

Before the
Office of the Surgeon General
Department of Health and Human Services
Washington, DC

In re

Impact of Health Misinformation in the
Digital Information Environment in the
United States Throughout the COVID-19
Pandemic Request for Information

Docket No. HHS-OASH-2022-0006

COMMENTS OF
COMPUTER & COMMUNICATIONS INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION

Pursuant to the request for information (RFI) published by the Office of the Surgeon General, Department of Health and Human Services in the Federal Register at 87 Fed. Reg. 12712 (Mar. 7, 2022), the Computer & Communications Industry Association (CCIA)¹ submits the following comments responding to selected topics from the RFI.

Information about how widespread COVID-19 misinformation is on individual technology platforms including: General search engines, content sharing platforms, social media platforms, e-commerce platforms, crowd sourced platforms, and instant messaging systems.

While the RFI targets “the digital information environment,” health misinformation often arises and is disseminated elsewhere. Misinformation about COVID-19 proliferates offline in traditional media like broadcast television, talk radio, and print,² including content producers that

¹ CCIA is an international, not-for-profit trade association representing a broad cross section of communications and technology firms. For 50 years, CCIA has promoted open markets, open systems, and open networks. CCIA members employ more than 1.6 million workers, invest more than \$100 billion in research and development, and contribute trillions of dollars in productivity to the global economy. A list of CCIA members is available at <https://www.ccia.net/org/members>.

² See, e.g., Robby Berman, *TV news was the main source of early COVID-19 misinformation for some in the US*, Medical News Today (Apr. 15, 2021), <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/tv-news-was-the-main-source-of-early-covid-19-misinformation-for-some-in-the-us>; Tiffany Hsu & Marc Tracy, *On Podcasts and Radio, Misleading Covid-19 Talk Goes Unchecked*, N.Y. Times (Nov. 12, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/12/business/media/coronavirus-misinformation-radio-podcasts.html>; Rod Dacombe, Nicole Souter, & Lumi Westerlund, *Research note: Understanding offline Covid-19 conspiracy theories: A content analysis of The Light “truthpaper”*, Harv. Kennedy Sch. Misinformation Rev. (2021),

hold themselves out as news publishers.³ Furthermore, stories that may circulate on social media often originate from other media sources.⁴ Accordingly, the RFI should not be artificially confined to one sector.

Digital services' robust trust and safety policies set them apart from other industries in the information space like payment processors or news publishers, which tend to only have content moderation on their websites for comments. As discussed *infra*, the digital sector has some of the most advanced mechanisms for addressing problematic content in the business community.

Information about COVID-19 misinformation policies on individual technology platforms.

Leading digital services are committed to ensuring consumer trust and safety online.⁵ Responsible services invest heavily in combating illegal and dangerous content, including misinformation about the ongoing public health crisis, and take aggressive steps to uphold their terms of service, with content moderation at scale requiring a mix of automated tools and human review.

Digital services have “robust” COVID-19 misinformation policies, as a federal judge found last week.⁶ Throughout the pandemic, digital services have announced and strengthened

<https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/research-note-understanding-offline-covid-19-conspiracy-theories-a-content-analysis-of-the-light-truthpaper/>.

³ Philip Bump, *The unique role of Fox News in the misinformation universe*, Washington Post (Nov. 8, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/11/08/unique-role-fox-news-misinformation-universe/>; Liz Hamel et al., *KFF COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor: Media and Misinformation* (Nov. 8, 2021), <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/poll-finding/kff-covid-19-vaccine-monitor-media-and-misinformation/>.

⁴ Felix Simon et al., *Types, sources, and claims of COVID-19 misinformation*, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Apr. 7, 2020), <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/types-sources-and-claims-covid-19-misinformation>.

⁵ Margaret Harding McGill, *Tech giants list principles for handling harmful content*, Axios (Feb. 18, 2021), <https://www.axios.com/tech-giants-list-principles-for-handling-harmful-content-5c9cfba9-05bc-49ad-846a-baf01abf5976.html>; *see generally* Digital Trust & Safety Partnership, <https://dtspartnership.org/> (last visited May 2, 2022).

