Microsoft

15 December 2020

December 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, and continue to take, to combat COVID-19 disinformation during the month of November 2020. This report supplements, and should be read in conjunction with, our reports to the Commission of August 15, September 15, October 15, November 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).

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 the 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".

A. Initiatives to promote authoritative content

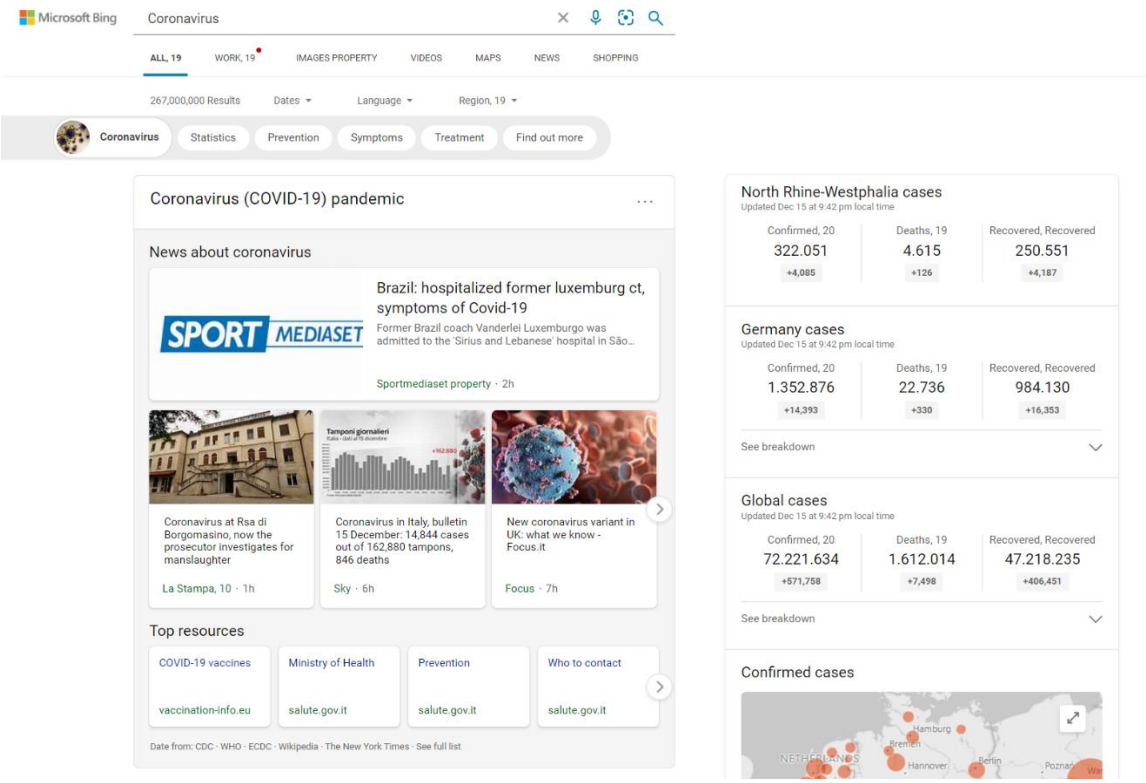
Point A of the Commission's Information Request asks platforms to "provide data on the actions taken to promote information from national and international health agencies, national and EU authorities, as well as professional media, including information on the use of trustworthiness indicators for news 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.

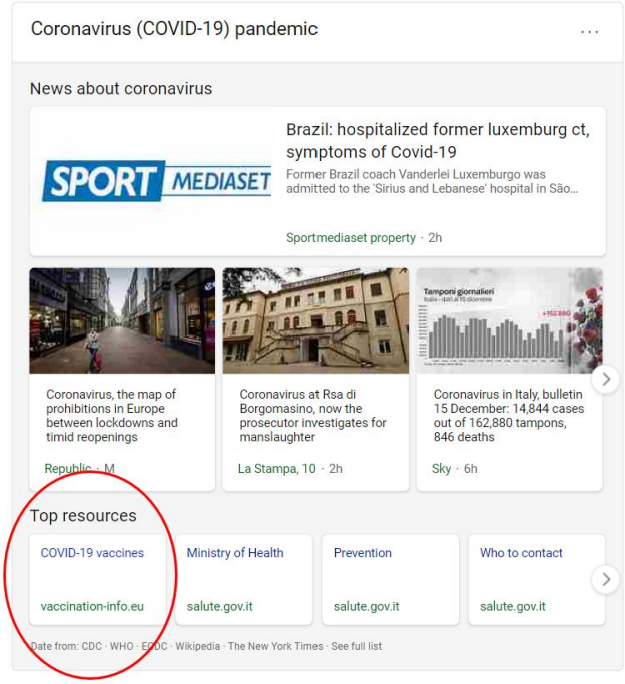
As we also noted in our August report, for specific queries, Bing will point users to special COVID-19 "information hubs" on Microsoft News. The articles in these information hubs, currently available in 39 markets globally, are sourced from over 4500 trusted news brands worldwide. These hubs also contain 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 November 2020, the Bing COVID experience had 27,133,738 visitors, including 3,649,021 from EU countries:

