Report of Microsoft Corporation on
Tackling COVID-19 Disinformation

Microsoft Corporation welcomes the opportunity to provide this report, in the context of its participation in the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation, on steps it is taking to combat COVID-19 disinformation. We appreciate the European Commission's leadership on this issue, including through its adoption of its Communication entitled "*Tackling COVID-19 disinformation—Getting the facts right*."[1] Microsoft embraces our responsibility to contribute to a safe online environment, and we recognize the particular importance of protecting consumers from disinformation that seeks to exploit the challenges wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Microsoft services have intensified efforts to promote the safety of our users and customers during the ongoing crisis, and we are working hard to continue and further improve our ability to combat COVID-19 disinformation on our services. We describe these efforts in more detail in the balance of this report.

At the outset, we would note that Microsoft is in a somewhat unique position among the signatories to the Code of Practice with regard to COVID-19 disinformation. In particular, many of Microsoft's leading services are: (1) offered primarily or exclusively to enterprise customers; or (2) used by individuals acting predominantly in a professional capacity (e.g., LinkedIn). It is unusual for bad actors to promote disinformation, especially on a topic such as COVID-19, through business-to-business interactions, or between individuals interacting in a professional context. As a result, our services tend to be targeted far less frequently by bad actors seeking to spread disinformation about COVID-19 than is the case for many others falling within the scope of the Code of Practice.

Microsoft does offer some consumer-facing, non-professional services—for example, our Bing search engine. Disinformation may at times appear in either organic or paid search results, and we take active steps to counter it, as described in more detail below. Given the unique nature of search, however, addressing disinformation in organic search results requires a different approach than may be appropriate for other types of online services, such as social media services. Outright censorship of information in organic search results is generally not appropriate outside of a few well-established and well-defined categories of content that are either broadly illegal, or universally abhorrent (*e.g.,* child exploitation imagery). Blocking content in organic search results also can raise significant fundamental rights concerns relating to freedom of expression and the freedom to receive and impart information. Thus, although Bing (as described below) strives to rank organic search results so that trusted, authoritative news and information appear first, and provides tools that help Bing users evaluate the trustworthiness of certain sites, we also believe that enabling users to find all types of information through a search engine can provide important public benefits.

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[1] Adopted 10 June 2020, JOIN(2020) 8 final.

This example illustrates a broader point. Microsoft has tailored its efforts to combat COVID-19 disinformation (and other types of disinformation) to the unique attributes of the service at issue. These efforts are not uniform or "one size fits all." As the Code of Practice on Disinformation recognizes, "because [online services] operate differently, with different purposes, technologies and audiences, [...] different approaches to accomplishing the spirit of the [Code]" will often be appropriate. Microsoft strongly agrees, and we have crafted our efforts to combat COVID-19 disinformation on our services to the specific nature of the respective service.

We also note at the outset that our actions to fight COVID-19 disinformation tend to be generally applicable, and not limited to individual Member States. Accordingly, we also tend to report and track these efforts on a global or EU-wide basis, rather than at the Member State level. In those instances where our efforts are limited to a certain Member State, we have noted that below.

Finally, while we place great importance on tackling COVID-19 disinformation, these steps are only a fraction of the efforts Microsoft is taking to help our customers, our partners, our employees, and the many communities in which we operate respond effectively to the COVID-19 crisis. To ensure that our efforts are transparent, and that information about them is accessible to the public, we regularly publish updates on our COVID-19 efforts across the full range of our initiatives on the website "[Responding to COVID-19 together](#)".

A. Initiatives to promote authoritative content

Point A of the Commission's Information Request asks platforms to "provide data on the actions taken to promote information from national and international health agencies, national and EU authorities, as well as professional media, including information on the use of trustworthiness indicators for news sources." Microsoft services have taken actions responsive to each of these points.

