Decode Democracy
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ALL CHANGE, NO FIX

How Big Tech's "Self-Regulation" Fails Our Democracy

MARCH 2021

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the changes made by major social media platforms during the last 18 months in the wake of a national election, global pandemic, and racial upheaval across the United States. Our report considers policies adopted in six major categories since August 2019 across nine platforms: Google, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, Reddit, Snapchat, and TikTok.

A review of policy changes announced by major social media platforms found the companies have made at least 321 policy changes over the last 18 months that impacted disinformation and democracy, including civic integrity, violence and extremism, public health, consumer empowerment, data protection, and platform governance and other operational features. Seventy percent of those changes occured at the largest platforms: Google, Facebook, and Twitter.

Despite instituting more than 300 policy changes in less than two years, social media platforms have largely failed to alleviate the growing problem of online disinformation. Furthermore, social media platforms invariably have reacted to crises and public pressure, instead of proactively addressing digital deception. Throughout 2020 it took advocacy from public interest organizations combined with real-world events and immense public and consumer demand to ultimately force the platforms to act.

Because the algorithms that drive social media thrive on conflict, platforms have been reluctant to address the root cause of the problem: a business model that amplifies polarizing content to maximize engagement and profits. When Facebook tinkered with its algorithm to better detect hate speech, one pundit said it found that "the 'nicer newsfeed' may be better for the world ... but it may not be better for business."

This report reveals:

- Despite making more than 300 policy changes in 18 months, major social media platforms have largely failed to alleviate the growing problem of online disinformation.

- The major social media platforms are failing to anticipate disinformation. Instead they are reacting to crises and public pressure.

- The major social media platforms failed to properly counter disinformation during the 2020 presidential election cycle and continued to respond in half-hearted, piecemeal fashion to disinformation after the election, with catastrophic consequences.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

OUR FINDINGS HOLD IMPORTANT LESSONS FOR LAWMAKERS.

First

We cannot leave the fight against online deception to social media and technology CEOs who are not accountable to the public. With online disinformation threatening our health, public safety, and democracy, Congress and the Biden-Harris administration should prioritize the fight against disinformation and create a coordinated national response.

Second

To find a sustainable solution to the problem of rampant online disinformation, we need to scrutinize the business models of social media platforms and hold them to account.

Third

We urgently need to pass laws that will help voters understand who is trying to influence them online. The For The People Act, recently reintroduced in Congress, is an important first step toward fighting online disinformation, increasing transparency, and reducing the influence of money in politics.

Lawmakers must realize they cannot rely on social media platforms to do the right thing – we're in desperate need of stronger laws and regulations.

Full recommendations from Decode Democracy based on this report are available on page 19.

This report considers policies adopted in six major categories since August 2019 across Google, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, Reddit, Snapchat, and TikTok. In an 18-month period, the platforms made at least 321 policy changes to address the most contentious topics, including civic integrity, violence and extremism, public health, consumer empowerment, and data protection. Seventy percent of those changes occurred on Google, Facebook, or Twitter (Table 1).

More than one-third of policy changes (123) were made in the area of civic integrity, logical given the astronomical growth of social media as a campaign tool. The Biden and Trump presidential campaigns together spent more than $364 million on general election campaign advertisements carried by Facebook and Google, and it's highly likely that unearned media that surfaced on group and individual accounts easily surpassed that figure.

Decode Democracy also considered policy changes in other areas, including privacy and data policy (41), violence and extremism (43), public health (53), consumer empowerment (31), and other changes that address platform governance and operational features (30).

OVERVIEW OF POLICY CHANGES
August 2019-January 2021*

	CIVIC INTEGRITY	VIOLENCE & EXTREMISM	PUBLIC HEALTH	CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT	DATA POLICY	PLATFORM GOVERNANCE & OPERATIONAL FEATURES	Total
GOOGLE	26	2	8	2	7	6	51
FACEBOOK	33	16	25	4	21	11	110
TWITTER	34	10	6	8	3	4	65
YOUTUBE	7	4	1	3	0	2	17
WHATSAPP	0	0	2	0	4	2	8
INSTAGRAM	2	2	5	1	1	1	12
REDDIT	7	2	2	11	2	3	27
SNAPCHAT	5	1	2	0	0	1	9
TIKTOK	9	6	2	2	3	0	22
TOTAL	123	43	53	31	41	30	321

0   321

Table 1: Overview of Policy Changes
*Data includes policy changes between August 1, 2019 and January 22, 2021.