EU Country	November Monthly Visits
Bulgaria	20085
Czech Republic	63261
Denmark	28420
Austria	210409
Switzerland	53096
Germany	560300
Greece	23441
United Kingdom	293174
Ireland	54170
Spain	371969
Estonia	3396
Finland	34434
Belgium	27703
France	333145
Luxembourg	1419
Croatia	244
Hungary	104458
Iceland	2382
Italy	498326
Lithuania	4388
Latvia	4986
Netherlands	198400
Norway	41
Poland	294829
Portugal	169747
Romania	132756
Slovakia	6417
Slovenia	2963
Sweden	150662
TOTAL	**3,649,021**

Moreover, a person entering a vaccine-related search query on Bing is presented with reliable COVID-19 vaccine-related information, news, and authoritative sources, for example, the [EU vaccination information portal](#).



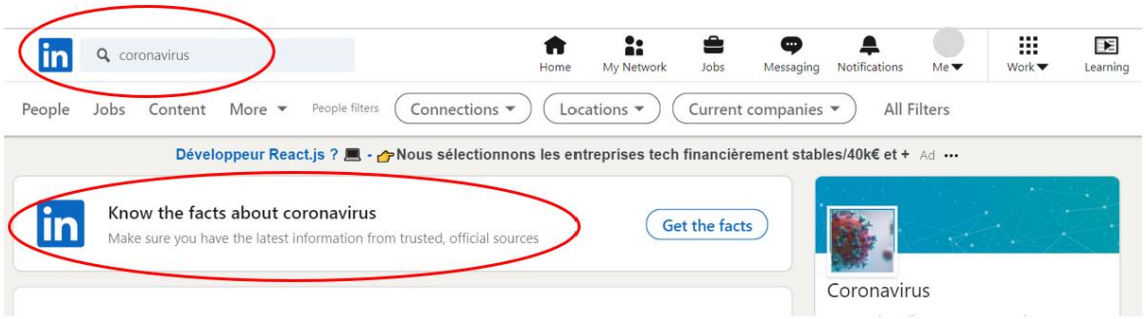
2. Microsoft Advertising

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 November 2020, Microsoft Advertising prevented a total of 1,804,343 advertiser submissions directly related to COVID-19 from serving to its users globally, 499,940 of which in European markets. These numbers include vaccine-related disinformation.

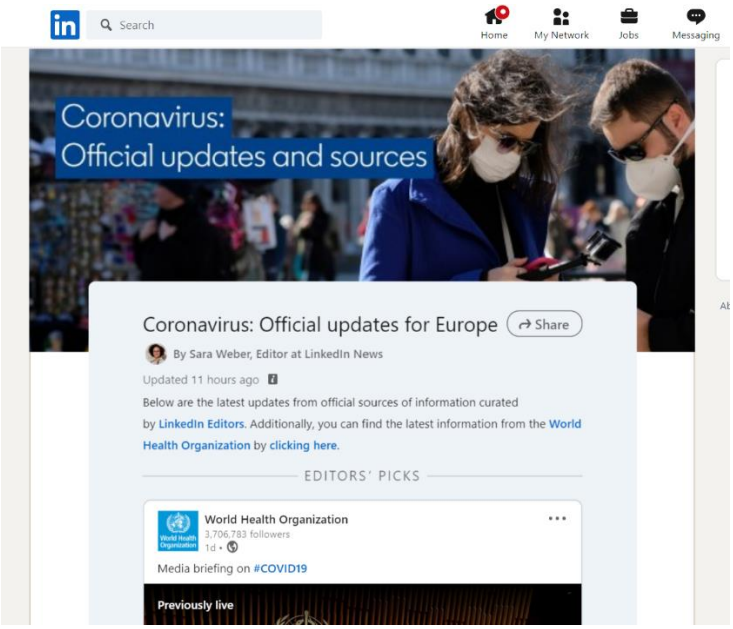
3. LinkedIn

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.

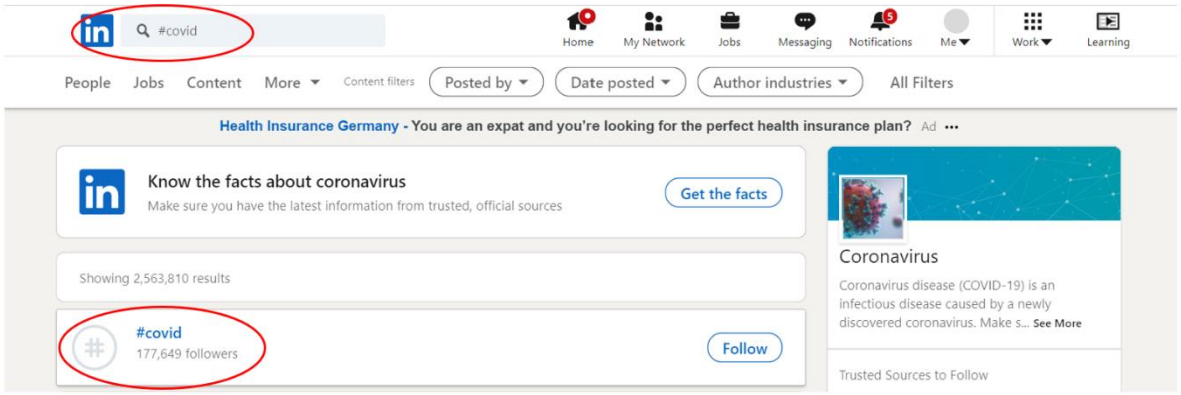
For instance, as illustrated in the screenshot below, we redirect any LinkedIn member that entered a search for the term "coronavirus" to a link labelled "*Know the facts about coronavirus*," which appears first in the list of search results:



