

## March Update on Microsoft Corporation's Efforts to Tackle COVID-19 Disinformation

Microsoft Corporation welcomes the opportunity to provide this report on the steps we have taken to combat COVID-19 disinformation during the month of February 2021, and which we continue to take. This report supplements, and should be read in conjunction with, our reports to the Commission of August 15, September 15, October 15, November 15, December 15, January 15, and February 15 entitled *Report of Microsoft Corporation on Tackling COVID-19 Disinformation* ("August report" available [here](#), "September report" available [here](#), "October report" available [here](#), "November report" available [here](#), "December report" available [here](#), "January report" available [here](#), and "February report").

Microsoft has taken substantial steps to promote the safety of our users and customers during the pandemic, and we are continually working to refine our efforts to combat COVID-19 disinformation on our services as these threats evolve. As explained in our August report, however, because many Microsoft services are offered primarily or exclusively to enterprise customers, or tend to be used primarily by individuals acting in a professional capacity (e.g., LinkedIn), our services tend to be targeted less frequently by COVID-19 disinformation than many other services. This fact necessarily affects how we have responded to the COVID-19 disinformation threat. In particular, Microsoft has tailored its efforts to combat COVID-19 disinformation to the unique attributes of our respective services. Also, because few of our actions to fight COVID-19 disinformation are limited to individual Member States, we generally track and report these efforts on a global or EU-wide basis. In those instances where our efforts are limited to a certain Member State, we have stated that below.

We would note again that the steps we are taking to address COVID-19 disinformation, while important, are only a small part of the efforts we are taking to help our customers, partners, employees, and the communities in which we operate respond effectively to the COVID-19 crisis. For more information on these efforts, please see our dedicated website, "[Responding to COVID-19 together](#)".

### Executive summary

#### A. Initiatives to promote authoritative content

- Bing is taking proactive steps to present users with authoritative information about COVID-19. This includes placing "Answers" and/or Public Service Announcements about COVID-19 at the top of search results for a number of COVID-19-related search queries. Bing will point users to special COVID-19 "[information hubs](#)" on Microsoft News, listing top resources such as the EU vaccination information portal. In February 2021, the Bing COVID experience had 14,723,373 visitors, including 2,356,073 from EU countries. Furthermore,

Bing displays a vaccine tracker indicating the progress of vaccination in individual countries and globally.

- Microsoft Advertising takes action against advertisements that contain disinformation about COVID-19 through our [Misleading Content policy](#), based on which we prohibit 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. In February 2021, Microsoft Advertising prevented a total of 1,703,704 advertiser submissions directly related to COVID-19 or vaccine-related disinformation from being served to users globally, 258,694 of which would have been served to users in European markets.
- LinkedIn redirects any member that enters a search for the term "coronavirus" or "#covid" to a link labelled "Know the facts about coronavirus," which redirects members to [LinkedIn's own official page on the coronavirus](#). To prevent misinformation on vaccines, we extended the coverage of this page to include official information about vaccines and vaccination. LinkedIn also sends interested members a "European Daily Rundown," which is a summary of the day's news that is written and curated by experienced journalists.

## B. Initiatives and tools to improve users' awareness

- Microsoft has a long-standing partnership with [NewsGuard](#), which operates a coronavirus misinformation tracker that lists all the news and information sites that it has identified as publishing materially false information about the virus. Microsoft also co-sponsored the [VaxFacts](#) campaign launched by NewsGuard on 3 February to counter hoaxes about COVID-19 vaccines and other healthcare misinformation.
- Microsoft [partnered](#) with the BBC, CBC/Radio-Canada, and The New York Times on "[Project Origin](#)," which helps users authenticate the sources of content and identify when it has been manipulated.
- Bing helps users determine the reliability of content displayed in Bing search results through its "[Fact Check](#)" feature, which gives users additional information to judge the trustworthiness of information online. In addition to its [schema.org ClaimReview](#) markup, Bing also determines whether an article might contain fact checks by looking for sites that follow commonly accepted criteria for fact checks, including those of third-party fact checking organizations.

