

CODE OF PRACTICE ON DISINFORMATION

INTERMEDIATE TARGETED MONITORING – MARCH REPORTS

The Commission has received Monthly reports from **Google, Facebook** and **Twitter** addressing actions taken during March 2019 towards implementation of commitments under the Code of Practice on Disinformation with particular pertinence to the integrity of elections. These commitments concern: scrutiny of ad placements (Commitment 1); political and issue-based advertising (Commitments 2 to 4); and integrity of services (Commitments 5 & 6).

1. OVERVIEW

The March reports demonstrate continued progress in the implementation of the Code. In particular, the Commission is pleased to see that, as previously announced, all three platforms have begun to implement their respective political ads transparency policies, and have started to systematically label political ads for the European Parliament elections campaign. Facebook and Twitter have already made publicly accessible libraries collecting such ads, while Google's political ads library is now in a testing phase. Data from these libraries will be available to third party fact-checkers and researchers to carry out independent assessments. In addition, Facebook and Twitter ensure access to their ads libraries through APIs enabling research on political and issue-based ads. The Commission considers this an important step although the functionality of such tools will require further technical improvements. Google's ads library, which is about to be made public, will provide similar research interfaces. *The Commission deeply regrets, however, that Google and Twitter have not reported further progress on their policies towards issue-based advertising to ensure findability and full transparency of such ads in their libraries.*

All three platforms scrutinize ads to exclude misrepresentation or spammy behaviour, including ads that provide content on politically relevant issues. However, the quality of the information provided varies by platform. Google provided the most detailed breakdown and figures by Member State on actions to improve the scrutiny of ad placements. *While recognising that Facebook's and Twitter's platforms mainly feature advertising on their own sites rather than third party sites, the Commission wishes to obtain further insights on the effectiveness of their policies in preventing purveyors of disinformation from advertising on their services.*

Furthermore, the Commission welcomes that all three platforms have taken action in March to ensure the integrity of their services, which shows they take the fight against malicious bots and fake accounts seriously.

With regards to fact-checking, Google supported the launch of *FactCheck-EU*, the European branch of the IFCN, and Facebook announced increasing the number of its fact-checking partnerships. In addition, all three platforms have provided data on a number of additional initiatives to promote media literacy and provide training for journalists and campaign staff.

2. COMMITMENTS PERTAINING TO ELECTORAL INTEGRITY

a. GOOGLE

Google reported on actions taken during March to improve **scrutiny of ad placements** in the EU. These included 10,234 actions against EU-based Google Ads advertiser accounts for violation of the company's policies on misrepresentation and 5,904 actions against such accounts for violation of its policies on insufficient original content, a similar figure to that of February. As regards EU-based AdSense publishers, Google took actions against 370 website publishers for violation of its policies on valuable inventory. The Commission welcomes these updated figures, which refer to misrepresentative or harmful behaviour by advertisers or publishers while avoiding judgments on the veracity of statements made about politics or current events. Not all of the violations acted upon were necessarily associated with disinformation campaigns. *As stressed in its comments on the February report, the Commission considers that a deeper analysis would help elucidate the extent to which enforcement of these policies work to de-monetize imposter websites and websites that persistently purvey disinformation.*

As regards **political ads transparency**, the March report confirms that applications for verification opened on 14 March and that the company began enforcing its election ads policy as of 21 March. Google has received 120 verification applications and successfully verified 18 advertisers to run election ads in the EU Parliamentary elections. Sixteen applications are pending further review, while 86 were rejected, many for failure to provide appropriate documents. Google identified and labelled more than 11,000 election ad creatives from verified advertisers, while more than 12,000 ads were prevented from being served for the advertisers' failure to meet verification requirements. Google's *EU Elections Ads Transparency Report* and its searchable ads library is about to be made public. *The Commission is deeply concerned that Google has not reported further progress with respect to the definition of issue-based advertising and the inclusion of such ads in its library.*

As regards **integrity of services**, the report indicates that in March YouTube removed over one million channels for violation of its *Spam, Deceptive Practices & Scams Policies*, as compared to the removal of 629,000 channels in February, and removed over 2,500 channels for violation of its *Policy on Impersonation*, as compared to 5,000 channels removed in February. These data are global and do not distinguish between types of content. *The Commission notes that the March report, like the February report, does not provide updated information or metrics on certain topics addressed in Google's Baseline report for year-end 2018, such as abusive account creation.*

b. FACEBOOK

Facebook improves the **scrutiny of ad placements** and removes the economic incentives for purveyors of disinformation by de-ranking in news feeds organic content containing clickbait headlines, disguised by cloaking practices, or directing people to ad farms. Furthermore, Facebook explains that its ad policies do not allow the provision of ads, which contain low quality, disruptive, misleading or false content or are circumventing its systems. In this context, the company reported it took action on over 600,000 ads in the EU that were identified as problematic for these reasons in March 2019. Additionally, Facebook reported the roll out of a new, publicly-available Ad Library globally on 28 March 2019, covering Facebook and Instagram. This library contains all active ads

including an archive of political and issue-based ads where such content will be maintained for 7 years.