KEY FINDINGS

Self-regulation by technology and social media platforms is largely reactive rather than proactive. Overall, they're failing to limit disinformation.
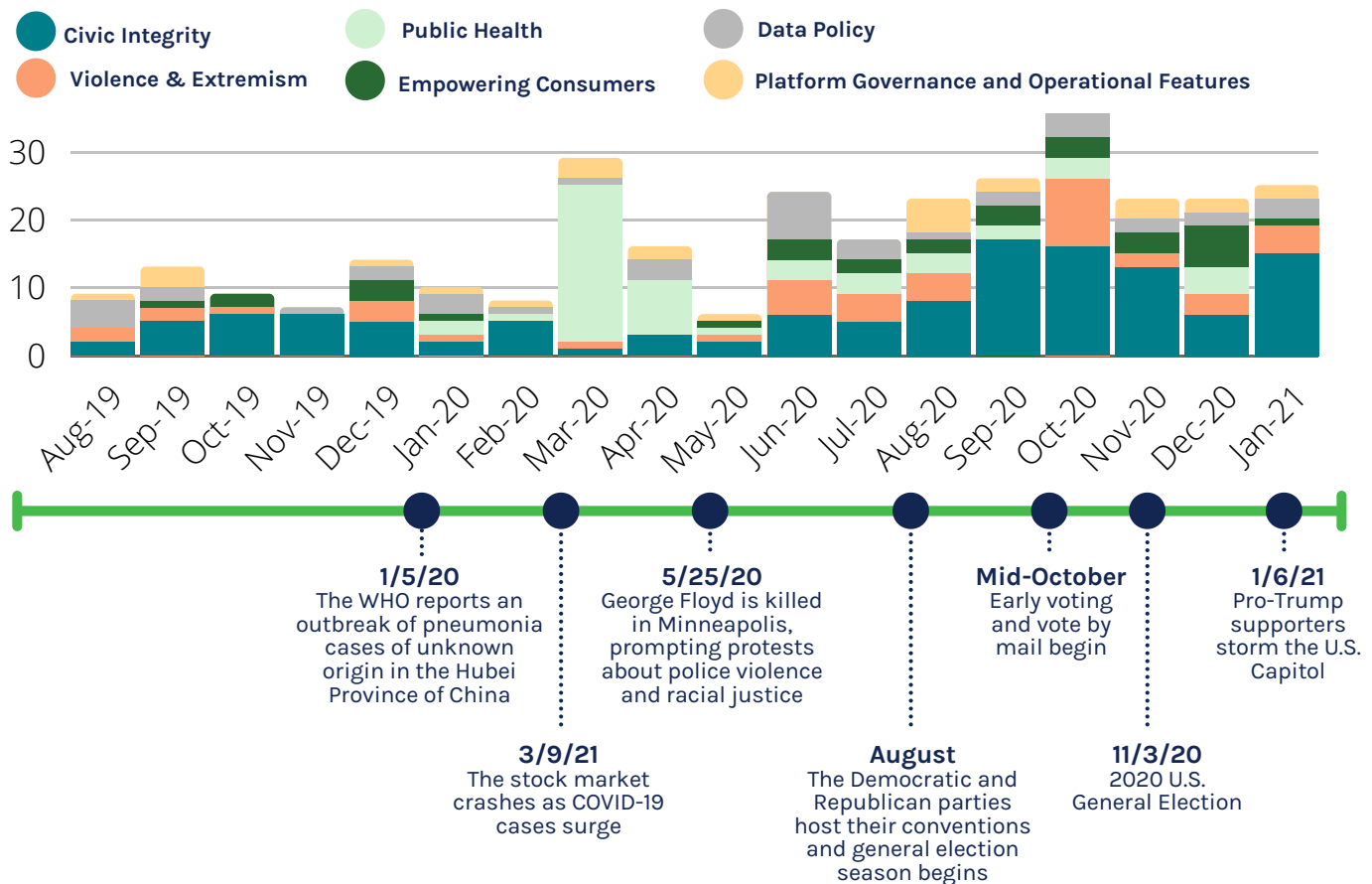
Despite the sheer number of policy changes, disinformation has become rampant on social media in ways never before seen in any other media. A global pandemic that has resulted in more American fatalities than all U.S. combat deaths during World War II was the subject of disinformation on Facebook pages that drew an estimated 460 million views in April 2020. Videos with electoral disinformation were viewed 137 million times on YouTube in the single week that followed the November 3 general election.

Part of the reason for these failures is that social media platforms invariably have reacted to crises only when pressured to do so. Not only were there clear and obvious spikes in online disinformation related to major real-world events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the U.S. election, but dozens of advocacy organizations applied immense pressure on the platforms to make changes to their policies. Combined, the efforts from public interest organizations and high-profile moments of viral disinformation erupting online were just enough to force the platforms' hand on several occasions — although ensuring such changes are enforced is another matter entirely.

The timeline of key events below underscores how platforms generally waited to shift their policies until after online disinformation and hate speech resulted in significant real-world damage.

TIMELINE OF POLICY CHANGES BY CATEGORY
Figure 1

Legend:
- Civic Integrity
- Violence & Extremism
- Public Health
- Empowering Consumers
- Data Policy
- Platform Governance and Operational Features

1/5/20
The WHO reports an outbreak of pneumonia cases of unknown origin in the Hubei Province of China

3/9/21
The stock market crashes as COVID-19 cases surge

5/25/20
George Floyd is killed in Minneapolis, prompting protests about police violence and racial justice

August
The Democratic and Republican parties host their conventions and general election season begins

Mid-October
Early voting and vote by mail begin

11/3/20
2020 U.S. General Election

1/6/21
Pro-Trump supporters storm the U.S. Capitol

KEY FINDINGS

Consider four major crises that occurred in 2020:

1 Despite conspiracy theories surrounding the coronavirus emerging shortly after the WHO first reported about an outbreak of pneumonia cases of unknown origin in the Hubei Province of China at the beginning of January, social media platforms didn't significantly address the "infodemic" until after dangerous conspiracy theories and false health advice went viral.

2 Platforms also failed to respond to the rise of right-wing extremism until after the explosion of domestic unrest following the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Facebook designated the faction of the Boogaloo movement that advocates violence as a "dangerous organization" at the end of June, and expanded its ban on racist writings and imagery later in the summer. Twitter waited until July to ban QAnon accounts and posts with links promoting hate speech and violence.

3 The major social media platforms had four full years to prepare policies limiting political disinformation in a national election. Yet lies circulated freely across all social media platforms throughout the 2020 election cycle. Although the platforms made multiple changes, every policy shift before the November 3 election would prove to be too little and would require a further update or modification. False claims about the security of mail-in ballots and the integrity of the U.S. election process were especially problematic in a deeply divided county. Setting the stage for a tumultuous post-election period, Twitter didn't clarify how it would handle claims of victory until one day before the election. Facebook had to further tighten its policies one day after the election.