## C. Manipulative behavior

- Microsoft employs several cross-company efforts to combat inauthentic and malicious actions on our services. We are using our AI and human intelligence capabilities to stop attacks designed to exploit COVID-19. For instance, we have been putting an emphasis on protecting critical services, especially hospitals, against [ransomware](#) attacks.
- Microsoft has [published](#) extensive information and data, derived from our threat intelligence efforts, on how cybercriminals are seeking to capitalize on the pandemic and how their behaviors and strategies have evolved over the course of the pandemic.
- Bing takes significant efforts to ward off inauthentic and fraudulent activity on the service, which we consider a violation of Bing's [policies](#) against abuse of search engine optimization practices.

- Microsoft Advertising employs dedicated operational support and engineering resources to enforce its Misleading Content and related policies, combining automated and manual enforcement methods to prevent or take down advertisements that violate its policies.
- LinkedIn strictly enforces its prohibition of the use of “bots or other automated methods to access the Services, add or download contacts, send or redirect messages”, through systems and automated defenses in place to address violations of our User Agreement or Professional Community Policies.

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

- All Microsoft services that display advertising have adopted and vigorously enforce policies prohibiting disinformation. In addition, Microsoft Advertising works both with advertisers and online publishers, and employs a distinct set of policies and enforcement measures with respect to each, to prevent the spread of disinformation through the advertising that it serves.

### **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." The Request also asks platforms to provide "relevant output indicators to assess the impact of such initiatives."

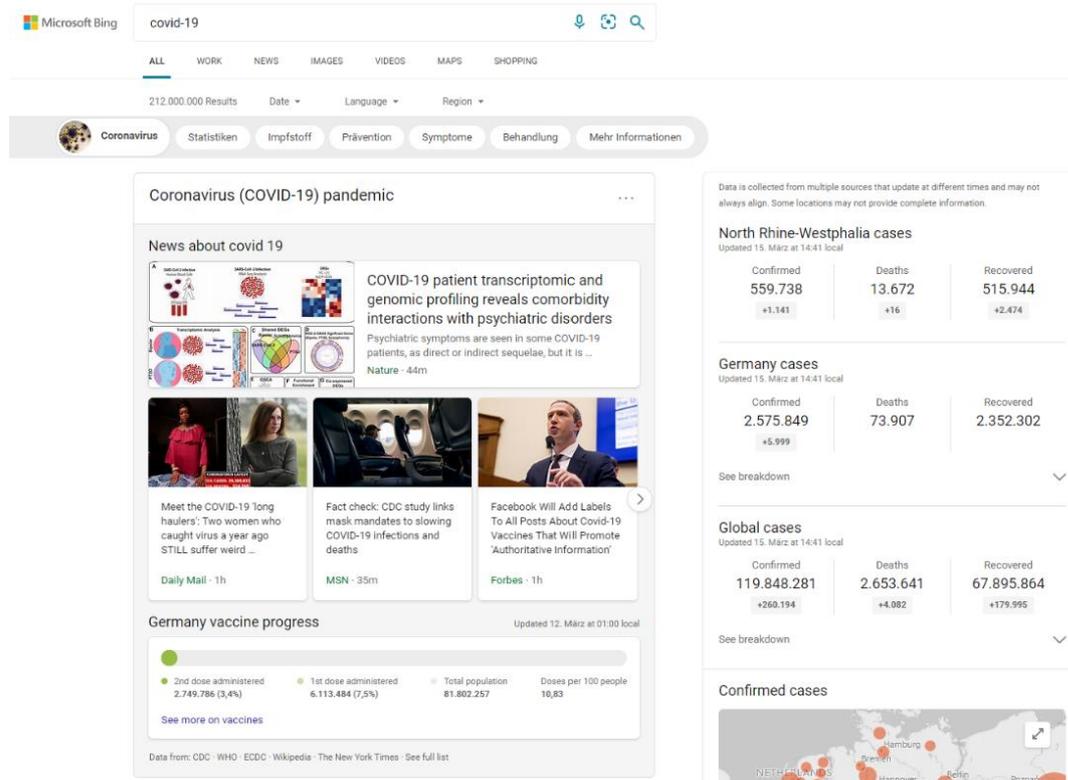
Microsoft services continue to take actions responsive to these points based on the nature of the service and the type of COVID-19 disinformation threats that the respective service confronts.

