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Brazil: A Crisis of Democracy, Freedom & Rule of Law?

WRITTEN STATEMENT

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Wild, and Members of the Subcommittee: thank you for the opportunity to come before you today to discuss the importance of protecting the freedoms of speech and expression.

My name is Chris Pavlovski. I am a native of Toronto, Canada, and the Chairman and CEO of Rumble. When I founded Rumble in 2013, incumbent platforms had become beholden to large creators, brands, and large corporations. Rumble provided an alternative for small and independent creators to speak their minds, express their opinions, own their narrative, build communities, and maximize their earnings. Our company was founded on a mission to protect a free and open internet, as we believe everyone benefits when there is a diverse marketplace of ideas, opinions, and dialogues.

In late 2020 and into 2021, we realized the power of our mission as millions of users followed creators to the emerging platform – with little to no marketing. Some of Rumble’s largest creators, including former Congressman Devin Nunes, Dan Bongino, Glenn Greenwald, and former Democratic presidential candidate Tulsi Gabbard, also joined the platform during this time. As a result, Rumble saw its average monthly active users increase dramatically, from 1.6 million in the third quarter of 2020 to 36 million in the third quarter of 2021. In other words, we saw an increase of 22.5 times the number of users in just one calendar year.

In September of 2022, Rumble successfully went public, relocating our headquarters to the United States and trading on the NASDAQ under the ticker “RUM.” We have expanded our video content into new verticals like sports, lifestyle, hip-hop, and video gaming. Beyond the video-sharing platform, Rumble now offers Rumble Advertising Center, Rumble Studio livestreaming software, and Rumble Cloud.

Freedom of speech and freedom of expression are the cornerstones of a democratic society. I know that’s not a foreign idea to the Members on this subcommittee, who have witnessed these rights used to protest tyrannical governments around the world and inequalities here in the United States. Freedom of expression is so important, that not only is it the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, but it is also Article 19 in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Without these freedoms, we may have never learned the stories of Frederick Douglass during the abolition movement in the 1830s, or witnessed the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, the Women’s Rights movement of the 1970s, or the Arab Spring in the early 2010s. It is extremely troubling to me that in 2024 I have to come before the U.S. Congress to testify that these fundamental rights are being threatened.

For years, we saw platforms shadow ban ideas they did not agree with. It was a subtle suppression of ideas and opinions that did not fit the “norm” as dictated by algorithms. Today, the censorship we see is much more overt. Governments are acting in ways we only imagine happening 50-60 years ago, openly asking platforms to censor and take down disfavored content. They are back in the business of thinking they know what’s best, dictating and controlling conversations, and stripping the human right to speak and share freely.

These are not theoretical fears. These things are happening, and I know this personally as the CEO of a platform that receives demands from governments around the world.

One of the first instances of government censorship we experienced did not come as a surprise, as it came from communist China. Communist governments often crack down on a variety of freedoms, including freedom of expression.

However, we were surprised in 2022 when we received a request from the French government to block certain news sources. People can certainly question the trustworthiness of news sources, but it should not be any government's job to selectively eliminate access to information. Rather than comply with the French government's request, we simply disabled access to the platform in France and challenged the legality of this demand.

To be clear, Rumble has a strong set of content guidelines under our terms and conditions, but the content the French government was asking us to censor did not violate any of our terms, instead, it was regarding Russian news outlets.

Earlier this year, we received requests from the Brazilian government to remove certain creators from our platform. Again, the content did not violate our terms and conditions, but instead shared opinions that were "unpopular" in Brazil at the time. Rumble made a very tough decision not to comply with the government's request. As with France, we chose to disable access for users in Brazil while we challenged the legality of the Supreme Court's demands.

It does not stop there. Just last month we received requests from New Zealand and Australia to censor politically unpopular content. Countries in every hemisphere, all of them members of the United Nations, are no longer upholding the human right to freedom of expression. This is getting out of control, and it should alarm everyone in this room.

As this committee knows, the United States is involved in so many initiatives to protect democracy around the world, but when it comes to defending the freedom of speech and protecting American businesses who attempt to uphold this right in Brazil, the United States has been silent. It cannot remain so.

It does not matter which platform hosts the content. Today it is Rumble, yesterday it was X, but tomorrow it could be the New York Times. The platform shouldn't matter; the universal right to freedom of speech and expression – the core of Western democracy – is at stake. America needs to step up and take a leading role.

Rumble will never back down from our mission. We are the tip of the spear in this fight and we relish that. We urge everyone, especially the U.S. State Department, to join us.

I'll close with one final thought: Every totalitarian regime that has crushed the rights of individuals, has sought to control what people can say and hear. It's never the good guys doing the censoring. If the United States won't stand up for freedom of speech – who will?

Thank you again for the opportunity to be with you today. I look forward to taking your questions.