4 The platforms' negligence in addressing Trump's falsehoods about the election and the rise of conspiracy theories and increasingly prominent militia groups culminated in the January 6 attempted coup at the U.S. Capitol by a Trump-inspired mob, led by right-wing insurrectionists who had used social media platforms to plan the assaults that resulted in five deaths. Again, the proverbial barn door was closed after livestock had escaped: Facebook suspended Trump's account "indefinitely" on January 7. Twitter followed suit on January 8. YouTube took action on January 12.

KEY FINDINGS

The major social media platforms failed to properly counter disinformation during the 2020 presidential election cycle and continued to respond in half-hearted, piecemeal fashion to disinformation after the election, with catastrophic consequences.

While Facebook and Google extended their political ad bans in mid-November, Twitter rolled back many of its approaches to combat political disinformation. YouTube, meanwhile, allowed videos supporting Trump's claim of vote fraud to be viewed 137 million times in the week after the election. The respite gave Trump just enough time to use the platform to cast doubt about the legitimacy of the election to supporters who stormed the U.S. Capitol on January 6 in hopes of disrupting the certification of Joe Biden as the winner of the 2020 contest. Google lifted its political advertising ban less than a month before runoff contests in Georgia determined the balance of power in the U.S. Senate for the next two years. Meanwhile, Facebook lifted its ban after a voter registration deadline had passed and early voting had already begun.

Even after the deadly attack on the U.S. Capitol by Trump insurrectionists who sought to lynch lawmakers -- including former Vice President Mike Pence and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi -- the response of social media platforms could charitably be described as too little, too late. Facebook blocked Trump's accounts but refused to rule out the possibility of reinstatement and instead dodged any corporate responsibility, leaving a final decision to an oversight board created in mid-2020. (Even as the U.S. Senate debated whether to convict the ex-president of inciting the riot, the oversight board hadn't rendered a decision.) Twitter waited until February 10 (two days into Trump's second impeachment trial) to announce that the former president's ban was permanent.

The belated half-measures also continued around public health issues. In early December, almost one year after the first COVID-19 case was reported in the United States, Facebook announced it would begin removing false claims about coronavirus vaccines; Google announced a week later that its search engine would return accurate information about vaccines, which had been the subject of speculation since the creation of the administration's Operation Warp Speed initiative launched in March 2020.

Policy shifts involving civic integrity and public health were clearly the highest-profile changes announced over the 18-month period. But other issues -- violence and extremism, consumer empowerment, and data protection -- also were the subject of more than 100 changes. Like the announcements of changes in civic integrity and public health policies, those shifts came too little and too late.

This haphazard and reactionary pattern of behavior from large technology and social media companies makes it clear self-regulation is falling short and that we need stronger laws and regulations to limit disinformation and hold social media platforms accountable.

KEY FINDINGS

CHANGES
TO PLATFORM POLICY

1. CIVIC INTEGRITY
2. PUBLIC HEALTH
3. VIOLENCE & EXTREMISM
4. DATA POLICY
5. CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT

CIVIC INTEGRITY

Slightly more than one-third of the policy changes examined by Decode Democracy involved civic integrity, which encompasses topics that include allegations of voter fraud, false and misleading political advertising, and attacks on the U.S. democratic system of government, such as voting by mail. Although social media platforms had been well aware of the possibility for disruption of the U.S. political process since the 2016 election cycle, they again found themselves reacting incrementally and belatedly to the challenges posed in 2020.

Facebook, for example, admitted in September 2017 to selling political advertisements to a Russian "troll farm" trying to influence the 2016 presidential campaign won by Donald Trump. But it wasn't until September 2019 that the company changed its policies to prevent foreign advertisers from masking their identities for more than a month. In a study of Facebook political advertising procedures, the New York University Tandon School of Engineering found the company ignored its own monitoring and enforcement procedures more than half the time.

The social media giant was especially brazen in its refusal to proactively address disinformation during the 2020 political campaign. Its refusal to flag egregious political falsehoods by Trump spurred Sen. Elizabeth Warren, a Massachusetts Democrat, to test the policy by placing an advertisement that falsely accused Facebook and Mark Zuckerberg, the company's chief executive, of endorsing Trump's re-election. (Her ads weren't removed.)

It wasn't until late June 2020, however– almost five months after the first-in-the-nation Iowa caucuses had heralded the official start of the election cycle – that Facebook acknowledged the campaign might pose "unique challenges" for social media platforms. Twenty-seven of Facebook's 33 civic integrity policy changes occurred after the Feb. 3 caucuses.

Even after Facebook began using independent fact-checkers to vet posts, a study by the nonprofit research group Avaaz found it failed to flag 60 percent of top-performing false posts about a pair of Georgia elections that eventually tipped the balance of power in the U.S. Senate, even though the posts had been identified as being false.