#### **1. Bing**

In our August report, we discussed how Bing regularly refines its search algorithms, and the metrics it uses to measure them, in order to elevate the prominence of authoritative, high-quality content in search results and to prevent manipulation of search results by bad actors—including those seeking to spread disinformation about COVID-19 (more information on Bing's organic search ranking practices can be found [here](#)). Our August report also discussed additional, proactive steps that Bing is taking to present users with authoritative information about COVID-19. This includes placing "Answers" and/or Public Service Announcements about COVID-19 at the top of search results for a number of COVID-19-related search queries, which provide information and statistics from authoritative sources such as the World Health Organization and relevant national health authorities. Bing is also showing "task panes" in prominent places on the first page of search results, which provide users with authoritative information about COVID-19, such as how to reduce the risk of catching or spreading the virus.

As we also noted in our August report, 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 sourced from over 4500 trusted news brands worldwide. These hubs also contain links to official tools and information sources on the crisis. The screenshot below provides an example of how Microsoft presents these various sources of information to users when they input a search term related to COVID-19 (in this case, the word "coronavirus"):



As a result of these efforts, a person entering a COVID-19-related search query on Bing is almost certain to be presented with authoritative content from trustworthy sources. In February 2021, the Bing COVID experience had 14,723,373 visitors, including 2,356,073 from EU countries:

EU Country	February Monthly Visits
Bulgaria	8,078
Czech Republic	49,426
Denmark	17,559
Austria	121,979
Switzerland	34,721
Germany	404,219
Greece	14,490
United Kingdom	193,347
Ireland	30,503
Spain	258,445
Estonia	2,025

Finland	27,256
Belgium	22,621
France	269,042
Luxembourg	724
Croatia	147
Hungary	51,280
Iceland	1,446
Italy	265,708
Lithuania	2,723
Latvia	3,416
Netherlands	76,786
Norway	15
Poland	164,340
Portugal	137,541
Romania	100,003
Slovakia	4,874
Slovenia	1,821
Sweden	91,538
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2,356,073</b>

Moreover, a person entering a vaccine-related search query on Bing is presented with reliable COVID-19 vaccine-related information, news, and authoritative sources. Furthermore, Bing displays a vaccine tracker indicating the progress of vaccination in individual countries and globally.

The screenshot shows a Microsoft Bing search for "covid-19 vaccine". The search results page includes a navigation bar with tabs for "ALL", "WORK", "NEWS", "IMAGES", "VIDEOS", "MAPS", and "SHOPPING". Below the search bar, there are filters for "81.600.000 Results", "Date", "Language", and "Region". A secondary navigation bar contains tabs for "Coronavirus", "Statistiken", "Impfstoff", "Prävention", "Symptome", "Behandlung", and "Mehr Informationen".

The main content area features a section titled "Coronavirus (COVID-19) vaccines" with a sub-section for "Germany progress" (Updated 12. März at 01:00 local). This section includes a progress bar and the following data:

2nd dose administered	1st dose administered	Total population	Doses per 100 people
2.749.786 (3,4%)	6.113.484 (7,5%)	81.802.257	10,83

Below this is a "Global Progress" section (Updated 15. März at 18:01 local) with a similar progress bar and data:

2nd dose administered	1st dose administered	Total population	Doses per 100 people
82.659.728 (1,1%)	219.248.826 (2,8%)	7.845.261.000	4,58

At the bottom, there is a "News about covid 19 vaccine" section featuring a news article titled "Canada sure that all COVID-19 vaccines are safe, including AstraZeneca doses - PM" with a thumbnail image of a man in a suit.

On the right side of the search results, there is a "COVID-19 vaccine" information box with a brief description and a "Wikipedia" link.

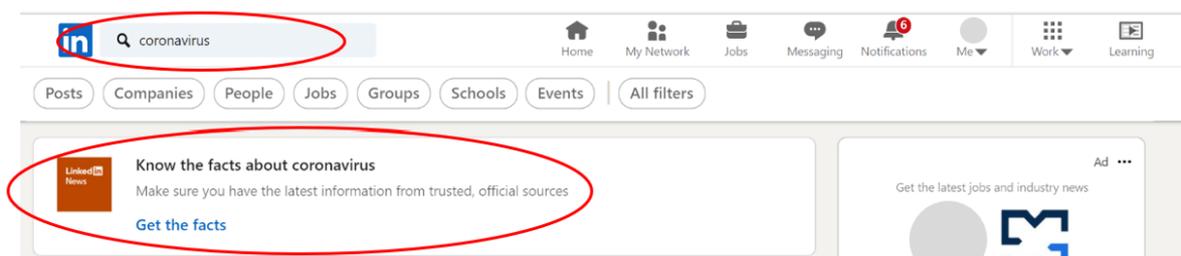
## 2. Microsoft Advertising

As described in our August report, Microsoft Advertising takes action against advertisements that contain disinformation about COVID-19 through 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. As a result of these efforts, in February 2021, Microsoft Advertising prevented a total of 1,703,704 advertiser submissions directly related to COVID-19 from serving to its users globally, 258,694 of which in European markets. These numbers include vaccine-related disinformation.

