

CODE OF PRACTICE ON DISINFORMATION

INTERMEDIATE TARGETED MONITORING – MAY REPORTS

The Commission has received monthly reports from **Google**, **Facebook** and **Twitter** addressing actions taken during May 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 Commission welcomes the progress achieved in improving the **transparency of political advertising** and public disclosure of such ads. The platforms' political ad repositories provide useful tools for journalists and other observers that enable analysis of ad spending by political actors across the EU. Furthermore, the Commission appreciates Facebook's progress in elaborating a definition for and ensuring transparency of issue-based advertising and strongly urges Google and Twitter to catch up in this regard. The Commission also calls on the platforms to apply their political ad transparency policies and tools to the upcoming national elections.

The platforms' efforts to ensure the **integrity of their services** have helped to detect, debunk and close down manipulation activities targeting the elections. They focussed on manipulative behaviour aimed at amplifying the visibility of content, including via coordinated operations, as well as the abusive use of bots and fake accounts. The platforms' collaboration both with public authorities in charge of the Rapid Alert System as well as with civil society organisations such as Avaaz has strengthened capabilities in this regard and confirms the importance of a collective and collaborative approach.

Google, Facebook and Twitter improved the **scrutiny of ad placements** to limit malicious click-baiting practices and reduce advertising revenues for purveyors of disinformation. For instance, their monthly reports provided figures on ads taken down and ad accounts closed due to deceptive or inauthentic behaviour detected through artificial intelligence and/or human-driven scrutiny. However, the figures provided by the platforms include a potentially high number of false positives as they cover actions in pursuit of broader goals, such as policies against misleading commercial claims. Moreover, the platforms have not made sufficient progress in developing tools to increase the transparency and trustworthiness of websites hosting ads for the benefit of advertisers. This is partly a result of the lack of engagement from the advertising industry.

The policies on transparency for online political ads implemented by the platforms as well as their actions against malicious bots, fake accounts and coordinated inauthentic behaviour have likely helped limit the impact of disinformation operations from foreign and domestic actors. This is supported by a number of studies and independent sources, which suggest that the dissemination of disinformation in the run up to the European elections was not alarmingly high. For instance, according to a [study](#) by the Oxford Internet Institute, which carried out a thematic analysis of the top 20 junk news stories on Facebook and Twitter, fewer than 4% of news sources shared on Twitter ahead of the 2019 EU elections was junk

news, while mainstream professional news outlets received 34% of shares. According to [FactCheckEU](#), the European branch of IFCN, there was less disinformation than expected in the run up to the European elections and it did not dominate the conversation as it did around the past elections in Brazil, the UK, France or the United States.

The **European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services** (ERGA) collaborated with the Commission in the monitoring of the platforms' implementation of their commitments related to electoral integrity and in particular political advertising. ERGA will provide its own assessment of the measures on transparency of political advertising shortly.

Finally, the Commission is pleased to announce that **Microsoft** joined the Code of Practice on 22 May 2019 and subscribed to all its commitments.

Before the end of the year, the Commission will assess the effectiveness of the Code following its initial 12-month implementation period. This will cover all commitments of the Code including the signatories' commitments to empower consumers and the research community.

2. COMMITMENTS PERTAINING TO ELECTORAL INTEGRITY

a. GOOGLE

Google reported on actions taken in May to improve **scrutiny of ad placements** in each Member State. These included 16,690 actions against EU-based Google Ads advertiser accounts for violation of the company's policies on misrepresentation and 5,465 actions against such accounts for violation of its policies on insufficient original content. As regards EU-based AdSense publishers, Google took action against 88 website publishers for violation of its policies on valuable inventory. It did not detect any EU-based AdSense publishers in violation of the company's misrepresentative content policies in May. It should be recalled that such policies have a wide scope and not all of the violations acted upon were necessarily associated with disinformation campaigns. *The Commission welcomes the continued efforts deployed by Google with a view to demonetising purveyors of disinformation. However, it encourages Google to further develop relevant metrics so as to enable a more robust assessment of the impact of these policies on the spread of disinformation.*

With regard to the **transparency of political ads**, Google reported on receiving 676 verification applications and successfully verifying 174 advertisers to run political ads during the campaign for the EU Parliament elections between 1 May and 26 May 2019. Fifty-seven applications were under review, while 445 were rejected, many for failure to provide the required documents. Google identified and labelled more than 98,000 election ad creatives from verified advertisers. Of those ads labelled, more than 63,000 were shown to users in May. Additionally, Google prevented more than 50,000 ads from being served due to the advertisers' failure to meet its verification requirements. Moreover, Google recalled its *Transparency Report* on political advertising in the EU and its searchable ads library, which provide data on sponsor identity, amounts spent and display periods. The report also informs on targeting criteria (age, gender and location) and number of impressions per ad. Google did not report any progress about providing transparency around issue-based advertising.