YouTube, a subsidiary of Google, took the same stance as Facebook, announcing in September 2019 that political content would not be banned from the video-sharing platform, even if it violated the company's own standards. Instagram, owned by Facebook, also took a lax approach to potentially deceptive content, announcing in February 2020 that influencers could post sponsored content paid for by political campaigns, as long as they labeled the posts as branded content.
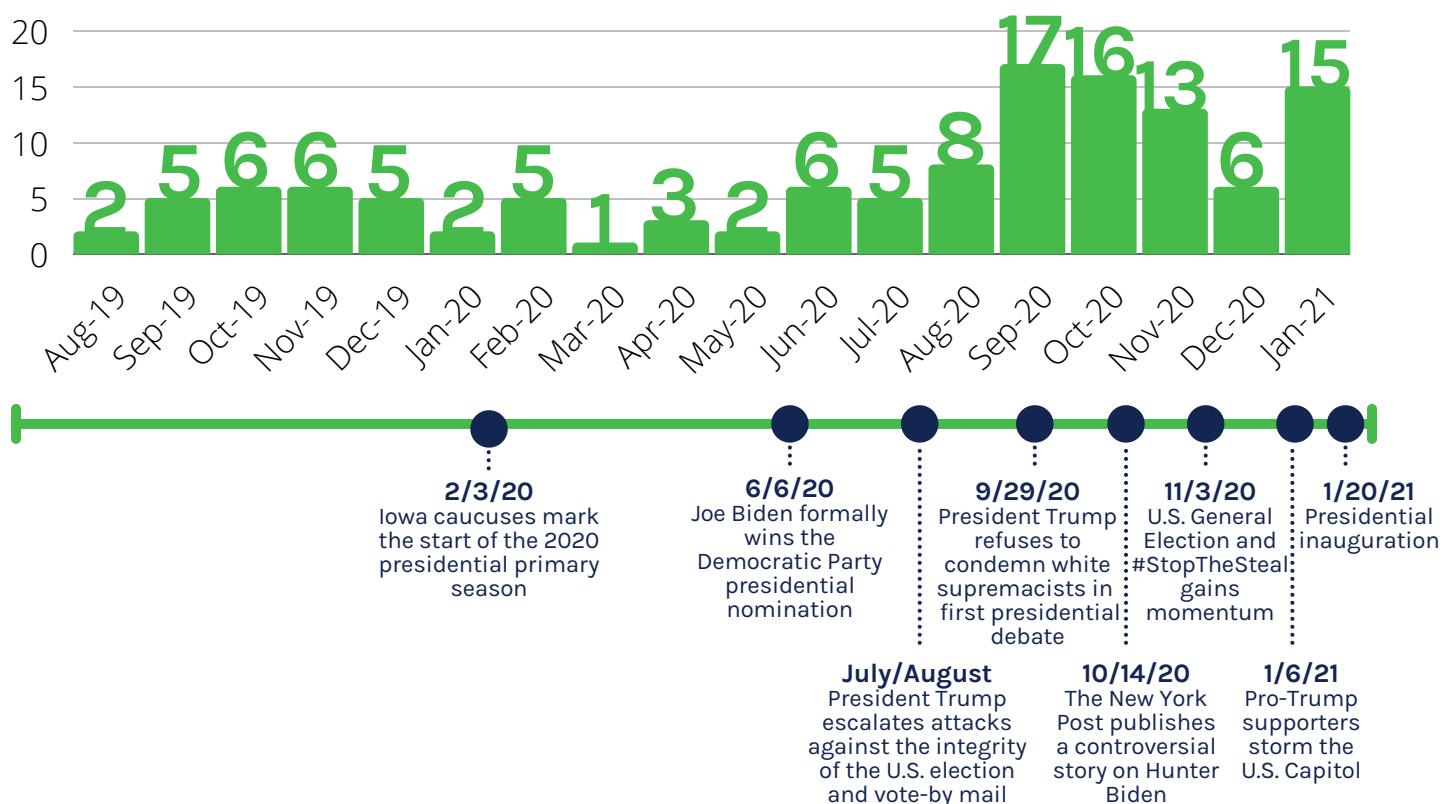
CIVIC INTEGRITY

Meanwhile, Trump continued to flaunt the policies of virtually all social media platforms until he was kicked off his preferred media in early January 2021.

Likewise, Google reacted late to the crisis, not updating its political advertising policy until November 20, 2019, less than one year before the 2020 election. Aware of the 2016 Cambridge Analytica controversy, in which Facebook allowed a political consulting firm to mine Facebook user personal information to target potential voters, Google announced it would limit targeting to age, gender and postal code location.

Smaller social media platforms also took stronger, earlier action than Facebook or Google. TikTok, a smaller video-sharing platform than YouTube, announced in October 2019 that it would ban political advertising, "including election-related ads, advocacy ads, or issue ads," although videos pushing conspiracy theories and disinformation garnered hundreds of thousands of views before being removed. Snapchat, a much-smaller competitor to Instagram, rolled out a policy in November 2019 that required it to fact-check all political advertising on its platform. It also said in June 2020 that it would stop promoting Trump's account, based on statements that incited violence.

TIMELINE OF POLICY CHANGES REGARDING CIVIC INTEGRITY
Figure 2

PUBLIC HEALTH

As of the writing of this paper, more than 28 million Americans have been infected with the COVID-19 virus and more than half a million have died from it. Because of the novel nature of the virus, little was initially known about it, and disinformation posed a major problem for public health officials seeking to curb its spread.

Social media contributed to the confusion surrounding the global pandemic, prompting platforms to change policies at a rapid pace. The first U.S. patient with the virus was identified in mid-January 2020, and Facebook announced that its third-party fact-checkers would attempt to limit disinformation and false contact. As the virus began spreading across the U.S., it announced in March 2020 that it was banning ads for hand sanitizer, disinfecting wipes and testing kits (which it then repealed in an August 2020 policy change). Facebook banned posts and groups promoting anti-lockdown protests in April 2020. All told, Facebook announced 24 COVID-related policy changes during the period examined by Decode Democracy.

The platform's response to the coronavirus pandemic underscored the reactive nature of social media to disinformation. A massive effort to develop a vaccine against the coronavirus was launched in March 2020. The anti-vaccination movement has been present in the U.S. for decades, and a report by the Centre for Countering Digital Hate found that the social media accounts by "anti-vaxxers" gained at least 7 million followers since 2019. The "Plandemic" conspiracy video, created by an anti-vaccine activist, was spread widely on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram in early May before being removed. Facebook failed to institute a policy against vaccine disinformation until Dec. 3, 2020 – less than two weeks before an initial vaccine was distributed.

