



*8th August 2018*

Committee Secretary  
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

By email: [em@aph.gov.au](mailto:em@aph.gov.au)

Dear Committee Secretary,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide the Electoral Matters Committee with details about Facebook's work to promote civic engagement and protect election integrity on Facebook in Australia. On our services, Australians connect and share with the people that matter to them and engage about the issues they care about, which often includes politics.

Facebook's work to protect the integrity of elections is focused on promoting civic engagement and an informed community. Specifically, this means our work is focused on four key areas:

- Enforcing our policies and removing fake accounts,
- Reducing the spread of false news,
- Expanding our capability to detect and disrupt information operations,
- Increasing pages and ads transparency,
- Promoting civic engagement and media literacy.

Our work to enforce our policies and remove fake accounts, to reduce the spread of false news and promote civic engagement and media literacy, has been ongoing for several years — including during the time of the 2016 Australian election. Our work to increase transparency for pages and ads has been undertaken more actively since the 2016 Australian election.

Specifically, in relation to the 2016 Australian election, we worked with the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) to respond to any complaints or concerns they had in relation to content that was shared on our services. We also released a News Feed reminder to Australians to register to vote on May 20, 2016 before the rolls closed<sup>1</sup> and on election day, a prompt appeared for those people

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<sup>1</sup> See the Facebook Australia Page post about the reminder here:

<https://www.facebook.com/FacebookAU/photos/a.10150193191842415.313439.363337977414/10153939899377415/?type=3&theater>



who logged in to Facebook that day, reminding them that it was election day, connecting them with polling booth information and inviting them to share that they were voting. During the 2016 Australian election, more than 4.1 million Australians engaged about election-related topics more than 33 million times on Facebook.<sup>2</sup>

Since the 2016 election, we have also been working with relevant local authorities to respond to questions and complaints in relation to content on our services. During the 2017 Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey, we worked with both the AEC and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) to remove content that violated our policies and applicable law, as well as notify administrators of Facebook Pages to ensure they complied with applicable authorisation requirements. We also ran a reminder to Australians who use Facebook to enroll to be able to vote in the Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey.<sup>3</sup> In 2017 — the year in which Australians voted in the marriage equality plebiscite — the topic of “same-sex marriage” was the third most mentioned topic by Australians on Facebook.<sup>4</sup>

We are unaware of any irregularities, beyond the complaints raised with us by the AEC, that occurred during the 2016 election, nor during the 2017 Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey, other than those complaints raised with us by both the AEC and the ABS. If the Committee has data or insights that indicate that there were irregularities, we would be happy to review this for relevance to our services, noting that it may be made more challenging given the two years that have passed since the 2016 election.

To assist the Committee in its work to review the cyber-manipulation of elections, we have outlined below more details about our election integrity work.

### ***Enforcing our policies and removing fake accounts***

We have always maintained an authentic name policy. Authenticity is the cornerstone of our community. People use Facebook to connect with real people, which is why we’re so focused on authentic connections and activity on our service. This is why, under our policies,<sup>5</sup> people are required to use their authentic name when they create an account. We know that online falsehoods are often propagated by fake accounts, so finding and removing these fake accounts more effectively helps to disrupt the spread of falsehoods. We use machine learning to detect abuse, protect against the creation of fake accounts, and uncover coordinated behavior that is abusive and counter to our

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<sup>2</sup> See the Note on the Facebook Australia Page here: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook/2016-election-on-facebook/1159677560738051/>

<sup>3</sup> See the Facebook Australia Page post about the prompt here: <https://www.facebook.com/FacebookAU/photos/a.10150193191842415.313439.363337977414/10155193504832415/?type=3&theater>

<sup>4</sup> See the 2017 Year in Review data: <https://www.facebook.com/FacebookAU/photos/a.10150193191842415.313439.363337977414/10155486192347415/?type=3&theater>

<sup>5</sup> The Facebook Community Standards are available here: [facebook.com/communitystandards](https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards)



## Community Standards.

We block millions of fake accounts each day at the point of creation before they can do any harm. We use machine learning, which allows us to find suspicious behaviors. Of those accounts that are not blocked at the point of creation, our Community Standards Enforcement Report<sup>6</sup> confirms that in January to March 2018, for example, we identified and disabled 583 million fake accounts that made it through registration. Of these fake accounts that made it through registration, we were able to detect 99% of fake accounts before anyone reported them to us. This usually happens quickly — within minutes of registration. This is an important part of our work to prevent the sharing of falsehoods and misinformation online.