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, primarily the World Health Organization. The storylines on this page are available in 8 languages:



LinkedIn members can also undertake a search using #coronavirus or #COVID19 via the same search box on their LinkedIn profile page. This will produce a list of all posts that have been published on the LinkedIn platform using these hashtags. The search result will also point members to the most recent post from LinkedIn News, which is generated by an in-house news team of 75+ journalists. By clicking on any of these posts, members are redirected to LinkedIn's official page on the coronavirus, as referenced above. Any member who wishes to receive regular updates from LinkedIn News can select the 'follow' option on any of the posts, and all future updates will be added to the newsfeed of a member's own storyline.



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.

Since October and until the end of new restrictions, a link to the official page on the coronavirus is featured in our local Daily Rundown.

In our top stories and local daily rundowns, we covered relevant political and economic news, including changes in local rules and health restrictions (e.g. in France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain).

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 30 November
Pan- European		
European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC)	https://www.linkedin.com/company/ecdc/	31,289
European Public Health Association (EUPHA)	https://www.linkedin.com/company/eupha/	1,610

European Commission	https://www.linkedin.com/company/european-commission/	1,045,301
World Health Organization (WHO)	https://www.linkedin.com/company/world-health-organization/	3,675,545
Unicef	https://www.linkedin.com/company/unicef/	2,877,845
Red Cross	https://www.linkedin.com/company/ifrc/	157,598
United Nations	https://www.linkedin.com/company/united-nations/	3,349,671
France		
Government	https://www.linkedin.com/company/gouvernementfr/	77,287
Ministry of Health	https://www.linkedin.com/company/minist%C3%A8re-des-solidarites-de-la-sant%C3%A9/	109,039
Ministry of Labour	https://www.linkedin.com/company/minist%C3%A8re-du-travail/	208,704
Santé publique France	https://www.linkedin.com/company/sante-publique-france/	79,362
DACH		
Germany Ministry and minister of health (Bundesgesundheitsministerium)	https://www.linkedin.com/company/bundesgesundheitsministerium/	33,172
KfW Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau	https://www.linkedin.com/company/kfw/	39,688
German Bundesagentur für Arbeit (Federal Employment Agency)	https://www.linkedin.com/company/bundesagentur-fuer-arbeit/	11,614
Switzerland Ministry of Health (Bundesamt für Gesundheit)	https://www.linkedin.com/company/bag-ofsp/	68,095
Netherlands		
Ministry of health (Ministerie van VWS)	https://www.linkedin.com/company/ministerie-van-vws/	102,484
Governmental institute RIVM	https://www.linkedin.com/company/rivm/	40,657

Italy		
Ministero della Salute	https://www.linkedin.com/company/ministerosalute/	26,614
Presidenza del Consiglio (government)	https://www.linkedin.com/company/presidenza-del-consiglio-dei-ministri/	59,876
Unicef Italia	https://www.linkedin.com/company/unicef-italia/	4,524
Spain		
Minister of Health	https://www.linkedin.com/company/sanidadgob/	15,699
Minister of Science	https://www.linkedin.com/company/cienciagob/	62,177
Minister of Social Security	https://www.linkedin.com/company/ministerio-de-inclusi%C3%B3n-seguridad-social-y-migraciones/	1,914
Unicef Comité Español	https://www.linkedin.com/company/unicef-spain/	20,607

As noted in our previous reports, we continue to share critical information on COVID-19 with coverage on New anti-Covid measures in Italy; new rules during holidays in France, lockdown in Germany and Austria, or new measures in the Netherlands. All official announcements are also featured in the official Coronavirus Storylines appearing on top of the search results #coronavirus #Covid19.

LinkedIn News also published the sixth annual Big Ideas package [available across five markets and five languages in the European Union: DACH (German), France (French), Italy (Italian), Netherlands (Dutch), and Spain (Spanish)]. In all other markets, members with English interfaces received the global list. In light of the coronavirus pandemic, LinkedIn News editors asked a variety of experts and business leaders for their predictions on where we go from here in 2021, including Kristalina Georgieva (IMF), or Stefan Oschmann (CEO Merck).

B. Initiatives and tools to improve users' awareness

Point 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.

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.

As noted above, as a result of these systems and related efforts, in November 2020, Microsoft Advertising prevented a total of 1,804,343 advertiser submissions directly related to COVID-19 from serving to its users globally, 499,940 of which in European markets. These numbers include vaccine-related disinformation.

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.