1. Bing

Bing provides both organic and sponsored search results in response to user search queries. For organic search, Bing employs a sophisticated ranking process that focuses not only on the relevance of a result to the user's search query, but also on ensuring that high-quality sources of information rank higher in search results than low-quality sites. Bing is constantly refining its search algorithms, and the metrics it uses to measure them, in order to prevent manipulation of search results by bad actors, and to ensure that high-authority sites rank higher than low-authority sites—including with respect to sites that relate to COVID-19. More information on Bing's organic search ranking practices can be found [here](#) (for Microsoft's efforts to combat disinformation in paid search results, please see the discussion on Microsoft Advertising, below.).

Beyond its ranking algorithms, Bing is taking additional, proactive steps to present users with high-quality, authoritative information about COVID-19. For instance, in many markets, Bing places "Answers" and/or Public Service Announcements about COVID-19 at the top of search results for a number of COVID-19-related search queries. These Answers provide up-to-date information and statistics on the current state of the pandemic, as well as information on

symptoms, testing, treatment, and other issues based on data from authoritative sources such as the World Health Organization and relevant national health authorities.

For many searches relating to COVID-19, Bing is also showing "task panes" in prominent places on the first page of search results, such as on the top right-hand side of the page. These task panes provide users with credible, authoritative information about COVID-19, such as steps people can take to reduce the risk of catching or spreading the virus.

Bing also prioritizes results from trusted news sources when responding to search queries relating to COVID-19. For specific queries, Bing will point users to special COVID-19 "information hubs" on Microsoft News. The articles in these information hubs, currently available in 39 markets globally, are curated by the Microsoft News editorial team from news content sourced from over 4500 trusted news brands worldwide with which Microsoft has license agreements. These hubs also contain links to official tools and information sources on the crisis.

These features originally launched with English versions and are now expanding to include more languages and markets. As a result of these efforts, a person searching for information about COVID-19 on Bing is almost certain to be presented from the outset with authoritative content about the pandemic from trustworthy sources. From 1 July – 31 July 2020, these Bing sources of authority on COVID-19 had over 42 million visitors, including nearly 3 million from Germany, the UK, Spain, France, Hungary, Italy and Portugal (combined). These results, combined with our own evaluation of these efforts, convinces us that they are proving to be effective in presenting users with authoritative content on COVID-19. We continue to monitor our service for additional disinformation challenges related to the pandemic, and we are responding as we become aware of them.

2. Microsoft Advertising

Microsoft Advertising serves the majority of ads displayed on Bing, and serves ads on many other Microsoft services and third-party sites as well. Microsoft Advertising has taken numerous steps to suppress advertisements that may spread disinformation about COVID-19. We have taken these actions pursuant to Microsoft Advertising's policies, including our Misleading Content policy, which prohibits advertising that can "reasonably [be] perceived as being deceptive, fraudulent or harmful to site visitors." On the basis of this policy, we have prohibited all advertising that seeks to exploit the COVID-19 crisis for commercial gain, spreads misinformation, or that may pose a danger to user health or safety. We discuss our efforts in this area in more detail in response to Point D of the Commission's Information Request, below, given that it focuses specifically on advertising.

Given the many steps Bing has taken to elevate trustworthy and authoritative content at the top of its organic search results, and similar efforts by LinkedIn (see below), Microsoft Advertising determined that it was not necessary to offer wide-ranging free or discounted search advertising in relation to COVID-19. That said, we have supported a number of public service announcement campaigns relating to COVID-19 by serving them at no cost on selected ad placements on our media properties like MSN in certain markets, including the U.K.

3. LinkedIn

LinkedIn's mission is to connect the world's professionals to allow them to be more productive and successful. Our services are designed to promote economic opportunity for our members by enabling them to meet other professionals, exchange ideas, learn, and find opportunities for employees, work, and make decisions in a network of trusted relationships.