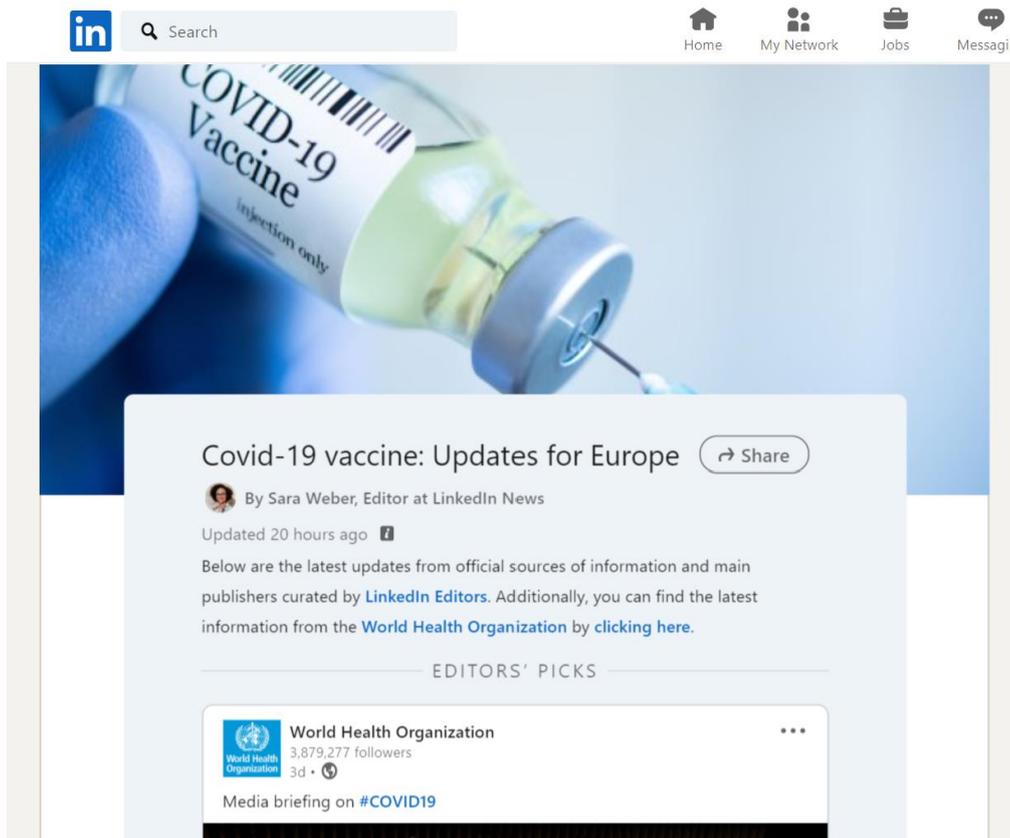
## 3. LinkedIn

As described in our August report, given LinkedIn's focus on enabling our members to meet other professionals in a network of trusted relationships, the service is an infrequent target of disinformation. This holds equally true with regard to COVID-19 disinformation. Accordingly, our efforts on COVID-19 have primarily focused on supporting the European Commission's efforts to combat disinformation by promoting trusted sources of information, and by extending the reach of authoritative government communications to local audiences.

For instance, as illustrated in the screenshot below, we redirect any LinkedIn member that entered a search for the term "coronavirus" or "#covid", "vaccine" or "#vaccination" to a link labelled "Know the facts about coronavirus," which appears first in the list of search results:



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. To prevent misinformation on vaccines, we extended the coverage to include official information about vaccines and vaccination. The page is regularly updated by LinkedIn editors and is also featured as Storyline in all local Daily Rundowns. We continue to cover other COVID-19 related news and conduct interviews with healthcare leaders, for example professor Alain Fischer, head of the French vaccination council.