The Commission urges Google to develop a policy on issue-based advertising, which ensures transparency and public disclosure of such ads, and to inform the Commission of its progress in its upcoming annual report.

As regards **integrity of services**, the report indicates that, from 1 May to 26 May, YouTube removed over 860,000 channels for violation of its *Spam, Deceptive Practices & Scams Policies*, as compared to the removal of 900,000 channels in April. In addition, it removed over 600 channels for violation of its *Policy on Impersonation*, as compared to the removal of 500 channels in April. These data are global and do not offer specific information about the type of content disseminated via these channels, or about the relevance for EU countries of such actions. Furthermore, Google informed on the expansion in May of *Breaking News* and *Top News* to eight EU countries: Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Greece, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania and Slovakia. *Breaking News* and *Top News* had already been available previously in other EU Member States (Germany, France, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the UK). These features ensure that only content from authoritative sources is prominently surfaced on the YouTube homepage during significant news events. The Commission notes that the May report does not provide updated information on its *Abusive Account Creation* policies, which were mentioned in Google's Baseline report for year-end 2018. *The Commission welcomes the expansion of Breaking News and Top News to further countries to ensure the prominence of authoritative content. Nevertheless, it calls upon Google to consider ways to improve its metrics to enable a more granular assessment of the progress achieved in the EU.*

b. FACEBOOK

As part of its efforts to improve the **scrutiny of ad placements**, as previously reported, Facebook recalls that its policies do not allow ads containing low quality, disruptive, misleading or false content or ads that are circumventing its systems. It did not mention the number of ads it took action on in the EU that were identified as problematic for these reasons in May 2019. *The Commission urges Facebook to provide data on a consistent basis so as to allow an accurate and continuous assessment of the effectiveness of its policies and the progress achieved.*

With regard to the **transparency of political and issue-based advertising**, Facebook noted the launch of its Ads Library Report in May 2019, which provides information on the number of political and issue-based ads per Member State as well as aggregated advertiser spend. It also includes information per advertiser, i.e. the name of the Page running the ads, the "paid for by" disclaimer, the amount spent and a link to the ads in the Ad Library. Facebook reported that between the launch of the ads authorisation process late March up to 29 May 2019, there were 343,736 political ads across the EU, with an amount of €19.8 million of political ads spend and provided a breakdown per Member State. *The Commission welcomes Facebook's efforts to ensure public disclosure of political advertising and to include issue-based ads in its repository.*

With regard to the **integrity of services**, Facebook provided insight into their Community Standards Enforcement Report, which includes metrics across nine policies, one of them being fake accounts. It reported on the establishment of the Data Transparency Advisory Group (DATG), tasked with providing an independent, public assessment of whether the

metrics shared in the Community Standards Enforcement Report are meaningful and accurate. The DATG published its first full assessment report in April 2019. Additionally, Facebook mentioned awarding grants for 19 research proposals to study its content policies and how online content influences offline events. Furthermore, as an effort to protect Facebook Live from abuse, the company reported on restricting those who have broken certain rules from using Facebook Live, with a “one strike” policy for violating its most serious policies. Facebook reported on the removal of a number of Facebook accounts, Pages and Groups that were involved in coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB) as part of networks emanating from Russia, Israel and Iran, some of which focused also on EU Member States (Austria, the Baltics, Germany, Spain and the UK). Moreover, Facebook provided an update on its vaccine misinformation policy and informed that it is now reducing the distribution of Pages that violate this policy in the News Feed. Furthermore, Facebook recalled that its Dublin Elections Operations Center provided 24/7 support in all EU official languages, which could count on the support of over 500 full-time employees and over 40 regional and functional teams. It also reported on tools and actions specific to the European elections such as an escalation channel for political pages to report issues. *The Commission welcomes the continuing efforts by Facebook to ensure the integrity of its services, for instance by the elaboration of new policies and setting up of new collaborations. However, the Commission urges Facebook to provide more granular and continuous information in its upcoming annual report regarding the closure of fake accounts or CIB networks so as to better assess malicious behaviour targeting specifically the EU.*

