Statement for the Record
U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack
on the United States Capitol

'The Rise of Alt-Tech and the Role of Gab in the January 6th Insurrection'

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Dr Ashton Kingdon and Dr Christopher J. Fuller are grateful that the U.S. House Select Committee is examining the January 6 Attack on the United States Capitol. We appreciate this opportunity to provide a statement for the record.

The January 6 insurrection revealed a new force in American politics — a broad coalition which saw members of fringe conspiratorial and far-right movements joined by a newly radicalized core of anti-government citizens. Predominantly middle-class, middle-aged, and according to available evidence, previously unassociated with extremist groups, this new movement had, like its more established insurrectionist associates, become so detached from reality that its members were willing to use violence to overturn what they believed to be the theft of the 2020 presidential election. That these participants made up over half of those arrested for their involvement in the insurrection makes understanding their road to radicalization vital for the long-term political health of the United States. The emergence of alt-tech platforms such as Gab — the focus of this statement — is a key step in the journey that some of these individuals took. But Gab should not be discussed in isolation. It is merely one component of an overlapping media ecosystem which has, over decades, contributed to the societal phenomenon of 'truth decay': the heightened disagreement about facts and data; blurring of opinion and fact; increase in the volume and influence of bias opinion; and diminishment of trust in respected institutions as sources of factual information. So, to understand Gab's role in the insurrection, it is first necessary to clarify how users came to be on the platform in the first place, and why these citizens were so vulnerable to the false stolen election narrative, that it inspired them to lay siege to their own government.

Truth Decay, Alt-Tech, and the Road to Gab

Consensus
The post-World War II economic boom, combined with the external challenges of the Cold War, helped forge the "liberal consensus". This general unanimity in social and political views coincided with, and was aided by, a media which predominantly shared broad journalistic values of truth, accuracy, and integrity. The paucity of choice of news outlets, combined with a journalistic sense of duty reinforced by the 1949 Fairness Doctrine (which required holders of broadcast licenses to discuss controversial issues of public importance in a manner that was honest, equitable, and balanced), ensured that news reporting was predominantly concerned with the impartial representation of events. By the 1960s however, some conservative publications, believing themselves marginalized by their more popular liberal rivals, began to challenge this notion, defining their reporting as *objective* rather than

impartial. By distinguishing between objectivity and impartiality, the conservative media sought to create a news environment in which bias was an acceptable journalistic value working in tandem with objectivity to publish facts they believed other outlets purposefully overlooked due to their own liberal biases, sowing the first seeds of truth decay.

Talk Radio
As deep political and social divisions led to the collapse of the liberal consensus in the 1970s, America's media ecosystem evolved to reflect this more fractious landscape. A further shift in tone was marked by the striking down of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987. While it had only regulated holders of broadcaster licenses, the assault upon the principle it represented as being out of step with "current marketplace conditions and First Amendment jurisprudence", permitted media outlets to engage in discussions with a new vehemence, coarseness, and bias, under the guise of freedom of speech. One of the first commentators to benefit was the radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh, whose show went nationwide in 1988. The broadcaster's staunch conservative positions promptly established him as a forceful voice of a political right, and within two years Limbaugh had amassed over 20 million listeners, success which inspired many more political and social commentators to express hardline opinions to the right of the mainstream political discourse of the time. The demonization of political opponents became common practice, as did the broadcast of purposefully divisive content and the dissemination of conspiracy theories. As audience numbers increased, commentators prioritised engagement over information, adopting the format of infotainment. The embrace of these populist false narratives not only transformed news and political commentary, but also began warping the relationship between reality and fiction, exposing millions more Americans to the damaging effects of truth decay.

Cable News
The blurring of news, opinion, and entertainment was accelerated by the proliferation of cable news channels. Like the talk radio stations that proceeded them, these channels were often avowedly partisan, with the purposeful use of bias in news reporting providing an identifiable consumer base to sell to advertisers, and thus generating massive profits in exchange for the further dividing of the body politic of the United States. While sensationalism was nothing new in America's media, the lack of regulation, focus upon entertainment at the expense of traditional journalism, and hosts' embrace of demagoguery meant citizens consumed divisive content, broadcast with a coarse vulgarity more akin to tabloids than traditional mainstream newscasting, with a breadth of choice that ensured viewers could find content that conformed to and satisfied their own ideological preconceptions. The deliberate confirmation bias of each network cultivated viewer loyalty, locking audiences into the selective realities each network constructed for its audience. In producing programming which boosted preferred candidates and policies and denigrated political opposition, the American public became subjected to propaganda every day of their lives as truth decay went mainstream.