Consistent with this mission, LinkedIn is a "real identity" professional network. The content that members post and share on LinkedIn is part of their professional identity—it can be seen by bosses, colleagues, potential business partners, recruitment firms, and future employers. These facts tend to discourage bad actors from using LinkedIn as a means to spread disinformation.

Given the professional nature of LinkedIn, our efforts on COVID-19 have primarily focused in supporting the European Commission, and national and local governments, in two ways: First, by promoting trusted sources of information; second, by extending the reach of authoritative government communications to local audiences.

From the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, we redirected any LinkedIn member that entered a search for the term "coronavirus" to a link labelled "*Know the facts about coronavirus*," which appears first in the list of search results (see Annex, Image 1). By clicking on this link, members are directed to LinkedIn's own official page on the coronavirus, which displays current information and broadcasts from verified international sources, primarily the World Health Organization. The storylines on this page are available in 8 languages across 54 countries. The page is updated on a regular basis, and any time there are any updates of significance by LinkedIn editors, a link to the page is listed in a member's newsfeed.

LinkedIn members can also undertake a search using #coronavirus or #COVID19 via the same search box on their LinkedIn profile page. This will produce a list of all posts that have been published on the LinkedIn platform using these hashtags. Importantly, the search result will also point members to the most recent post from 'LinkedIn News,' which is generated by an in-house news team of 75 journalists. By clicking on any of these posts, members are redirected to LinkedIn's official page on the coronavirus, as referenced above. Any member that wishes to receive regular updates from 'LinkedIn Editors' can select the 'follow' option on any of the posts and all future updates will be added to the newsfeed of a member's own storyline (see Image 2).

Further, LinkedIn sends interested members a "European Daily Rundown," which is a summary of the day's news that is written and curated by experienced journalists. Members receive this in the form of a notification either in the news feed on their LinkedIn profile, or by email (see Image 3). Since the start of the pandemic, and up until last month, this notification included reference to the 'latest news on the coronavirus' and redirected members to LinkedIn's official European page for the coronavirus. That page contains information and the most recent updates from verified and official European sources, such as the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, the European Public Health Association, the European Commission, and Member State governments.

The "European Daily Rundown" is distributed to members in all 27 EU member states and has a reach of approximately 9.7 million members. In addition, LinkedIn has local editions of the "European Daily Rundown" which are published in French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch and German and also feature dedicated newsfeeds on the coronavirus. They are written and curated by a team of 18 experienced journalists based in 6 EU countries.

More generally, throughout the pandemic, LinkedIn News has shared information of a more general nature with our members on a broad range of issues related to COVID-19. For example, we have informed members about the importance of relying on facts in times of crisis and how our News team works (e.g., here for Germany and here for France). We have helped them stand together in solidarity and share efforts on how companies are helping respond to the pandemic (e.g., in France, Italy, Germany). We also continue to cover updates and changes in local rules, e.g., in Spain, Germany, Italy, France, Gulf), political and economic news, including the EU recovery fund (e.g., France, Germany, Netherlands, Italy, Europe) and other economic issues, e.g. bonus payments for healthcare workers (Netherlands), how Southern Italy's economy will be affected (Italy), the plan for the aerospace industry (France), and how members in the tourism industry are handling the situation (Italy).

In response to requests from a number of Member State governments, we now also allow Member State governments to use our "LinkedIn Live" feature to disseminate crucial information on COVID-19 to LinkedIn members. The Department of Taoiseach for Ireland, the UK's Department of Business Energy and Industrial Strategy and HRM Treasury, Germany's Department of Health, France's Department of the Economy, and the Netherlands' Finance Ministry have all used LinkedIn Live to share key government messaging relating to COVID-19.

Our LinkedIn News team also amplifies the reach of this government messaging. For example, LinkedIn conducted live interviews with government officials in France and Germany: In France, a conversation with Bruno Le Maire, Minister for the economy, about the reopening of the economy, and in Germany, a conversation with Jens Spahn, Minister for health, about the way out of the crisis. For all live interviews, our members could submit questions in advance, or ask them during the interview. As described above, we also help extend the reach of government messaging by publishing storylines around these interviews.

