CODE OF PRACTICE ON DISINFORMATION

INTERMEDIATE TARGETED MONITORING – APRIL REPORTS

The Commission has received monthly reports from **Google**, **Facebook** and **Twitter** addressing actions taken during April 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 April reports demonstrate continued progress in the implementation of the Code of Practice against disinformation. In particular, the Commission is pleased to see that all three platforms have provided detailed data on actions undertaken to improve the scrutiny of ad placements. Furthermore, all three signatories have now launched public political ad repositories, which can be accessed and searched also through specific APIs. The monitoring that the European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services (ERGA) will carry out regarding the implementation of the commitment on transparency of political ads in the Member States will provide further insights on the reliability, searchability and completeness of such repositories. In addition, all three platforms have taken robust action against malicious behaviour involving coordinated information operations and the use of bots and fake accounts. *The Commission appreciates these achievements while regretting that Google and Twitter were not able to develop a clear and transparent policy to identify and publicly disclose issue-based ads before the elections.*

These achievements and the recent announcement by Microsoft that it will join the Code of Practice suggest that the Code has the potential to reach its objectives. To this end, it is however necessary for the industry to ensure a wider take-up of the Code in particular by advertisers and ad-network operators.

After the European elections, signatories will need to step up their efforts to ensure a full and effective implementation of the Code commitments aimed at empowering online users and the research community. In particular, platforms will need to engage with traditional media to develop transparency and trustworthiness indicators for information sources, which will be used to feed content ranking algorithms and provide users with access to a plurality of credible information sources.

Moreover, it is necessary that signatories further engage with the research community to identify relevant platforms' datasets, which should be made accessible under privacy-compliant conditions with a view to enabling i) a faster detection and deeper analysis of disinformation campaigns across the EU; ii) a transparent and independent monitoring of the impact of platforms' policies under the Code of Practice ; and iii) an independent oversight of the functioning of platforms' algorithms to the benefit of all users.

2. COMMITMENTS PERTAINING TO ELECTORAL INTEGRITY

a. GOOGLE

Google reported on actions taken in April to improve **scrutiny of ad placements** in each Member State. These included 35,428 actions against EU-based Google Ads advertiser accounts for violation of the company's policies on misrepresentation and 6,696 actions against such accounts for violation of its policies on insufficient original content. As regards EU-based AdSense publishers, Google took action against two accounts for violation of the company's misrepresentative content policies and against 310 website publishers for violation of its policies on valuable inventory. 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. *Therefore, 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.*

Google provided an update regarding its policy on **transparency of political ads**. This policy includes a verification and disclosure process for advertisers who want to run ads that reference a political party, candidate, or current office holder. In the month of April, Google has received 556 verification applications and successfully verified 123 advertisers to run political ads during the campaign for the EU Parliament elections. Thirteen applications were under review, while 420 were rejected, many for failure to provide the required documents. Google identified and labelled more than 56,968 election ad creatives from verified advertisers. Of those ads labelled, 10,289 were shown to users in April. Additionally, Google prevented more than 16,195 ads from being served due to the advertisers' failure to meet its verification requirements. Moreover, *Google's Transparency Report* on political advertising in the EU and its searchable ads library have been made public and 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. Furthermore, Google Cloud's BigQuery API allows users to code and run their own unique queries on the data set from the Transparency Report, with a view for instance to developing charts, graphs, tables or other visualizations of election advertising. Finally, Google indicated that it continues reflecting about a workable approach to issue-based advertising, without providing any information about concrete progress in this area. *The Commission welcomes Google's efforts to increase transparency of political advertising and to allow third parties to run customized queries on its political ad repository, but regrets the lack of measurable progress with respect to the definition and public disclosure of issue-based advertising*.

As regards **integrity of services,** the report indicates that, in April, YouTube removed over 900,000 channels for violation of its *Spam, Deceptive Practices & Scams Policies*, as compared to the removal of one million channels in March. In addition, it removed over 500 channels for violation of its *Policy on Impersonation,* as compared to the removal of 2,500 channels in March. 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. Moreover, the Commission notes that the April report, like the March and February reports, does not provide updated information on its A*busive Account Creation* policies, which were mentioned in Google's Baseline report for year-end 2018. *The Commissions welcomes the continued efforts deployed by Googles in this area, while inviting Google*

to consider ways to improve its metrics to enable a more detailed and accurate assessment of the progress achieved.

b. FACEBOOK

As part of its efforts to improve the **scrutiny of ad placements**, 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 took action on over 600,000 ads in the EU that were identified as problematic for these reasons in April 2019. *While welcoming these actions, the Commission recalls that, in order to enable an objective assessment of their effects, Facebook should make available relevant metrics to measure the extent to which they have contributed to reduce the spread of disinformation.*