Social Media
The emergence of the World Wide Web did nothing to diminish the deep political divides afflicting the United States. The 1996 Telecommunications Act's removal of responsibility for content from its online host allowed a new kind of business to emerge. Social media platforms encouraged users to upload and share content across their sites with the freedom to publish their words, images, and eventually videos without a legal responsibility for that content. Far from establishing the desired utopian global village, users brought with them the standards, expectations, and prejudices already established within the traditional media

ecosystem. These divisions were exacerbated by the business model social media platforms adopted, with the sites' owners learning to exploit the data they collected from their users to build profiles to sell for targeted advertising, which the sites themselves could host. To encourage users to spend more time online, thus providing more data, advertising, and retail opportunities, research into behavioural economics was utilised. The work posited that people make decisions based around one of two different systems of thinking: first, guesses, hunches, and gut feelings — emotional decision making based upon a sense of "I just know." The second, more critical mindset utilises analysis, statistical data, and probability. While good for addressing contested and controversial points, this mindset is much less appealing to advertisers, who seek to hook customers through a more emotional connection. Trying to grab the attention of consumers is nothing new, but Silicon Valley's insights into individual users enabled their platforms to customise and shape online content in personalised ways. In the pursuit of keeping users in the emotional state of mind, the web giants coded algorithms to filter a user's content and provide them with more of what they already liked while filtering out opposing opinions, evidence, and perspectives. These algorithmically curated "filter bubbles" proved enormously profitable, but were disastrous for critical discourse, as the automated censorship of content fed users ever more unrealistic and skewed views of the world around them, fencing them off from alternative perspectives and further embedding the consequences of truth decay.

Alt-Tech
Through its economically motivated filtering process, social media platforms served as incubators, allowing users which harboured conspiratorial and anti-government mindsets to connect, collaborate, and reach new members whose likeminded world views had been forged in the United States' biased, hostile, and filtered media ecosystem. Eventually however, as the role of social media platforms as hosts to groups based around specific conspiracy theories, far-right beliefs, and anti-government positions began to have negative consequences in the physical world, from calls for racial violence, to the livestreaming of terrorist attacks, to the spread of misinformation related to the Covid-19 pandemic, social media platforms reluctantly began to adopt the practice of censoring user content deemed inappropriate and harmful, with the ultimate sanction being the deletion of specific groups and accounts, a practice known as deplatforming. Rather than shutting down these harmful narratives however, this approach instead triggered the migration of these communities onto new alternative platforms, referred to as alt-tech, which promised users online spaces without the terms and conditions which had seen them removed from the mainstream platforms. The problems that had been present on the mainstream platforms were exacerbated by an even greater lack of control and responsibility, further filtering of information, and the coalescing of separate anti-government groups into single online communities, creating intellectually coherent and self-supporting narratives completely detached from reality. It is within this echo chamber that Gab exists, one component in a destructive media ecosystem inside which a diverse range of citizens, unmoored from objectivity and balance after decades of truth decay, united around the false narrative of a stolen election.

Introduction to Gab

The social network Gab was launched on August 15 2016 by Andrew Torba, who sought to develop an alternative to Facebook and Twitter to avoid censorship, and host contributions from more extreme personalities who were being removed from mainstream platforms. Most coverage on Gab looks similar to that of Facebook; a basic subscription enables users to have a profile, about me section and cover photo or avatar. There is a news feed with posts and a

sidebar listing with groups and trending topics. Users can like, comment, share, and follow others in a similar way to Twitter, and there is also seamless propaganda potential through public posts, and confidential communications through private chats. The site also encourages the joining of a plethora of groups organised around themes ranging from memetic warfare, rural life, natural living, traditionalism, and cybersecurity, to the more extreme anti-vaccine, America First, QAnon, patriotism, and anti-government. While designed as a social media network, Gab is an entire ecosystem encompassing video platforms and news sites, as well as a marketplace to buy and sell merchandise. The Gab Pro subscription allows the additional functions of users being able to schedule posts, upload content to GabTV (similar to YouTube), create groups, have accounts verified, set message expiration times, and create self-deleting public Gab posts. In addition to traditional features, in 2019 Gab extended its free speech platform with its tailor-made browser Dissenter – which enables users to circumvent censorship and comment freely on any URL on the internet. It also allows users to comment on news articles, YouTube videos, and social media posts when comments sections have been omitted or turned off.