Google was less active, only introducing a COVID-19 advertising ban in mid-March 2020, citing its sensitive events policy. In October 2020, it also used the policy to announce that it would not tolerate advertisements with claims that victims of a sensitive event, such as a global health crisis, were responsible for their own tragedy or didn't deserve support.
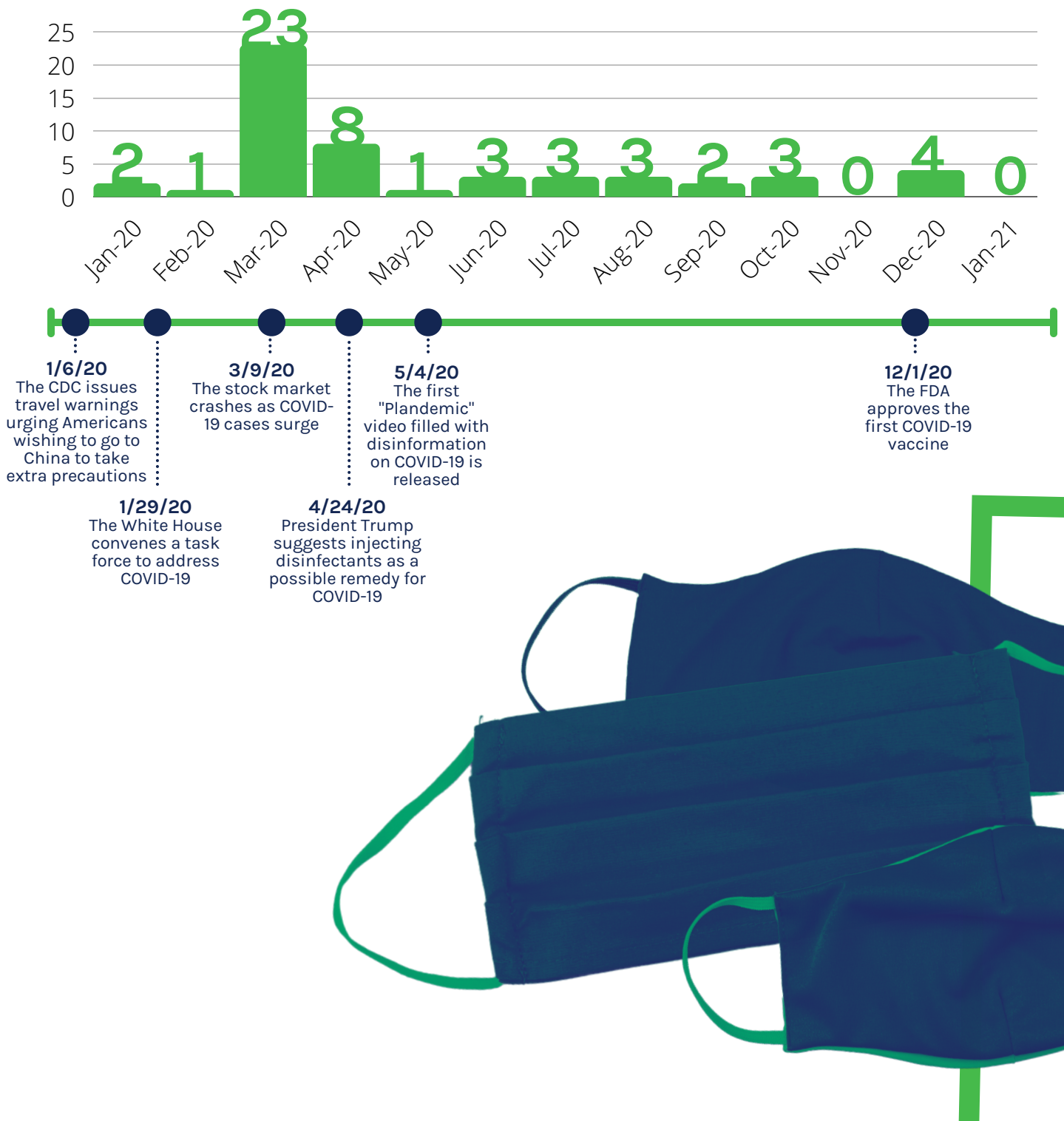
Twitter said in late January 2020 that it would introduce a dedicated search prompt allowing users to find "credible, authoritative information" about the virus. It announced the creation of labels for tweets that contained potentially harmful or misleading information about the virus in May 2020. It raised the issue of vaccine disinformation even later than Facebook, announcing it would remove false information about the vaccine on Dec. 16, 2020 -- two days after the first Americans began receiving the shots.

PUBLIC HEALTH

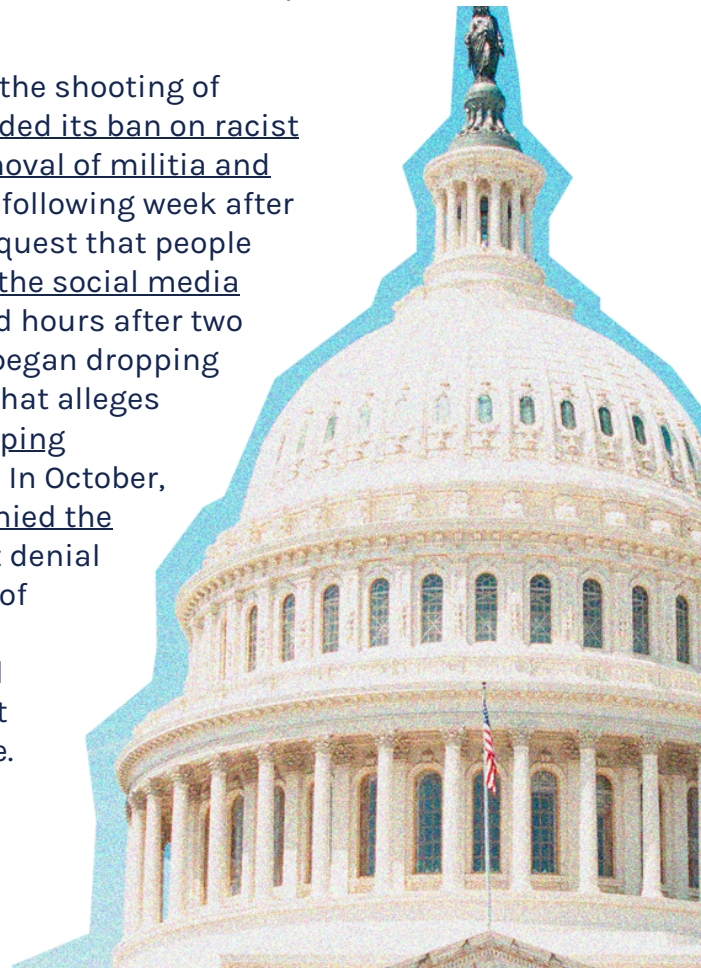## TIMELINE OF POLICY CHANGES REGARDING PUBLIC HEALTH
Figure 3