On the **transparency of political ads**, Facebook states that its political ads policy will also apply to Instagram. Users can see a “paid for by” disclosure at the top of the ad and can access further information by clicking on the label, namely campaign spend associated with an individual ad, how many people saw it, their age, location and gender. Additionally, in Facebook’s Ad Library information on the funding entities, reach, all-time spend and spend over the last week for all political and issue-based ads will be available. Furthermore, Facebook announces the availability of an Ad Library Report for mid-May, which will provide aggregated statistics about political and issue-based ads. Finally, Facebook highlights the roll out and expansion of access to its Ad Library API in March, which may be used by anyone who has gone through an identification process, has created a Facebook Developer account, and has agreed to its platform terms of service. The Commission considers this an important step. If properly designed, this API should allow independent third-party organisations to assess the effectiveness of Facebook’s policy on transparency of political and issue-based ads. *However, the Commission urges Facebook to agree with the European research community on a framework that facilitates access to a broader set of data, in compliance with privacy rules, in order to allow a comprehensive assessment of the Code of Practice implementation.*

On the **integrity of services**, Facebook mentions that fake account blocking, detection and removal is a critical element of its strategy to preserve the integrity of Facebook’s products and services and reports on 2.19 billion fake accounts disabled globally in Q1 2019 up from 1.2 billion in Q4 2018. According to Facebook, most of these disabled accounts originated from commercially motivated spam attacks. The Commission would like to underline the importance to receive data pertinent to the European Union. Moreover, Facebook reported on eight CIB (coordinated inauthentic behaviour) networks taken down in March, originating in North Macedonia, Kosovo and Russia. *The report, however, does not state whether these networks also affected users in the European Union.*

More generally, Facebook refers to an analysis carried out by Décodeurs du «Monde» on French language news sites, indicating that Facebook’s role in the distribution of misinformation has significantly decreased. The results of this analysis are in line with a similar study in the US on the scale and spread of disinformation since the 2016 US elections.

c. TWITTER

Twitter re-iterated a general summary of its advertising policies but did not report on any actions in March to improve the **scrutiny of ad placements** or provide any metrics with respect to its commitments in this area. Twitter states that it aims to provide details in its April report on the enforcement of its ads policies. *The Commission urges Twitter to detail relevant activities and provide relevant metrics in its next monthly report.*

As **regards political ads transparency**, the March report confirms that on 11 March Twitter began enforcement of its *Political Campaigning Ads Policy*, as foreseen in its February report. The policy includes a certification process for those seeking to run political campaigning ads for the European Parliament elections. The March report provides further details on the public disclosure of such ads in Twitter’s *Ad Transparency Centre* (ATC). Information on the accounts of certified political advertisers as well as the advertisements they have run are viewable in the ATC by selecting

“European Union” from a drop-down menu; such accounts are viewable only once they have actually launched ads. To date, four advertisers have completed the certification process. The ATC provides details on sponsor identity, spend, and impressions and has the capability of providing demographic information for the target audience (e.g. country, gender, language) and the actual audience reached (e.g. age, gender, language, metropolitan or regional area). The Commission welcomes this progress. *However, it is concerned about Twitter’s progress on the transparency and findability of issue-based advertising and the research functionalities of the ATC, which seems to require technical improvements.*

As regards **integrity of services**, Twitter notes that, in the period from January to March 2019, it challenged around 53 million of potentially spammy and fake accounts, while users submitted 1.4 million spam reports. Twitter indicates that approximately 75% of such accounts challenged are removed. *While it welcomes these metrics, the Commission assumes they reflect global activity and it calls on Twitter to provide data or insights on how they relate to activity in the EU in its April report.* Twitter gives figures demonstrating that data on foreign information operations it has previously made available is being widely accessed and used by researchers. Twitter also notes that in June it will introduce changes to two of its most commonly-used API endpoints that will increase visibility, control and protection over how researchers use the Twitter platform and public data.

3. OTHER ACTIONS REPORTED IN MARCH

Google reported on a number of additional trainings for journalists on countering disinformation and tools and best practices to strengthen research and reporting; trainings for election professionals on security tools; and continued efforts to support media literacy. It also supported financially the launch of FactCheck EU, the European branch of the IFCN. The company also announced that in March it launched two new tools for the fact checkers and researchers: a ‘Fact Check Explorer’, which allows for the exploration of fact checking journalism, and the ‘Fact Check Markup Tool’, which allows fact checkers to easily mark their own articles in a way that is machine-readable, using the existing ‘ClaimReview’ mark-up. This tool will allow search engines to easily recognize fact checked articles and thus increasing their visibility in search results. The company also provides dedicated APIs, making it easy for third parties to perform such searches or mark-ups easily.

Facebook announces a future extension of its fact-checking partnerships to Poland and elaborates on the functioning of the company’s fact-checking programme, which takes place in three steps: identify, review and act. In particular, when a user tries to share information that has been flagged as false by fact-checkers, Facebook alerts the user of to the existence of additional information from fact-checkers, which leads to 50% of such users deciding not to share the content after seeing the alert. The company also informed on their engagement in the European Media Literacy Week and on their support to projects aimed at enhancing media literacy skills.

Twitter noted that its *Cross-Functional European Elections Team*, highlighted in its February report, is actively supporting integrity work in the region. *Again, the Commission would appreciate further information on staffing and resources (e.g., local language coverage), and insights on how the team will monitor trends not only at regional level but monitor and react to threats at the level of the individual Member States.* Twitter also reported on various digital literacy initiatives undertaken in March in Europe.