

December 12, 2016

The Honorable James Comey
Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation
Federal Bureau of Investigation Headquarters
935 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20535-0001

Dear Director Comey:

Like many Americans, I was deeply troubled by the recent incident at Comet Ping Pong, a local pizza restaurant in Washington, D.C. that was targeted by an alleged gunman who entered the store and fired an AR-15 assault-style rifle while claiming to investigate an online fake news story.¹ While I was relieved to see that no one was hurt, this serious incident should serve as a warning regarding the severe consequences of failing to address the growing problem of fake news on social media.

As Ranking Member on the U.S. Senate Small Business Committee, I am especially concerned that this emerging trend will continue to put blameless small businesses like Comet Ping Pong and its neighbors in harm's way. This incident – which put the community on lockdown – was the unfortunate culmination of ongoing harassment and death threats on Comet Ping Pong and its employees, as well as neighboring small businesses. According to one local business owner, the harassment has been so disruptive that, if it continues, he may need to shut the company down.²

Threats and intimidation are always unacceptable, but they can have a major impact on small businesses. Unlike big businesses, small businesses often do not have the resources to devote to dealing with harassment, which takes valuable time away from helping customers. These threats also harm the innocent staff and threaten the ability of small businesses to provide a safe workplace for their employees. In addition, for small businesses looking to make payroll and pay the bills, the threat of shutting down can be a real burden, especially to employees whose lives and work schedules are disrupted.

Unfortunately, according to several of the small businesses who are the victims of the recent harassment in Washington, the law enforcement response has not been robust.³ Considering the unique challenges this harassment poses to small businesses, it is essential that our law

¹ "N.C. man told police he went to D.C. pizzeria with gun to investigate conspiracy theory."

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/local/wp/2016/12/04/d-c-police-respond-to-report-of-a-man-with-a-gun-at-comet-ping-pong-restaurant/?utm_term=.12747bc2c0d9

² "Comet Ping Pong Fallout Hits Neighboring Businesses." <http://wamu.org/story/16/12/05/comet-ping-pong-fallout-hits-neighboring-businesses/>

³ "Pizzagate: Comet Ping Pong not the only D.C. business enduring a nightmare."

<http://money.cnn.com/2016/12/05/media/pizzagate-threatening-calls-washington-dc-businesses/>

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enforcement authorities provide them with the support they need. I encourage the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to offer whatever assistance appropriate to local law enforcement, and ensure that any potential violations of federal law⁴ are thoroughly investigated.

Until social media companies take more vigorous efforts to address the fake news problem on social media, it is likely that more small businesses will become the victims of harassment. The Comet Ping Pong incident shows that harassment tied to online fake news stories has the potential to escalate into real threats against small businesses and their employees. I urge you to monitor this ongoing issue and ensure that the FBI is equipped to respond effectively and investigate threats to small businesses. Small businesses, which are the lynchpins of local communities, deserve our support.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I look forward to your response in a timely manner.

Sincerely,



Jeanne Shaheen
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on Small Business &
Entrepreneurship

⁴ *E.g.*, 47 U.S.C. § 223; 18 U.S.C. §§ 373, 876.