B. Initiatives and tools to improve users' awareness

Point B of the Commission's Information Request asks platforms to "provide data about implementation of their policies to inform users when the interact with disinformation" about COVID-19. Microsoft has taken significant steps to provide its customers with this information.

One important dimension of the disinformation challenge is maintaining the integrity and authenticity of news articles and other media as they are shared across the Internet. There are few tools today to help assure readers that the stories they see online originate from the news organization and author listed, and that their content has not been altered.

To help address this need, Microsoft partnered with the BBC, CBC/Radio-Canada, and The New York Times to lead "Project Origin," a new approach to combatting disinformation by helping users authenticate the sources of content and identify when it has been manipulated. This tool uses the "Authentication of Media via Provenance" solution (AMP, now branded as Origin) to

create and attach a digital watermark to media originating from an authentic content creator. Critically, this watermark degrades when the content to which it is attached has been manipulated. The watermark can thus help assure users about the authenticity of the media they are viewing and potentially give an automated signal to users warning of manipulated or fake media.

Another important effort in Microsoft's fight against disinformation, including in relation to COVID-19, is our long-standing partnership with NewsGuard. NewsGuard is a highly regarded news rating service that provides "trust ratings" for online news sites. Microsoft provides a free NewsGuard plug-in for the Microsoft Edge web browser, as well as an opt-in news rating feature for the Edge mobile application on both iOS and Android.

NewsGuard operates a coronavirus misinformation tracker that lists all of the news and information sites in France, Italy, Germany, the UK, and the United States that it has identified as publishing materially false information about the virus. When Edge users who have installed the plug-in navigate to these sites, a NewsGuard label appears warning the user that the information on the site is unreliable (further details on the NewsGuard coronavirus misinformation tracker is available here). NewsGuard has also published fact checks of common misinformation and misconceptions surrounding the coronavirus pandemic, which are available for free on its website.

Microsoft has sponsored the inclusion of NewsGuard in a number of public libraries in the EU, for example, the Cologne Public Library in Germany and the library system of Milan in Italy.

In addition to these cross-company efforts, individual Microsoft services have also taken steps to alert users when they might be interacting with disinformation.

1. Bing

In addition to the COVID-19-specific steps discussed above, Bing also helps users determine the reliability of content displayed in Bing search results through its "Fact Check" feature. Introduced in September 2017, Fact Check helps users find fact checking information on news displayed within Bing search results. This gives users additional information with which to judge the trustworthiness of information online. The label may be used on a broad category of queries including news, health, science, and politics. Bing determines whether an article might contain fact checks by looking for the schema.org ClaimReview markup. In addition to the ClaimReview markup being contained on page, Bing also looks for sites that follow commonly accepted criteria for fact checks, including of third-party fact checking organizations.

2. Microsoft Advertising

As described in response to Information Request 1, Microsoft Advertising has taken steps to prevent or remove advertisements that may spread misinformation, including on COVID-19. We apply our policies equally across all Member States. For example, because we prohibit advertisements that can "reasonably [be] perceived as being deceptive, fraudulent or harmful to site visitors," if we were to learn that an advertisement on our system contained disinformation about COVID-19, we would remove it (rather than leave it in place merely alert users about the misinformation it contains). We provide more information on our practices in response to Point D, below.

C. Manipulative behaviour

Point C of the Commission's Information Request asks platforms to "report all instances of social media manipulation and malign influence operations or coordinated inauthentic behaviour detected on their services."

Microsoft recognizes the threat that media manipulation and inauthentic behaviours pose to society. Particularly during global crises, the need to protect society's core democratic values is paramount. As the world battles the COVID-19 pandemic, nation-states and cybercriminals are taking advantage of the crisis by using virus-themed phishing attacks and other techniques to attack critical institutions. We must assume they will use these techniques to target our elections as well.