1/6/20
The CDC issues travel warnings urging Americans wishing to go to China to take extra precautions

1/29/20
The White House convenes a task force to address COVID-19

3/9/20
The stock market crashes as COVID-19 cases surge

4/24/20
President Trump suggests injecting disinfectants as a possible remedy for COVID-19

5/4/20
The first "Plandemic" video filled with disinformation on COVID-19 is released

12/1/20
The FDA approves the first COVID-19 vaccine

VIOLENCE & EXTREMISM

Social media platforms also frequently altered policies to address speech that involved either violence or extremism. The bulk of the policy changes began occurring in late May 2020, shortly after Minneapolis police killed George Floyd, a Black man who was being questioned in connection with the passing of a potentially counterfeit $20 bill. The killing spurred a wave of Black Lives Matter protests across the U.S. throughout the summer, and also saw a tremendous amount of disinformation including right-wing extremists who attempted to portray themselves as left-wing protesters and instigate violence. Google was criticized for rejecting an advertisement from a pair of liberal political action committees that displayed police officers attacking protestors; the same advertisement was approved by Facebook. Google updated its policy in October 2020 to bar advertisements that attempted to profit from "conflict and/or mass acts of violence."

In July, more than 1,000 advertisers paused ads on Facebook under a boycott organized by the Stop Hate for Profit campaign in order to push the company to take greater action on hate speech and deceptive content. While Facebook failed to meet the full demands of the campaign, the boycott underscored a broader shift in the landscape — including advertisers willing to use financial incentives to push social media companies to improve their policies.

Meanwhile, as more protests erupted in the wake of the shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin, Facebook expanded its ban on racist posts and images in August 2020, including the removal of militia and hate groups advocating for violence at protests. The following week after the new policy update, a Facebook militia group's request that people bring weapons to Kenosha protests was reported to the social media platform more than 450 times and was only removed hours after two protestors were killed. That same month, Facebook began dropping posts that supported QAnon, the conspiracy theory that alleges former President Trump was fighting Satan-worshipping pedophiles aided by top Democratic party members. In October, Facebook announced plans to remove posts that denied the Holocaust. Despite facing pressure to ban Holocaust denial for years by Jewish organizations, it was the release of a report by the Institute for Strategic Studies on the prevalence of the "Holohoax" (Holocaust denial) and a campaign targeting Mark Zuckerberg by Holocaust survivors that finally pushed Facebook over the edge.
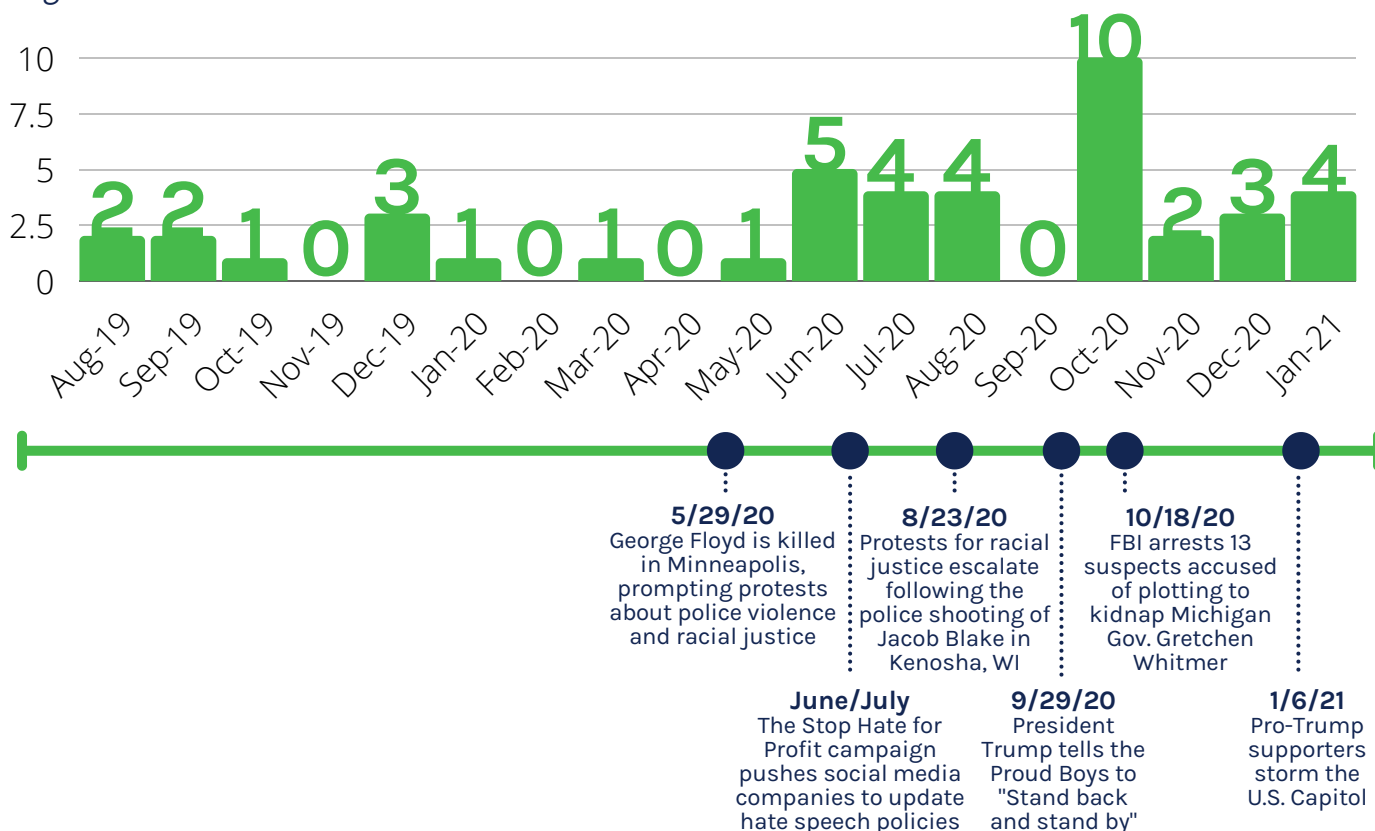
VIOLENCE & EXTREMISM