LinkedIn also 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.

The European Daily Rundown is distributed to LinkedIn 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 that are published in French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch and German. They are written and curated by a team of 18 experienced journalists based across the EU.

The chart below provides a list of the key trusted sources that the LinkedIn News team relies upon to source official information related to COVID-19. This list includes official pages of various Member State governments, as well as those of international organizations.

Company Page	Link	# of Followers on 28 February 2021
<b>Pan- European</b>		
European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC)	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/ecdc/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/ecdc/</a>	33,820

European Public Health Association (EUPHA)	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/eupha/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/eupha/</a>	1,809
European Commission	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/european-commission/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/european-commission/</a>	1,097,715
World Health Organization (WHO)	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/world-health-organization/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/world-health-organization/</a>	3,855,724
Unicef	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/unicef/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/unicef/</a>	3,042,857
Red Cross	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/ifrc/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/ifrc/</a>	177,373
United Nations	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/united-nations/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/united-nations/</a>	3,543,334
<b>France</b>		
<a href="#">Government</a>	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/gouvernementfr/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/gouvernementfr/</a>	87,560
<a href="#">Ministry of Health</a>	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/minist%C3%A8re-des-solidarites-de-la-sant%C3%A9/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/minist%C3%A8re-des-solidarites-de-la-sant%C3%A9/</a>	118,877
<a href="#">Ministry of Labour</a>	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/minist%C3%A8re-du-travail/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/minist%C3%A8re-du-travail/</a>	236,292
<a href="#">Santé publique France</a>	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/sante-publique-france/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/sante-publique-france/</a>	89,449
<b>DACH</b>		
<a href="#">Germany Ministry and minister of health (Bundesgesundheitsministerium)</a>	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/bundesgesundheitsministerium/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/bundesgesundheitsministerium/</a>	37,811
KfW Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/kfw/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/kfw/</a>	43,215
German Bundesagentur für Arbeit (Federal Employment Agency)	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/bundesagentur-fuer-arbeit/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/bundesagentur-fuer-arbeit/</a>	13,402
<a href="#">Switzerland Ministry of Health (Bundesamt für Gesundheit)</a>	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/bag-ofsp/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/bag-ofsp/</a>	74,899
<b>Netherlands</b>		
Ministry of health (Ministerie van VWS)	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/ministerie-van-vws/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/ministerie-van-vws/</a>	109,182

Governmental institute RIVM	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/rivm/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/rivm/</a>	43,889
<b>Italy</b>		
Ministero della Salute	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/ministero-salute/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/ministero salute/</a>	46,193
Presidenza del Consiglio (government)	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/presidenza-del-consiglio-dei-ministri/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/presidenza-del-consiglio-dei-ministri/</a>	68,367
Unicef Italia	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/unicef-italia/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/unicef-italia/</a>	5,186
<b>Spain</b>		
<a href="#">Minister of Health</a>	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/sanidadgob/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/sanidadgob/</a>	20,136
Minister of Science	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/cienciagob/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/cienciagob/</a>	67,423
Minister of Social Security	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/ministerio-de-inclusi%C3%B3n-seguridad-social-y-migraciones/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/ministerio-de-inclusi%C3%B3n-seguridad-social-y-migraciones/</a>	4,130
Unicef Comité Español	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/unicef-spain/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/unicef-spain/</a>	23,390

## B. Initiatives and tools to improve users' awareness

B of the Commission's Information Request asks platforms to "provide data about implementation of their policies to inform users when they interact with disinformation" about COVID-19.

An important element of combatting disinformation is the ability to maintain the integrity and authenticity of news articles and other media as they are shared across the Internet. As discussed in our August report, Microsoft has partnered with the BBC, CBC/Radio-Canada, and The New York Times to help meet this need through "[Project Origin](#)," which helps users authenticate the sources of content and identify when it has been manipulated.

Another important effort in Microsoft's fight against COVID-19 disinformation, also discussed in our August report, is our long-standing partnership with [NewsGuard](#). 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 users of Microsoft's Edge browser who have installed the NewsGuard plug-in navigate to these sites, a 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 co-sponsored the "[VaxFacts](#)" campaign launched by NewsGuard on 3 February 2021. The health media literacy campaign features a free tool to help users to avoid misinformation and make informed decisions about vaccinations. Through the "VaxFacts" campaign the [HealthGuard](#) browser extension is now free until 30 June.