In response to these threats, Microsoft has added new services to our Defending Democracy program to help our democratic processes become more resilient in light of these cyber threats. In particular, we are investing in understanding these inauthentic behaviours, related technologies, and implications to platforms and democracy.

For example, through an ongoing partnership with Jake Shapiro at the Princeton University Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, on a project entitled "*Trends in Online Foreign Influence Operations*," Microsoft's Defending Democracy Program is exploring topics such as the link between malicious content on social media (where many bots and trolls operate) and the wider news ecosystem. Working with Princeton's Center for Information Technology Policy, Microsoft has also supported the development of new tools dedicated to detecting foreign information operations and influence programs.

Moreover, to counter inauthentic behaviour on our services, Microsoft initiated legal action in June 2020 to take control of and destroy web domains used in COVID-19 related cybercrime attacks. This global operation targeted cybercriminals who deployed a sophisticated new phishing scheme using COVID-19-related lures in their phishing emails. These emails were designed to compromise the accounts of Microsoft customers in 62 countries. The criminals attempted to gain access to customers' email, contact lists, sensitive documents, and other valuable information. Although 80% of victims compromised by this attack were US-based, our European customers were also targeted. Microsoft utilized technical means to block the criminals' activity and disable the malicious application used in the attack.

In addition, we are using our AI and human intelligence capabilities to stop attacks designed to take advantage of the angst caused by the COVID-19 virus. As part of a recent spear-phishing campaign, attackers created emails to look like legitimate supply-chain reports related to COVID-19. Microsoft's Office 365 Advanced Threat Protection service identified and blocked the attack in transit and shared signals with the Microsoft Defender service to protect all our customers. We also have been putting an emphasis on protecting critical services, especially hospitals, against ransomware.

Beyond these cross-company efforts, individual Microsoft services have also taken steps to combat inauthentic behaviours detected on their services.

1. Bing

Because users cannot post content to Bing directly or otherwise amplify content through interactions with other Bing users, Bing is not vulnerable to the types of manipulative and

inauthentic behaviours that afflict many other types of online services. Instead, Bing search results draw on an index of the web created by Microsoft itself in crawling third-party web content. As described above, Bing then ranks this content using proprietary algorithms designed to return the most relevant and authoritative content responsive to the user's query, This process substantially limits the possibility for many common types of abuse.

That does not mean, however, that bots do not pose a threat to the Bing service. Indeed, Bing takes significant efforts to ward off other types of inauthentic and fraudulent activity, which we consider a violation of Bing's policies against abuse of search engine optimization practices. For instance, we continually combat attempts to artificially inflate the position of web pages within search results for a particular query, e.g., efforts to engage in "click fraud" or harnessing "link farms" to make it seem as though a site is more popular than it actually is.

Bing does not have COVID-19-specific processes for identifying and taking action against manipulative behavior because our processes and procedures for taking action against inauthentic activity are the same regardless of the subject matter. When such behavior violates [Bing's Webmaster Guidelines](#), Bing takes action against the page to either demote or remove the content. Bing is constantly refining its detection algorithms and the metrics it uses to measure them to prevent manipulation of its search results by bad actors and to ensure that high-quality sites rank higher than low-quality ones.

2. Microsoft Advertising

As an online advertising network, Microsoft Advertising maintains the integrity of its services in part through the same measures it takes to scrutinize ad placements. In particular, Microsoft Advertising employs dedicated operational support and engineering resources to enforce its Misleading Content and related policies (described above), combining automated and manual enforcement methods to prevent or take down advertisements that violate its policies. This system uses various algorithms to automatically detect and neutralize invalid or malicious online traffic which may arise from or result in click fraud, phishing, malware, or account compromise.

Microsoft Advertising has several teams of security engineers, support agents, and traffic quality professionals dedicated to continually developing and improving this traffic filtration and network monitoring system. Microsoft Advertising's support teams work closely with its advertisers to review complaints around suspicious online activity, and they work across internal teams to verify data accuracy and integrity.