Twitter, which also took steps to curb the presence of QAnon followers and Holocaust deniers on its platform, waited until July 2020 to ban posts that contained links promoting hate speech and violence. The policy closed a loophole that allowed users to tweet to links that would break company rules if the material were posted directly.

While most policy changes announced by social media platforms were done independently, some situations involving potential violence or hate speech brought about a simultaneous response. YouTube, the Google subsidy, joined Twitter on Nov. 5, 2020, suspending the account of longtime Trump political adviser Steve Bannon after he suggested beheading FBI Director Christopher Wray and National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci.

As riots raged in major U.S. cities, Reddit announced a policy that "explicitly states that communities and users that promote hate based on identity or vulnerability will be banned." It followed up by banning major user groups, including The Donald, a subreddit devoted to the president that contained almost 800,000 users; Chapo TrapHouse, a liberal subreddit; and 2,000 other communities that violated its standards.

TIMELINE OF POLICY CHANGES REGARDING VIOLENCE AND EXTREMISM
Figure 4

DATA POLICY

Malware, viruses, and phishing scams have been on the internet since the days of screeching dial-up tones. Yet major social media platforms largely have remained in a reactive position when it comes to curbing their effects, and data policies appeared more likely to be secondary concerns during the 18-month period examined by Decode Democracy.

Facebook announced 21 separate policy changes that attempted to enhance user privacy. In August 2019, it collapsed group settings from "public," "closed," or "secret" into simply "public" or "private" in an effort to minimize confusion. In October 2020, Facebook said it would begin offering users the ability to view public group posts based on their interests.

Facebook signaled in December 2019 that it would comply with the California Consumer Privacy Act; Twitter took a more expansive approach, launching a site to explain its data protection efforts and announcing that it would move accounts outside the U.S. and European Union from Ireland to the control of its San Francisco office, providing it with the ability to test settings and controls that might otherwise be restricted by the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Twitter also gave advertisers more power in April 2020, turning off a feature that had allowed users to stop sharing private information with advertisers, such as advertisements that were seen or interacted with, as well as a tracking identifier for a phone.

In at least one case, consumer outrage prompted change. WhatsApp, another subsidiary, launched a policy in January 2021 that forced users to share data with Facebook or have their accounts suspended. Barely a week later amid hundreds of thousands of defections to rival services, the company issued a clarification, saying it would not use personal data or messages for marketing purposes.

It's important to note that while social media platforms hailed their data policy changes as victories for users, the simple fact remains: the platforms make money by selling user data to advertisers, and privacy is a distant concern.

CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT

Altogether, social media platforms made only 31 policy changes that gave consumers more power over what they view, fewer than any other category.

Twitter was responsible for roughly one-quarter of those changes, announcing policies that added more context to its popular Trends feature; more detailed explanations for blocked tweets; descriptive text to tweets for context, particularly for content related to COVID-19 and manipulated media; prompts that encouraged users to read linked material before retweeting; limited people who can respond to content; and allowing material from blocked accounts to be reinstated by appeals.

Facebook and its subsidiaries were considerably less active in changing policies that gave consumers more power. Facebook updated its community standards policy in September 2019 to limit content based on authenticity, safety, privacy and dignity; a month later, Instagram rolled out a "restrict" feature designed to curb online bullying.

Google announced one consumer-empowering change, providing more information in October 2019 about its bidirectional encoder representations from transformers (BERT) model that aimed to help improve the accuracy of natural language searches.