In terms of content moderation, Gab presents itself as a free speech platform in conjunction with the law defined by the U.S Supreme Court and the First Amendment. This means that certain content is considered illegal and is strictly not tolerated, violators either being suspended or banned from using Gab's services. Crucially, Gab puts the responsibility of moderation firmly in the hands of its users, enabling them to set up their own content preferences. Each post or user profile on Gab is equipped with an option to mute, block, or report any content believed to be in violation of Gab's terms of services which includes direct threats, porn, doxing, spam, or illegal posts. Gab group administrators and GabTV channel operators moderate their own groups/channels, setting what they deem to be acceptable in relation to posting or commenting guidelines. Essentially, moderation covers any applicable federal, state, or local law of the US, and is not protected by the First Amendment to the US constitution. One of the key controversies of Gab, which will be discussed below, is the site's lack of formal moderation which can lead to a fertile environment for hate speech, extremism, and misinformation.

Platform Controversy

Prior to the attack on the Capitol Gab had already courted controversy due to its connection to a number of events. First, the Unite the Right rally which took place over two days in August 2017, saw hundreds of white supremacists gather to protest the removal of a Confederate statue of Robert E. Lee, located in Emancipation Park, Charlottesville, Virginia. The rally resulted in a vehicle-ramming attack carried out by James Alex Fields which led to the death of Heather Heyer. Consequently, social media companies began suppressing far-right content so propaganda could no longer be disseminated as efficiently. Facebook and Twitter suspended accounts *en masse* and YouTube began automatically removing far-right posts. The resulting suspension of far-right accounts from conventional platforms led to a backlash in which it was argued that information was being concentrated in the hands of a few monopolies and membership to Gab grew in the thousands. The second controversy surrounding the platform occurred on October 27, 2018 when Robert Bowers shot and killed eleven people in the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. Bowers had been extremely active on Gab, posting a series of messages providing a rationale for his attack based on antisemitic conspiracy theories and a disdain for immigration. More specifically, in the days before his attack, Bowers posted or reposted memes and comments at least 68 times. While Gab

removed Bowers' account and cooperated with federal authorities, the incident cost the platform its [GoDaddy](#) domain registration. PayPal, Stripe, Joyent, Shopify and Medium also [severed ties](#) with the site. Despite a clamp down, Rob Monster, CEO of Epik, put Gab back online as a means of protesting digital censorship and in the name of [freedom of speech](#).

In response to this emergent content moderation, alternative infrastructures for hosting online platforms utilising free open-source software and encompassing distributed websites, cryptocurrencies, and block-chain-based live-streaming swiftly emerged. Collectively, this new approach was dubbed alt-tech due to the alternative model it offered to the established mainstream social media platforms. Conventional platforms like Twitter and Facebook face criticism due to their [centralisation](#). When people use these platforms, they are trusting one company with all their data, and the platform is in control of what content is posted, which posts are taken down, and which accounts are suspended. A fundamental way of reducing censorship is to encourage greater decentralisation of social media, and, consequently, in July 2019, Gab began using [Mastodon](#), an alt-tech project designed to put social networking back into the hands of its users. Mastodon is not controlled by a single company, and is both [open-source and decentralised](#), the former meaning that anyone can access a copy of the code and edit it as they see fit, and the latter signifying that anyone can set up their Mastodon server. Although the main reason for Gab to [decentralise](#) as a platform was to prevent it from being taken down, by not existing in any one particular place and belonging to all who use it, this dispersion also promotes the primary goal of the platform, of upholding freedom of speech and protecting the First Amendment, as content can only be removed by the users.