D. Data on flows of advertising linked to COVID-19 disinformation

Point D.1 of the Commission's Information Request asks platforms to "provide data on policies undertaken to limit advertising placements on their own services" relating to COVID-19 disinformation. Point D.2 asks platforms to "provide information on policies to limit advertising placements on third-party websites using disinformation around COVID-19 to attract advertising revenue."

Microsoft strives to provide our customers with a positive online experience free from deceptive advertisements. Microsoft is working across our services to achieve this goal through policies and enforcement processes aimed at ensuring that the advertising and content served

is clear, truthful, and accurate. All of Microsoft's services that display advertising have adopted and vigorously enforce policies prohibiting disinformation.

Microsoft's company-wide commitment to disrupting the economics of disinformation is illustrated in significant part by Microsoft Advertising's practices in this area. As noted above, Microsoft Advertising serves the majority of ads displayed on Bing, and serves ads on many other Microsoft services and third-party sites.

Microsoft Advertising works both with advertisers, who provide it with advertising content, and online publishers who display these advertisements on their services. Microsoft Advertising employs a distinct set of policies and enforcement measures with respect to each of these two categories of business partners to prevent the spread of disinformation through the advertising that it serves.

1. Advertisers

As described above, Microsoft Advertising's [Misleading Content policy](#) prohibits advertising that can "reasonably [be] perceived as being deceptive, fraudulent or harmful to site visitors." On the basis of this policy, we have prohibited all advertising that seeks to exploit the COVID-19 crisis for commercial gain, spreads misinformation, or that may pose a danger to user-health or safety. Microsoft Advertising also has a set of [Relevance and Quality Policies](#) to manage the relevancy and quality of the advertisements that it serves through its advertising network. These policies deter advertisers from luring users onto sites using questionable or misleading tactics, *e.g.*, by prohibiting advertisements that lead users to sites that misrepresent the origin or intent of their content.

As noted above, Microsoft Advertising employs dedicated operational support and engineering resources to enforce these policies. Every ad loaded into the Microsoft Advertising system is subject to these enforcement methods, which leverage machine-learning techniques, automated screening, the expertise of its operations team, and dedicated user safety experts. In addition, Microsoft Advertising conducts a manual review of all advertisements flagged to its customer support team and removes advertisements that violate its policies.

As a result of these systems and related efforts Microsoft Advertising prevented a total of 827,178 advertiser submissions directly related to COVID-19 from being displayed to users globally in July 2020 alone; this included 183,075 users located in European markets.

2. Online publishers

Microsoft Advertising utilizes a distinct set of policies and measures to combat the display of advertising on—and thus disrupt the flow of advertising revenue to—sites involved in spreading disinformation. These policies and measures apply to all types of disinformation, including disinformation relating to COVID-19. Our policies apply to ads served on our Microsoft's own services, as well as ads that we serve on third-party websites.

Microsoft Advertising requires our publishing partners to abide by strict brand safety-oriented policies to avoid providing revenue streams to websites engaging in misleading, deceptive, harmful, or insensitive behaviors. These policies include a comprehensive list of prohibited content that our ads cannot serve against. Prohibited content includes, but is not limited to, sensitive political content (*e.g.*, extreme, aggressive, or misleading interpretations of news, events, or individuals), unmoderated user-generated content, and unsavory content (such as

content disparaging individuals or organizations). These policies also prohibit our publishing partners from promoting disinformation.

Publishers are required to maintain a list of prohibited terms and provide us with information on their content management practices where applicable. In addition to content requirements, publishers are required to abide by restrictions against engaging in business practices that are harmful to users (*e.g.*, distributing malware).