In June 2020, its YouTube subsidiary changed a function that held potentially inappropriate comments for review by channel managers to a default setting.
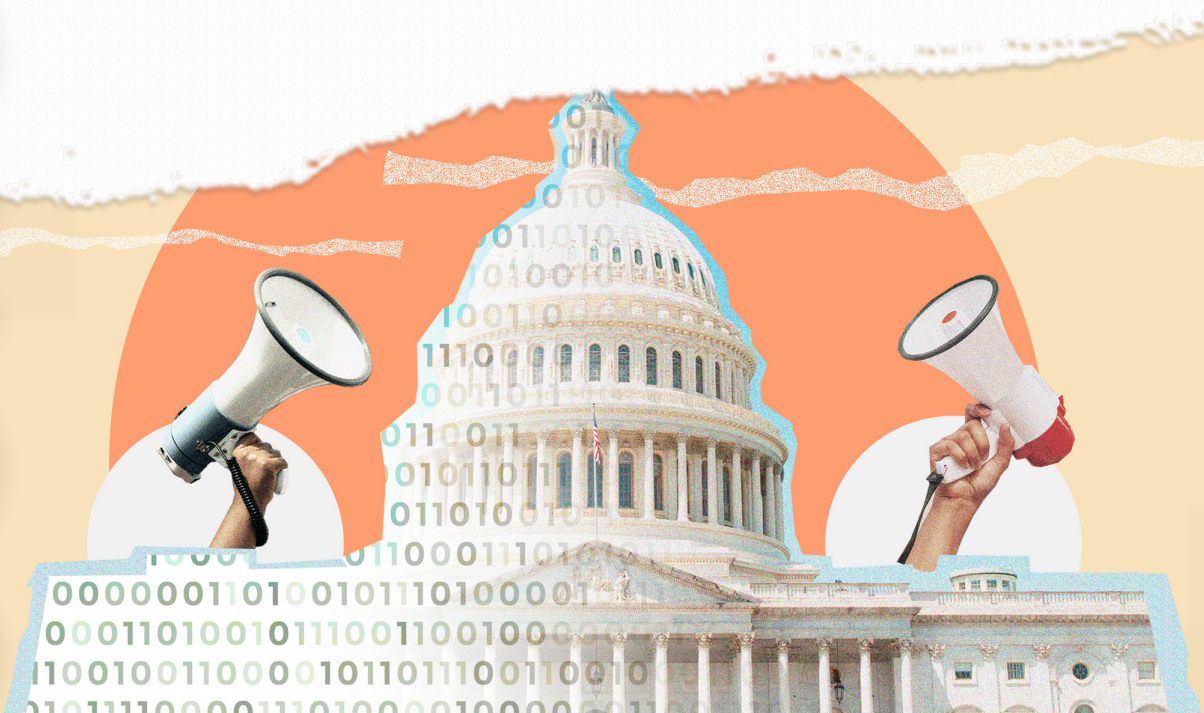
CONCLUSION

Our review of policy changes implemented by large social media platforms found that companies cumulatively tweaked their policies on issues including disinformation and hate speech at least 321 times from August 2019 through January 2021, with almost three-quarters of those changes occurring at three of the largest platforms (Google, Facebook, and Twitter).

Although it's difficult to quantify the impact of these policy shifts, their sheer number provides supporting evidence of platforms' reticence to review a business model that amplifies polarizing content to maximize engagement–and profits. As algorithms amplify new conspiracy theories and commoditize extremist viewpoints, platforms are routinely forced to re-optimize their policies in response to unforeseen challenges and mounting public pressure that has brought more scrutiny on these platforms in the last year than ever.

Despite frequent calls to action from a broad spectrum of their users, social media platforms have been slow and reactive to respond to the proliferation of false, misleading and potentially dangerous online speech triggered by new challenges. Their policies frequently have been written after the damage has been done, and the results have spilled over into real life with devastating consequences.

These findings, read in combination with evidence that platforms' implementation of their own rules is influenced by political considerations, paint a gloomy picture of the future when it comes to the spread of hate and disinformation. But this future is not inevitable. Congress has the means to keep platforms accountable by passing laws that recognize the dangerous role of social media platforms in fostering both online and offline radicalization from the spread of false and malicious information.

RECOMMENDATIONS

OUR ANALYSIS HOLDS IMPORTANT LESSONS FOR LAWMAKERS.

- The failure of social media to promptly address emerging online disinformation is threatening our health, the integrity of our democracy, and public safety — none of which should be left in the hands of tech firms that place profits ahead of the safety of their customers. Congress and the Biden administration should prioritize the fight against disinformation and put in place a coordinated national response. Possible concrete measures include establishing an interagency task force to study the harms of disinformation across major social media platforms; appointing a disinformation expert to the COVID-19 task force to coordinate a whole-of-society response to the infodemic; and creating a website to debunk viral disinformation as it occurs.

- The number and frequency of policy changes implemented by platforms provides evidence of the fact that these are only temporary bandages. Platforms are not interested in addressing rampant disinformation and polarization, and they only tweak around the edges in response to mounting public pressure. If we want to find a sustainable solution to these problems, social media algorithms — the core business model — require public scrutiny.

- Platforms often fail to properly implement their own policies. Over the last couple of years, we have collected enough evidence that social media platforms are taking half-measures that amount to nothing more than window dressing. We need legally binding commitments.

- The lack of clear, comprehensive, transparent, and stable rules of online political communication is harming civic engagement and the integrity of the democratic process. The 2020 U.S. general election was played by different sets of rules, depending on the specific platform and the latest half-baked update to its civic integrity policy. If we want to empower digital citizens, we need to urgently update our campaign finance laws by passing laws such as the For The People Act (HR/S 1), which would help combat disinformation, hold digital platforms more accountable, and increase transparency for voters about who is attempting to influence them online.

To preserve our nation's democratic values and protect our future elections, Congress must address the fundamental disconnect between a political discourse based on shared information people can trust and social media companies' business models, which maximize outrage and engagement by intentionally rewarding divisive and harmful content. Otherwise, we can expect technology and social media companies will simply continue a steady drumbeat of incremental, reactive changes that fall far short of the reforms needed to protect our democracy.

METHODOLOGY

Policy changes detailed in this analysis are based on a review of the announcements of new policy changes by platforms or instances of salient enforcement of existing policies gathered from corporate press releases and relevant news reports between August 1, 2019 and January 22, 2021. Platforms examined include Facebook, Twitter, Google, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Reddit, and TikTok. All policy changes that affected all platforms within a single corporate entity (e.g. a change at Google impacting YouTube) were counted as a single policy change. All policy changes were categorized into one of the following groups: civic integrity, public health, violence & extremism, data policy, empowering consumers, or platform governance and other operational features, with no policy change included within two categories.

Click here to view the full dataset of policy changes compiled by Decode Democracy.

This report was produced by Decode Democracy, a nonpartisan campaign that fights online political deception to build a better democracy. Decode Democracy is part of MapLight, a 501(c)(3) nonpartisan nonprofit.

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