The use of Gab in the January 6 Insurrection

In the year preceding the insurrection, extremist groups and likeminded but otherwise unaffiliated Trump supporters had been spreading and consuming misinformation on Gab. In particular, many people joined the platform following the 'stop the steal' hashtags being [promoted](#) on Facebook and Twitter. The phrase 'stop the steal' became a hallmark of Trump campaigns throughout his political career. It was first deployed during the 2016 Presidential election [orchestrated](#) under the auspices of defending Trump's Republican primary nomination and in protest of a potential Hillary Clinton victory. The phrase entered the public realm again in 2018 in relation to Florida and its close gubernatorial and Senate contests. In 2020, the phrase was overhauled to organise a nationwide network of protests that sought to pressure state and federal officials to overturn the results of the election and prevent Presidential elect Joe Biden from taking office. The Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab constructed a [timeline](#) of key events, both on and offline, centred on the coordination of 'stop the steal' efforts that escalated to violence and threatened the transition of power core to American democracy. Following the election of Joe Biden, Gab was filled with conspiracy theories and disinformation about the election results, information that came directly from Republican Party members as well as the [President himself](#). Trump's claims helped fuel increasingly heated rhetoric as he promoted conspiracy theories such as the [unfounded](#) notion that a company that makes electronic voting systems had deleted votes. Importantly, the 'stop the steal' network included movements, groups and individuals across the political and extremism spectrum including: hyper-partisan pro-Trump activists and media outlets, radical right groups like the Proud Boys, anti-government extremists, and QAnon adherents, and perhaps most importantly the newly radicalised believers, previously unconnected to extremism until their exposure to such content through Gab and the wider

media ecosystem. Each group overlapped but maintained distinct engagement and coordination on Gab, their amalgamation being propelled by the compounding crises occurring throughout the election cycle, such as the anti-government sentiment arising from Coronavirus restrictions and mask mandates, and the Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd. These groups were very much bound around the disinformation regarding the results of the 2020 election and extreme support of Trump, often amplified by Trump himself, which intensified the movement's actions towards violence. Though the 'stop the steal' movement was unsuccessful in its goal of maintaining Trump's power by explicitly anti-democratic means, it was successful in expanding the reach of election-related misinformation.

As well as being a hub for the distribution of conspiracy theories, anti-government propaganda, and misinformation regarding the 2020 election, Gab also served as a node for organising anti-government activity, including the attack upon the Capitol itself, due to the platform's minimal usage guidelines and restrictions regarding content. Analysis of Gab in the days leading up to January 6 revealed that it was awash with messages organising logistics including the distribution of flyers calling for armed rallies before the inauguration of Biden, guidance on the sort of tools that would be best suited to prying doors open, and directions for which streets to use in order to avoid the police. White nationalists, anti-government extremists, and QAnon adherents created chats and engaged in group conversations that included plans to surround the Capitol on all sides, and posted maps of the building with marked locations of tunnels and entry points. There was also discussion of overwhelming police with large crowds to violate the laws against carrying weapons and entering federal buildings. During the insurrection, hashtags were prominent on Gab including: Storm the Capitol; revolution; civil war; fight for Trump; the storm is here; and firing squad. Gab's media ecosystem has been advocating a 'deep state' narrative since its conception; on the day of the attack the platform's creator, Torba, wrote "in a system with rigged elections there are no longer any viable solutions". Taking this into account it could be suggested that Gab bears some responsibility in relation to inciting violence as it substantially helped organise and spread the word about the march on the capitol that eventually escalated into the insurrection attempt.

In the wake of the January 6 insurrection, Twitter and Facebook/Instagram de-platformed Trump for inciting violence and cracked down on his supporters, and Parler, another alt-tech platform, was removed from the Internet by Amazon, Apple, and Google for violating guidelines around violent content. This combination can be considered one of the largest 'big tech' exoduses in history as millions of users immediately migrated to Gab, which positioned itself as the only option for those seeking a true unwavering commitment to free speech online. Those espousing white supremacist ideology began invoking imagery of the Capitol attack to celebrate the start of a white revolution against the government. Likewise, virtual communities mourned and vowed revenge for Ashli Babbitt, a veteran who was shot and killed by a police officer while attempting to forcibly enter the House of Representatives through a broken window. The migration of individuals whose critical thinking has already been undermined by decades of exposure to truth decay across the media ecosystem exposes new audiences to more extreme ideologies, which can deepen and intensify far-right or conspiratorial beliefs and channel unfocused anger and anti-government sentiment towards political and cultural targets. Gab is a 'melting pot' of disparate subcultures ranging from neo-Nazis, traditional white supremacists, Identitarians, QAnon adherents, anti-government

extremists, and increasingly individuals seeking to escape what they perceive as mainstream media censorship. As such, the platform is facilitating the transfer of ideas and the development of the new force in American politics which was witnessed on January 6. But as this statement has demonstrated, how those users came to be on Gab, and where the attitudes they brought with them were developed, is the product of a wider media ecosystem which has been enabling and accelerating truth decay across American society for decades. And until this wider issue is addressed, platforms like Gab will continue to attract users who, detached from reality, will coalesce around conspiracy theories and anti-government sentiment, vulnerable to the belief that violence is the only way to effect change to events that have not even occurred.