Facebook reported that it started enforcing its policy on **political and issue-based advertising** in mid-April. This policy applies to all ads that reference political figures, political parties, elections (including "get out the vote" campaigns) or issues of political and social importance promoted within the EU and falling under six categories: Immigration, Political Values, Civil & Social Rights, Security & Foreign Policy, Economy, and Environment. Facebook does not allow political and issue-based ads which do not go through its authorization process. Facebook's April report also provides an update on the company's cross-border advertising policy, which requires advertisers to be authorised in the country they want to run ads in, and its decision to exempt official pages of EU bodies from these restrictions upon request by the European Parliament. Facebook confirmed its intention to publish the Ads Library Report in mid-May, which will provide cumulative statistics about ads in the Ad Library (for instance aggregated total spent by Page, total number of ads and total spend by advertiser). *While welcoming these developments, the Commission encourages Facebook to make its mid-May report publicly available without delay.*

With regard to the **integrity of services**, Facebook reported on the removal of 97 Facebook accounts, Pages and Groups that were involved in coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB) as part of a network emanating from Russia that focused on Ukraine. Moreover, Facebook provided an update on its policy against disinformation around the side effects of vaccines, which included new actions aimed at restricting access to fundraising tools. Furthermore, the report provides information on the opening of the Dublin elections operation centre in April, which will work cross-functionally with threat intelligence, data science, engineering, research, community operations, legal and other teams to act against disinformation, hate speech and voter suppression. The elections operations centre has specialists covering all EU Member States and languages. In addition, Facebook reported that it is working on new ways to complement existing fact-checking programs, such as involving groups of users to point to journalistic sources that can corroborate or contradict claims made on potentially false content. Additionally, Facebook highlighted that, since April 2019, it is reducing the reach of Groups that repeatedly share disinformation, by lowering those Groups' overall news feed distribution. *The Commission welcomes all these steps, which go in part beyond the scope of the commitments subscribed by Facebook under the Code. Nevertheless, the Commissions encourages Facebook to provide more granular information regarding the closure of fake accounts or CIB networks so as to better assess malicious behaviour targeting specifically the EU .*

Furthermore, Facebook informs on a number of actions to **empower the research community**. In particular, the US-based research organisation Social Science One announced in April that a group of researchers will gain access to privacy-protected Facebook data. These will be more than 60 researchers from 30 academic institutions across 11 countries, including 11 EU-based research institutes. These researchers will have access to the CrowdTangle API as well as Facebook URLs Data Set. While the first allows tracking the popularity of news items and other public posts on Facebook and Instagram, the latter includes a dataset of URLs shared on Facebook. *The Commission welcomes Facebook's efforts to enable independent research and encourages further cooperation with the research community to increase civil society's capabilities to detect and analyse disinformation trends and patterns.*

c. TWITTER

As regards measures designed to improve **scrutiny of ad placements**, Twitter reported about 4,590 ads rejected in the EU for not complying with its *Unacceptable Businesses Practices* ads policy between 1 January and 31 March 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 7,533 ads from being served to EU users for non-compliance with its *Quality Ads* policy between 1 January and 31 March 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 Twitter's progress reported to improve the scrutiny of ad placements and the provision of data at Member State level, which was missing from previous reports. It nevertheless encourages Twitter to provide more granular data 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. In the first month of enforcement of this policy (11 March – 11 April 2019), 12 ads targeting seven EU Member States were blocked. Furthermore, Twitter reported on 11 political campaigning advertisers certified, with six of them running ads during the reporting period. Twitter also created a link to access the *Ads Transparency Centre* (ATC) directly from the political campaigning ad appearing in the Twitter feed. *While welcoming these developments, the Commission reiterates its concerns regarding the lack of clarity as to the treatment of issue-based ads, and will review the research functionalities of the ATC.*

With regard to the **integrity of services**, the April report includes information on Twitter's efforts to create a healthier service. Twitter started to use technology to proactively flag abusive content for human review instead of relying only on reports from people using Twitter. Twitter reported it proactively challenged 13,787,154 potentially spammy or fake accounts in April 2019 and received 597,295 user reports about suspected spam accounts. Furthermore, Twitter reported on a new election integrity policy, in place since 29 April 2019, 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. Additionally, Twitter has developed a reporting feature for users to flag such misleading voting related content. *The Commission welcomes these efforts, which go sometime beyond the scope of Twitter's commitments*

under the Code. Nevertheless, the Commission calls on Twitter to provide more granular data so as to better assess the impact of the policies at stake for the EU.

3. OTHER ACTIONS REPORTED IN APRIL

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 noted the launch of several elections products, such as a new "how to vote" search feature, available across all EU Member States that allows users to easily find information around how to vote. Other new tools Google reported on, available through Google Search, are infoboxes for candidates and parties participating in the EU elections as well as infoboxes for the European Parliament.

Facebook further expanded its fact-checking partnerships, now including 21 partners in 14 European languages. The company also participated in the European Youth Forum's Yo!Fest 2019, where it facilitated media literacy workshops and other awareness raising activities. Facebook informed on the roll-out of its Context Button across the whole EU and on the addition of trust indicators to the Context Button, however for the moment only available in English and Spanish.

Twitter provided information on an initiative as part of World Press Freedom Day to elevate female voices in journalism and on a collaboration with a Spanish fact-checking organisation to support research into disinformation.