c. TWITTER

As regards measures designed to improve **scrutiny of ad placements**, Twitter reported about 1,428 ads rejected in the EU for not complying with its *Unacceptable Businesses Practices* ads policy between 1 May and 20 May 2019 and provided a breakdown per Member State. Examples of such practices include, amongst others, potentially deceptive, misleading, or harmful business propositions or making misleading, false, or unsubstantiated claims. Moreover, Twitter reported that it prevented 1,975 ads from being served to EU users for non-compliance with its *Quality Ads* policy between 1 May and 20 May 2019 and provided a breakdown per Member State. This policy requires ads to adhere to editorial guidelines related to the following topics: user bio, destination URL, content, clarity, accuracy, text, image and video. *The Commission welcomes the provision of data at Member State level on measures to improve the scrutiny of ad placements. It nevertheless encourages Twitter for the upcoming annual report to provide deeper insights to better assess the impact of these policies on the spread of disinformation.*

On the **transparency of political ads**, Twitter provides information on ads prevented from being served because they failed to pass the certification process obligatory for political campaigning advertisers. Between 11 April and 20 May 2019, 503 such ads were blocked. Furthermore, Twitter reported on 27 political campaigning advertisers certified, with 21 of them having run ads. Twitter also reported on the total number of political campaigning applicants (70 EU-wide) and provided a breakdown per Member State. It recalled that the ads included in the *Ads Transparency Centre* (ATC) will remain accessible there indefinitely. *The Commission urges Twitter to develop a policy on issue-based advertising, which*

ensures transparency and public disclosure of such ads, and to inform the Commission of its progress in its upcoming annual report.

With regard to the **integrity of services**, Twitter reported it proactively challenged 9,775,179 potentially spammy or fake accounts between 1 May and 20 May 2019 and received 344,987 user reports about suspected spam accounts. Furthermore, Twitter updated on its election integrity policy, prohibiting three categories of manipulative behaviour and content: i) misleading information about how to participate to the elections; ii) voter suppression and intimidation; and iii) false or misleading affiliation. Users were able to flag such misleading content via a reporting feature and Twitter received 28,456 such reports between 1 May and 20 May 2019. *The Commission welcomes the provision of data on the numbers of fake accounts reported and challenged, as well as Twitter's efforts to counter misleading voter related content. It nevertheless calls on Twitter to provide more specific insights in its upcoming annual report to better assess the impact of the policies at stake for the EU.*

3. OTHER ACTIONS REPORTED IN MAY

Google reported on a number of trainings provided to journalists on identifying and tackling disinformation as well as on trainings for those involved in elections on security tools. Furthermore, Google recalled several elections products, such as a “how to vote” search feature, available across all EU Member States that allows users to easily find information around how to vote. Google also noted the launch in YouTube of information panels for official candidates participating in the EU elections and a Google search feature to display the results of the European elections.

Facebook reported on its voter information reminders and election day reminders that were displayed at the top of user's News Feeds before and on the day of the elections and informed on the creation of specific Instagram Story EU Elections stickers. The company also provided information on several initiatives to raise awareness and strengthen media literacy skills, such as an EU-wide campaign in partnership with fact checkers on how to stamp out false news. Furthermore, Facebook reported on new research partnerships to help improve image and video analysis technology for the purpose of detecting manipulated media.

Twitter reported on a 273% increase in Tweet volume compared to the 2014 EU elections and on 6.2 million election-related Tweets. Twitter also informed on the findings of a [study](#) by the Oxford Internet Institute, which carried out a thematic analysis of the top 20 junk news stories on Facebook and Twitter. According to this study, fewer than 4% of news sources shared on Twitter ahead of the 2019 EU elections was junk news, while mainstream professional news outlets received 34% of shares. Twitter also referred to a [report](#) by the Demos Institute UK, which conducted an analysis of three case studies of Russian information operations in Germany, France and Italy to examine the patterns in data released by Twitter as definitively attributed to Russian state information operations. The study found that information operations frequently involve tactics not easily fact-checked, such as selective amplification of reputable, mainstream media stories to fit an agenda, harassment, abuse, emotional manipulation and poisoning of channels of communication. These findings have been made possible thanks to the constructive approach taken by Twitter in releasing relevant datasets for research purposes, as reported in January and March, which opens a

promising avenue to enable independent research of information operations by malicious actors.