⁶ *Berenson v. Twitter*, No. 3:21-cv-09818-WHA, 2022 WL 1289049 (N.D. Cal. Apr. 29, 2022), at *2 (stating that “Twitter constructed a robust five-strike COVID-19 misinformation policy. . .”).

policies to combat COVID-19 misinformation and promote authoritative public health information and resources, including expanding existing vaccine misinformation policies and amplifying medical voices;⁷ banning content that spreads false or misleading health-related information that has a serious potential to cause public harm;⁸ implementing a strike system for enforcement of medical misinformation policies, including reducing the visibility of content and permanent suspension for repeated violations;⁹ limiting the spread of misinformation through limits on forwarding messages, warning labels, and notifications if they've interacted with content that is later removed for violating COVID-19 misinformation policies;¹⁰ removing misinformation that repeats false health information widely debunked by the CDC and WHO;¹¹ disallowing medical misinformation that contradicts local health authorities' guidance on treatment, prevention, diagnosis, transmission, social distancing and self-isolation guidelines, or

⁷ Pinterest, *Pinterest announces new initiatives to fight against COVID-19 vaccine misinformation* (Mar. 11, 2021), <https://newsroom.pinterest.com/en/post/pinterest-announces-new-initiatives-to-fight-against-covid-19-vaccine-misinformation>; Pinterest, *Health misinformation*, <https://help.pinterest.com/en/article/health-misinformation> (last visited Apr. 28, 2022).

⁸ Michael Cheah, *Important updates to our content guidelines for 2020*, Vimeo (May 21, 2020), <https://vimeo.com/blog/post/content-guidelines-2020-covid/>; Erika Barros, *Important updates to our content policies for 2020*, Vimeo (Oct. 9, 2020), <https://vimeo.com/blog/post/2020-terms-of-service-guidelines/>.

⁹ Twitter Safety, *Updates to our work on COVID-19 vaccine misinformation* (Mar. 1, 2021), https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2021/updates-to-our-work-on-covid-19-vaccine-misinformation; Twitter Inc., *Coronavirus: Staying safe and informed on Twitter* (Jan. 12, 2021), https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/covid-19, Twitter Help Center, *COVID-19 misleading information policy*, <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/medical-misinformation-policy> (last visited May 2, 2022). See also *Berenson v. Twitter* at *1 (“As the pandemic continued and to protect the public, Twitter began crafting specific community standards to limit COVID-19 misinformation on the platform. These content moderation policies included takedown procedures for, e.g., ineffective treatments and false diagnostic criteria, as well as measures for ‘labelling’ information as ‘misleading.’ . . . Twitter announced a five-strike policy as part of its COVID-19 misinformation guidelines on March 1, 2021.”).

¹⁰ Nick Clegg, *Combating COVID-19 Misinformation Across Our Apps*, Meta (Mar. 25, 2020), <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/03/combating-covid-19-misinformation/>; Guy Rosen, *An Update on Our Work to Keep People Informed and Limit Misinformation About COVID-19*, Meta (Apr. 16, 2020), <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/04/covid-19-misinfo-update/>; Aida Ndiaye, *Together Against Covid-19 Misinformation: A New Campaign in Collaboration with the WHO*, Meta for Media (Mar. 10, 2021), <https://www.facebook.com/formedia/blog/together-against-covid-19-misinformation-a-new-campaign-in-partnership-with-the-who>; Meta, *Responding to COVID-19*, <https://about.facebook.com/actions/responding-to-covid-19/> (last visited May 2, 2022)

¹¹ Instagram, *COVID-19 and Vaccine Policy Updates and Protections*, <https://help.instagram.com/697825587576762> (last visited May 2, 2022).

the existence of COVID-19;¹² funding projects debunking vaccine misinformation with fact checks;¹³ supporting and hosting authoritative scientific COVID-19 research and data online;¹⁴ banning “harmful misinformation superspreaders,” including health misinformation and widespread conspiracy theories related to dangerous treatments, COVID-19, and vaccine misinformation;¹⁵ only permitting apps related to COVID-19 with reputable data sources;¹⁶ banning COVID-19 denial forums and falsifiable health information that has been manipulated and presented to mislead;¹⁷ not allowing creators that repeatedly use unfounded or debunked theories to argue against broadly supported public health measures;¹⁸ prohibiting ads that exploit the COVID-19 crisis for commercial gain, spread misinformation or might pose a danger to users’ safety;¹⁹ and disallowing posting or promoting content that attempts to sway opinion on COVID-19 through the use of sensationalized, alarmist, or hyperbolic language, or that repeats widely-debunked health claims, unsubstantiated rumors, or conspiratorial narratives.²⁰

¹² YouTube, *COVID-19 medical misinformation policy*, <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/9891785> (last visited May 2, 2022).