In 2017, we also made improvements to our systems to recognize inauthentic accounts more easily by identifying patterns of activity — without assessing the content itself. For example, our systems may detect repeated posting of the same content, or an increase in messages sent.<sup>7</sup>

In the lead up to elections, we can proactively look for potentially harmful types of election-related activity, such as Pages of foreign origin that are distributing inauthentic civic content. If we find any, we then send these suspicious accounts to be manually reviewed by our security team to see if they violate our policies, in which case we remove them. This prevents misleading or divisive memes from going viral.

When the AEC or ABS has alerted us to content that violates local law, that does not violate our policies, we will either restrict access to that content out of respect for local laws or take steps to ensure that it complies. To do this, we establish relationship with relevant local authorities such as the AEC, and — in the case of the marriage law postal survey — also the ABS. During the 2017 marriage law postal survey, for example, we removed content notified to us by the ABS from our Marketplace product that offered votes for sale, and we also notified the administrators of Pages that they needed to comply with Australia's authorisation laws in collaboration with the AEC.

### ***Reducing the spread of false news***

False news has long been a tool for economic or political gains, and we're seeing new ways it's taking shape online. For the past several years we have taken steps to reduce the spread of false news on our services.

Authentic communications is a core part of people's experience on Facebook. People find value in connecting with their real friends and family, and they also find value in receiving updates from the Pages and organisations that they choose to follow. One of the ways that people receive updates

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<sup>6</sup> Facebook's first Community Standards Enforcement Report is available here:

<https://transparency.facebook.com/community-standards-enforcement>

<sup>7</sup> See the Note on the Facebook Security Page about improvements in protecting the integrity of activity on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook-security/improvements-in-protecting-the-integrity-of-activity-on-facebook/10154323366590766/>



from their friends and family and the Pages that they choose to follow is via News Feed. News Feed is a personalized stream of stories that each person builds from the people and Pages they have chosen to connect to on Facebook.

The goal of News Feed is to show you the stories that matter most to each individual. To do this, we use ranking to order stories based on how interesting we believe they are to that person: specifically, who they tend to interact with, and what kinds of content they tend to like and comment on.

We work to ensure that false news, misinformation and other types of low quality information does not achieve such as spam, by improving the way posts, videos, and articles appear in News Feed. We use signals that people on Facebook produce to de-prioritize content that is inauthentic, including hoaxes and misinformation. Down ranking a piece of content means it will appear lower down on a user's News Feed.

We have also made updates so people see fewer posts and ads in News Feed that link to low-quality web page experiences, such as 'click bait', sensationalism or spam. We also found that if reading an article makes people significantly less likely to share it, that may be a sign that a story has misled people in some way. We are incorporating this signal into ranking, specifically for articles that are outliers, where people who read the article are significantly less likely to share it.

A lot of the misinformation that spreads on Facebook is financially motivated, much like email spam in the 90s. If spammers can get enough people to click on fake stories and visit their sites, they'll make money off the ads they show. By making these scams unprofitable, we destroy their incentives to spread false news on Facebook. So we're figuring out spammers' common tactics and reducing the distribution of those kinds of stories in News Feed. We penalize [clickbait](#), [links shared more frequently by spammers](#), and [links to low-quality web pages](#), also known as "ad farms."

We provide more information about all of our work in relation to News Feed via Inside Feed: <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/category/inside-feed/>

False news runs counter to our mission to connect people with the stories they find meaningful. We will continue working on this and we know we have more work to do.

### ***Increasing our ability to detect and disrupt information operations***

In addition to misinformation, we have expanded our ability to find and eliminate information operations from our platforms. Information operations are when sophisticated threat actors run coordinated efforts to mislead and manipulate the public. There are three important elements to every information operation — coordination among accounts, among Pages, or among offline groups; manipulation or deception and a strategic goal such as domestic or foreign interference.

Information operators often target elections, and we have recently taken action against these threats in Brazil, in Mexico, and in the United States. The team tackling this problem includes threat



intelligence investigators, data scientists, product and engineering experts, colleagues from policy and legal and elsewhere.

Information operations are fundamentally a security problem. Our work to address these focus on two areas: manual investigations and automated detection and disruption. Manual investigations require heavy investment and skilled investigators but are nevertheless, a critical component of our effort. The threat actors in this space are continually innovating, so our manual investigations need to be constantly innovating.

