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Democracy Hacked? How To Respond
Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy
Council of Europe
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Dear Members of the Committee,

For the past years, I have been researching political disinformation and manipulation in digital media. This includes the Russian Internet Research Agency's infiltration of political debates online; how journalists report on disinformation, as well as the challenges currently facing journalists and researchers trying to investigate this topic.

As you all know, the past years have been dominated by debates about fake news and the post-truth era. Unfortunately, much of this debate has been misguided. At times, it has even served to legitimise anti-democratic solutions, such as state censorship and secretive tech measures with little to no oversight.

When we talk about solutions to disinformation and manipulation, we *have* to remember the basic cornerstones of European democracies. Empowering citizens to influence political decision-making on a transparent basis. Having systems of checks and balances that citizens can trust. And prosecuting legal matters within our courts and not within private companies.

Based on my research, I will today present three recommendations as to how Europe can protect our democracies in the digital age. These recommendations revolve around:

- 1. Ensuring transparent collaboration between social media companies and academic researchers and journalists.**
- 2. Ensuring increased transparency from social media companies regarding content moderation.**
- 3. Restricting or banning micro-targeted political advertising**

I sincerely believe that pursuing these three paths would strengthen our democracies' ability to withstand the threats of online disinformation and protect civil rights. Based on the actions of social media companies, it is my sincere belief that these protections can only be achieved through regulation.

Let me start by expanding on my first recommendation – the need to ensure transparent collaboration between social media companies and researchers and journalists.

Today, social media platforms have a vested interest in appearing “tough” on disinformation. Yet they also have a clear economic stake in limiting independent investigations that could result in negative press. This is why these companies, especially Facebook, have been more than happy to launch their own closed initiatives, but have been unwilling to listen to the multitude of experts calling for proper systems of independent research and measures of checks and balances.

Indeed, while the threat of disinformation and manipulation has become increasingly clear, social media companies have in several respects made it *harder* for independent researchers and journalists to study these issues.

In order to address the threat of disinformation, knowledge is vital. Disinformation is not a new problem, but it is taking new forms online. We are in many ways dealing with an arms race and, thus, we need continuous independent research.

To give you a recent example of the problem, Facebook announced yesterday that it has removed 5.4 billion fake accounts in 2019. Right now, we have no way of independently verifying this claim. We have no way of knowing which countries or languages were targeted by these accounts. We have no way of knowing what types of content these accounts disseminated – those that were not caught by Facebook immediately. We have no way of knowing how many users in Europe were reached by these accounts. We have no way of knowing, if users were ever notified of seeing these accounts. We have no way of knowing how many accounts showed signs of large-scale orchestration. Finally, we have no way of knowing, whether any of these findings had other consequences for the culprits than the removal of their content. This is not sufficient.

Therefore, we need to ensure that researchers and journalists can get much better access to data on fake accounts and disinformation without these companies strictly controlling it.

My second recommendation is that content moderation becomes much more transparent.

Social media platforms have become vital outlets for public debate in our democracies. This is why unaccountable removal of content on these platforms imposes a threat in several ways. On the one hand, citizens can currently far too easily become subject to unjust content removal with little transparency or accountability. On the other hand, criminal offenders, who for example threaten with violence, can too easily get away with simply having their post removed.

To improve this, social media companies need to make it much clearer on what grounds and through which processes content is removed. Citizens also need to have better and more transparent means of appealing content removal and assurance that qualified humans, rather than algorithms, will review their appeal.

At the same time, criminal offences, such as threats of violence, identity theft or fraud should not simply be handled through content moderation, but through our courts of justice. In order for this to happen, content moderators need to have much better training in national legal contexts and there needs to be better systems in place for how social media companies can share potential criminal violations with local authorities. Right now, too much focus has been on simply the removal of content.

My final recommendation is to restrict or even ban the use of micro-targeted political ads. This encompasses ads tailored and targeted towards citizens based on their data profiles regarding personal behaviour, preferences, 'likes' on social media, age, gender and more. There needs to be a limit on how specific such targeting of political ads can be.

Just last week, it was revealed that both Google and Facebook have considered taking this exact measure, as they are well aware of the risks of manipulation and democratic opacity that comes with micro-targeting. It is certainly positive, if these companies are considering this step. Yet, this

issue also needs to be addressed through regulation, not by individual companies, especially as such a limitation or ban would need include transparency and measures of appeal, for example as to what is defined as 'political.'

After the scandals surrounding both Cambridge Analytica and the Russian Internet Research Agency, it is clear that micro-targeted ads can be used as instruments of political manipulation. By limiting them, our political landscape would both become more accountable and less susceptible to such manipulation.

In sum, it is my sincere hope that European countries will join forces to take these positive steps and counter the rapidly evolving threats posed by disinformation and manipulation online. This will be vital for not only our immediate future, but also the long-term sustainability of our democratic societies. Thank you.