¹³ Alexios Mantzarlis, *An open fund for projects debunking vaccine misinformation*, Google News Initiative (Jan. 12, 2021), <https://blog.google/outreach-initiatives/google-news-initiative/open-fund-projects-debunking-vaccine-misinformation/>.

¹⁴ Amazon Staff, *Amazon’s COVID-19 blog* (last updated Mar. 4, 2022), <https://www.aboutamazon.com/news/company-news/amazons-covid-19-blog-updates-on-how-were-responding-to-the-crisis>.

¹⁵ Kim Lyons, *Twitch has a new policy that will ban ‘harmful misinformation superspreaders’*, The Verge (Mar. 3, 2022), <https://www.theverge.com/2022/3/3/22960269/twitch-new-misinformation-policy-ban-covid>; Twitch, *Preventing Harmful Misinformation Actors on Twitch*, https://safety.twitch.tv/s/safety-news/detail?language=en_US&post=Preventing-Misinformation-Actors-from-Using-Twitch (last visited May 2, 2022).

¹⁶ *Ensuring the Credibility of Health & Safety Information*, Apple Developer (Mar. 14, 2020), <https://developer.apple.com/news/?id=03142020a>.

¹⁷ Rishi Iyengar, *Reddit takes action against groups spreading Covid misinformation*, CNN Business (Sept. 1, 2021), <https://www.cnn.com/2021/09/01/tech/reddit-covid-misinformation-ban/index.html>; Reddit Security, *COVID denialism and policy clarifications* (Sept. 1, 2021), https://www.reddit.com/r/redditsecurity/comments/pfyqqn/covid_denialism_and_policy_clarifications/.

¹⁸ Patreon, *An Update to Patreon’s Policies on COVID-19-Related Medical Misinformation* (Feb. 16, 2021), <https://blog.patreon.com/an-update-to-patreons-policies-on-covid-19-related-medical-misinformation>.

¹⁹ David Elliott, *Promoting trusted information in response to COVID-19*, Microsoft On The Issues (Apr. 10, 2020), <https://news.microsoft.com/on-the-issues/2020/04/10/bing-linkedin-covid-19/>.

²⁰ Alex Anderson, *Addressing Health Misinformation*, Discord Blog (Feb. 25, 2022), <https://discord.com/blog/addressing-health-misinformation>.

Any aggregate data and analysis of technology platform COVID-19 misinformation policies including implementation of those policies and evaluations of their effectiveness.

Data in digital services' transparency reports demonstrates that COVID-19 misinformation policies are being enforced and actions are being taken accordingly. For example, since Twitter introduced their COVID-19 guidance, they have challenged 11.7 million accounts, suspended 6,797 accounts, and removed over 78,679 pieces of content worldwide as of March 2022.²¹ As of August 2021, Facebook has removed more than 20 million pieces of content related to COVID-19 and vaccine misinformation,²² and YouTube has removed over 1 million videos related to COVID-19 misinformation.²³

Respectfully submitted,

Ali Sternburg
Vice President, Information Policy
Computer & Communications Industry Association (CCIA)

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²¹ Twitter Transparency Center, *COVID-19 Misinformation*, <https://transparency.twitter.com/en/reports/covid19.html> (last visited May 2, 2022).

²² Monika Bickert, *How We're Taking Action Against Vaccine Misinformation Superspreaders*, Meta (Aug. 18, 2021), <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/08/taking-action-against-vaccine-misinformation-superspreaders/>.

²³ Neal Mohan, *Perspective: Tackling Misinformation on YouTube* (Aug. 25, 2021), <https://blog.youtube/inside-youtube/tackling-misinfo/>.