In addition, for each investigation, we identify particular behaviors that are common across threat actors, and then work to build automate detection of these behaviors and even modify our products to make those behaviors much more difficult. Our work detecting and removing 99% of fake accounts before they are reported to us is a good example of this effort, as is our work on advertising transparency (both of which are outlined in more detail in this submission).

Our goal is to use manual investigations to disrupt sophisticated threats and continually improve our automation and products based on the insights from those investigations.

### *Increasing pages and ads transparency*

To further prevent abuse and misuse of our services, we have brought more transparency to ads and Pages on Facebook. More transparency means increased accountability for page administrators and advertisers. Specifically, these pages and ads transparency tools include:

- **More Page Information:** You can learn more about Pages, even if they don't advertise. For example, you can see any recent name changes and the date the Page was created.
- **View Active Ads:** You can now see the ads a Page is running across Facebook, Instagram, Messenger and our partner network, even if those ads aren't shown to you. Just log into Facebook, visit any Page and select "Info and Ads." You can see ad creative and copy, and you can flag anything suspicious by clicking on "Report Ad."

These transparency measures have been available since June 2018.<sup>8</sup>

### *Promote civic engagement & media literacy*

Online platforms such as Facebook can help people connect with elected officials and engage in the democratic process. To support this, we run enroll to vote reminders and election day prompts in News Feed, in collaboration with and based on feedback from the AEC, and in the case of the Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey, the ABS. We believe that democracies are stronger when more people are engaged - that's why we are encouraging everyone who is eligible to register to vote by reminding people of the deadline and connecting them with resources.

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<sup>8</sup> More details about these new transparency tools are available here:

<https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2018/06/transparency-for-ads-and-pages/>



To help people make more informed decisions about what they read online, we are working with many different industry, academic and not-for-profit partners to build an informed community that exposes us to new ideas and builds common understanding in a world where every person has a voice. To achieve this, we have undertaken several recent initiatives that focus on giving training and tools for journalists, and training and tools for the public, so that we can work with all relevant stakeholders to build more informed communities. Some of these are:

- **The Facebook Journalism Project:**<sup>9</sup> a project that builds on our commitment to collaborating with news organizations and helping people get better information so they can make smart choices about what they read. Through this project, we are collaborating with news organizations to develop products, learning from journalists about ways we can be a better partner, and working with publishers and educators on how we can equip people with the knowledge they need to be informed readers in the digital age.
- **The News Integrity Initiative:**<sup>10</sup> this is a global consortium of which we are a founding member together with the Walkley Foundation, focused on helping people make informed judgments about the news they read and share online. This is a 14 million dollar fund for applied research and projects, joining more than 25 international funders and participants including tech industry leaders, academic institutions, non-profits, advertising and public relations companies, and other organizations.
- **News Literacy to Build Informed Communities:** we have hosted two workshops, most recently in Sydney in partnership with The University of Technology, Sydney, bringing 40 media literacy experts from around the Asia-Pacific region together, including the representatives of the Walkley Foundation, Huffington Post Australia, the University of Technology and the University of Melbourne, to identify tangible ways in which we can work together to build more informed communities.<sup>11</sup>
- **Digital literacy library:** we recently released a web portal that houses free lesson plans for teachers to use in their classrooms to help students 11-18 years old think critically and share thoughtfully online. The first set of lessons were developed by the Youth and Media research team at Harvard's Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society and cover a range of topics including reputation management, respectful sharing, identity exploration, cybersecurity and more. Found in our Safety Center, the portal serves as a resource to educators looking to address digital literacy and help the 830 million young people online build the skills they need to safely enjoy digital technology. We are excited to work with local educators and other community leaders to promote greater digital literacy utilizing these resources and welcome any suggestions you have about how best to do this.

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<sup>9</sup> An overview of the Facebook Journalism Project is available here: <https://media.fb.com/2017/01/11/facebook-journalism-project/>

<sup>10</sup> See the announcement of the News Integrity Initiative here: <https://www.journalism.cuny.edu/2017/04/announcing-the-new-integrity-initiative/>

<sup>11</sup> See <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/h/facebook-brings-together-experts-to-address-news-literacy-in-asia-pacific/>; see also <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/h/apac-news-literacy-working-group-reconvenes-to-support-asias-news-community/>

# facebook

We trust that the Committee finds this information useful as it continues to consider the topic of the cyber-manipulation of elections. Please let us know if you have any further questions.

Kind regards,

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