Recommendations

Deplatforming
When addressing online extremism, social media fora have often been reactionary when it comes to deplatforming, which remains the default tool for repeated or severe violations of terms of service. Utilising artificial intelligence and machine learning to automatically remove content directly hinders extremists in their propaganda dissemination, online and offline mobilisation, and trolling and other networked harassment, and thus reduces their ability to achieve their main goals. People with extreme views need to operate on major mainstream platforms to normalise their ideas and have them resonate with wider audiences. The removal of such content from the mainstream makes it harder for narratives to appear acceptable, with a consequent decrease in support. Deplatforming also disrupts extremist planning and organisation, particularly on sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, which seamlessly offer both propaganda potential (through public posts), and confidential communications (through private chats). However, people do not cease to follow their extreme beliefs just because they have been removed from a certain platform, and consequently, it is of paramount importance that technology is not solely relied upon to address the elimination of extremism. Indeed, stringent filtering systems and censorship often increase migration to private chats on encrypted sites like Telegram, which, although often smaller and offering extremists a reduced audience, are rendered more secretive through their encoding, making it far more difficult to monitor threats effectively. As highlighted above, migration from platforms like Facebook and Twitter to Gab exposed audiences to more disparate and contrasting ideologies, which can deepen and intensify extreme beliefs and channel unfocused hatred towards political and cultural targets. Therefore, deplatforming, or more extreme actions such as shutting down whole platforms, is not a long-term solution to the radicalization problems highlighted by the January 6 insurrection. Instead, citizens need to be trained to engage more critically with the media ecosystem they live within.

Equipping Citizens to Critically Engage
As the events of January 6 demonstrated, a significant number of American citizens are ill equipped to differentiate between the fact and fiction that is regularly blurred in America's hostile, divisive, and propaganda-laden media ecosystem, especially when filtered through mostly unregulated social media platforms such as Gab. In lieu of censorship and control, which is at odds with American values, it would be beneficial for the United States to develop among its citizens the specific body of skills required to critically engage with media content, especially that shared on social media platforms. Techniques of source verification, knowledge about how the digital world works (e.g. algorithms, video slicing, deep fakes, bots), and an understanding of our own psychological biases and irrationalities ought to be taught in schools, and made openly available to users via social media platforms themselves.

Recovering a Shared Sense of Reality
The loss of a shared sense of reality and commonly agreed upon facts among American citizens has been extremely damaging to political discourse and left individuals particularly vulnerable to misinformation. The online practice of filtering content for users has played a significant role in creating this situation. To address the divisive consequences of content filtering, lawmakers should appoint accountability officials who have the right to send in technicians with the requisite skills to examine how algorithms are being used by social media companies. The technicians should be empowered to demand explanations and justifications for how feeds are being controlled and altered, and work with the companies to loosen the filtering effect of these algorithms to ensure users are exposed to a wider range of views, more reflective of the whole American body politic. This is especially true during and immediately after elections. In the longer term these technicians can provide an oversight function to retain a shared public common of information.

Politicians too have sought to benefit from the divisions caused by filtered realities through the practice of microtargeting voters. The more microtargeted voters are, the narrower the public commons and political discourse is, and the more detached citizens become from a shared and agreed upon reality. Such practices are anti-democratic, create mistrust, and increase the risks of unchallenged misinformation spreading. Combating this means creating opportunities for citizens to engage with people and ideas outside of their echo chambers and filter bubbles. Democracy requires open debate and discussion among citizens. Politics can, and at times ought to be, raucous and argumentative. But policy issues should be discussed as a nation, between candidates and voters, not broken down into specific packages which can be targeted to small audiences without other citizens being aware. New campaign laws should place limits upon the extent to which microtargeting can be used by electoral candidates and politicians in general. All social media posts on all platforms (including alt-tech spaces such as Gab and methods such as self-deleting messages), online advertising, and spending should be recorded and shared for transparency so that journalists, academics, and interested citizens can see the whole campaign a candidate is running. This would keep campaigns more honest by exposing wrongdoing, discouraging exploitative practices, and helping ensure citizens are discussing politics in a shared reality.