Microsoft Advertising reviews publisher properties and domains for compliance with these restrictions. In this review, Microsoft Advertising also considers feedback from its advertisers and maintains a review process to investigate related advertiser complaints. Publishers are promptly notified of properties or domains that violate Microsoft Advertising's policies; Microsoft does not approve such properties and domains for live ad traffic. If a property or domain is already live, and later found in violation of Microsoft Advertising's policies, it is removed from the network until the publisher remedies the issue. We also give advertisers the option to block their ads from being displayed on particular web domains.

Annex

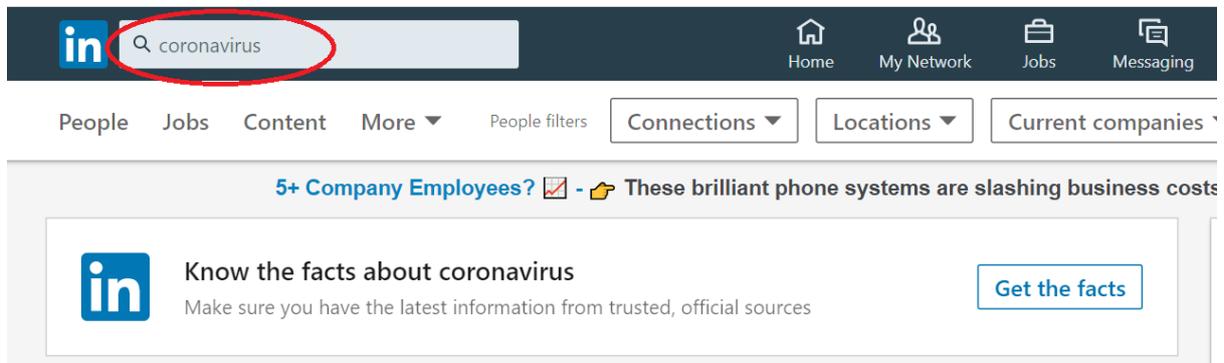Image 1: LinkedIn search results on the coronavirus

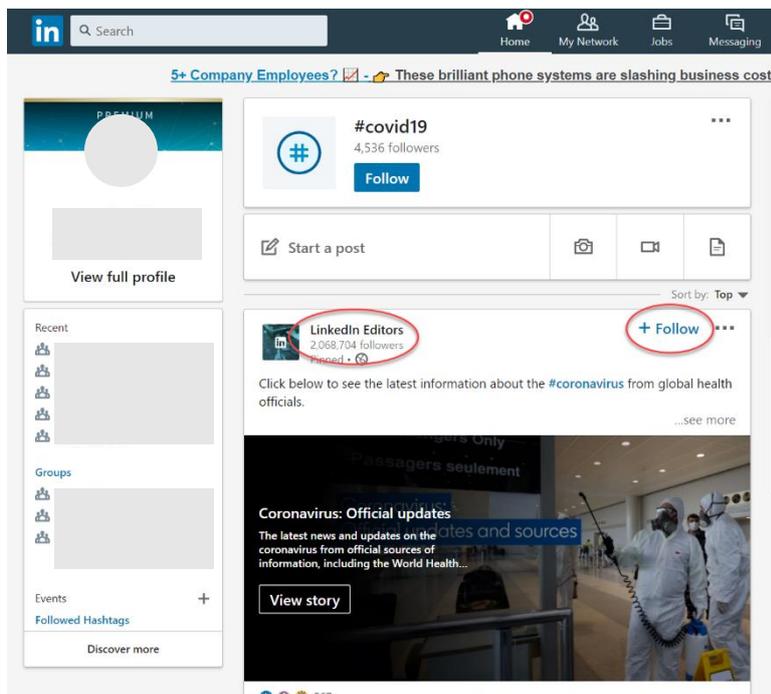Image 2: LinkedIn search results using #coronavirus, #COVID19

Image 3: LinkedIn European Daily Rundown

Saturday, March 7
Daily Rundown: News by LinkedIn Editors
Pieter, here's what you need to know today

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