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

## 1. Bing

As discussed in more detail in our August report, another way in which Bing helps users determine the reliability of content displayed in Bing search results is through its "[Fact Check](#)" feature, which gives users additional information with which to judge the trustworthiness of information online. Bing determines whether an article might contain fact checks by looking for the [schema.org ClaimReview](#) markup. In addition to this markup, 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 takes action against COVID-19 disinformation through our policies that prohibit advertisements that can "reasonably [be] perceived as being deceptive, fraudulent or harmful to site visitors." When we learn that an advertisement on our system contains misinformation about COVID-19, we remove it (rather than leave it in place and merely alert users about the misinformation it contains). We provide more information on our practices in response to Point D, below.

## C. Manipulative behavior

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 behavior detected on their services."

Microsoft employs several cross-company efforts to combat inauthentic and malicious actions on our services. We are using our AI and human intelligence capabilities to stop attacks designed to exploit COVID-19. For instance, we have been putting an emphasis on protecting critical services, especially hospitals, against [ransomware](#) attacks, and earlier this year extended our AccountGuard email protection service to healthcare workers, human rights organizations and humanitarian organizations in order to offer additional protections to those who are on the frontlines of responding to the pandemic.

In recent months, Microsoft has [detected](#) cyberattacks from three nation-state actors targeting seven prominent companies directly involved in researching vaccines and treatments for COVID-19. Most of the attacks were blocked by security protections built into our products.

We have notified all organizations targeted, and where attacks have been successful, we have offered help.

We have also [published](#) extensive information and data, derived from our threat intelligence efforts, on how cybercriminals are seeking to capitalize on the pandemic and how their behaviors and strategies have evolved over the course of the pandemic. Because so many of these efforts involve the dissemination of disinformation or other deceitful practices, publishing this information can help users of all kinds more effectively identify and protect themselves against these harms.

In our August report, we provided information on the steps that Bing and Microsoft Advertising have taken to combat inauthentic behaviors on their services. In the interests of brevity, we do not repeat that information here.

Given the professional focus of LinkedIn and its members, it is rarely the target of social media manipulation, malign influence operations, or coordinated inauthentic behavior in relation to COVID-19. This might also be attributable in part to the fact that LinkedIn strictly enforces the LinkedIn User Agreement, which prohibits the use of "bots or other automated methods to access the Services, add or download contacts, send or redirect messages." In addition, LinkedIn has systems and automated defenses in place for different types of content that may violate our User Agreement or Professional Community Policies (PCPs). On September 29, 2020, we strengthened our PCPs to further clarify the types of content and behavior that are permitted on the platform, and that will ensure that LinkedIn remains a safe and trusted professional network. In addition to this, our ongoing efforts to address any activity that falls foul of these PCPs can broadly be grouped into three categories: (1) Fake accounts; (2) content uploaded by members; and (3) advertisements. Detailed information on LinkedIn's efforts to address the three categories is provided in our September report.

## **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."

As discussed in our August report, all Microsoft services that display advertising have adopted and vigorously enforce policies prohibiting disinformation. In addition, Microsoft Advertising works both with advertisers and online publishers, and employs a distinct set of policies and enforcement measures with respect to each, 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. Moreover, and as explained in our August report, every ad loaded into the Microsoft Advertising system is subject to enforcement methods that leverage machine-learning techniques, automated screening, in-house expertise, and dedicated user safety experts. Microsoft Advertising conducts a manual review of all advertisements flagged to its customer support team and removes advertisements that violate its policies.

Please see section A.2 above relating to Microsoft Advertising's ad removal data.

## 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.

Specifically, 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. As discussed in our August report, these policies include a comprehensive list of prohibited content that our ads cannot serve against, including disinformation. We require publishers to maintain a list of prohibited terms and provide us with information on their content management practices where applicable. In addition, we require publishers to abide by restrictions against engaging in business practices that are harmful to users.

Microsoft Advertising reviews publisher properties and domains for compliance with these restrictions and promptly notifies publishers of properties or domains that violate Microsoft Advertising's policies. Microsoft does not approve properties that violate our policies for live ad traffic; if a property or domain that violates our policies is already live, we remove it from our ad network until the publisher remedies the issue. We also give advertisers the option to block their ads from being displayed on particular web domains.