google Search's Autocomplete feature is designed, trained, managed, reviewed, or updated to avoid query results that Google desires to limit or preclude because it views them to be harmful or dangerous.

To arrange for the delivery of responsive documents or ask any related follow-up questions, please contact the Committee on Oversight and Accountability Majority staff at (202) 225-5074. Attached are instructions for producing the documents and information to the Committee.

The Committee on Oversight and Accountability is the principal oversight committee of the U.S. House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate "any matter" at "any time" under House Rule X.

Thank you in advance for cooperating with this inquiry.

Sincerely,



James Comer
Chairman
Committee on Oversight and Accountability

cc: The Honorable Jamie B. Raskin, Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Accountability