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One Hundred Seventeenth
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON HOUSE ADMINISTRATION

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May 5, 2022

Lina Khan
Chairperson
Federal Trade Commission
600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20580

Chairperson Khan:

As members of the Committee on House Administration Subcommittee on Elections, we are concerned about the use of fake and automated accounts, known as bots, to disseminate election-related mis- and disinformation on social media platforms. Indeed, a study conducted by the University of Southern California during the lead up to the 2020 election found that thousands of bots were posting about the two presidential candidates and their campaigns on Twitter. The study found that the bots “exacerbate the consumption of the content within the same political chamber, so it increases the effect of the echo chamber.”¹ Moreover, an internal Facebook memo written in March 2021 revealed the company’s ability to detect anti-vaccine rhetoric and misinformation was “basically non-existent” in non-English comments.² Frances Haugen, a former Facebook employee turned whistleblower, said that the company spends 87 percent of its misinformation budget on U.S. content.³

The Federal Trade Commission has an opportunity to exercise its authority to address some of the market issues related to bots and fake accounts, particularly those with a nexus to federal elections. Several proposals were contained in a July 16, 2020, statement, “Regarding the Report to Congress on Social Media Bots and Deceptive Advertising Commission File No. P204503,” from former Commissioner Rohit Chopra.⁴

¹ Emily Gersema, *Election 2020 chatter on Twitter busy with bots and conspiracy theorists*, USC NEWS (Oct. 28, 2020), available at <https://news.usc.edu/177963/election-2020-twitter-social-media-bots-foreign-interference-usc-study/>

² Amanda Seitz and Will Weissert, *Inside the ‘big wave’ of misinformation targeted at Latinos in Florida, elsewhere*, ORLANDO SENTINEL (Nov. 29, 2021), <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/politics/os-ne-inside-the-big-wave-of-misinformation-targeted-at-latinos-20211129-arlx66zghbavtg2my4hutqj44u-story.html>.

³ *Id.* An analysis done by online activist group Avaaz, found that Facebook failed to flag 70 percent of Spanish-language misinformation surrounding COVID-19 compared to just 29 percent of such information in English. *Id.*

⁴ Statement of Commissioner Rohit Chopra, “Regarding the Report to Congress on Social Media Bots and Deceptive Advertising Commission File No. P204503,” July 16, 2020, available at https://www.ftc.gov/system/files/documents/public_statements/1578231/social_bots_chopra_statement.pdf.

We are interested to learn whether the Commission has considered exercising the authority outlined by former Commissioner Chopra. Specifically, we would like the Commission to answer the enclosed questions.

Thank you in advance for your assistance with this matter. We respectfully request your responses by May 20, 2022. If you have any questions regarding this request, please contact Committee staff at (202) 225-2061.

Sincerely,



G. K. Butterfield
Chair
Subcommittee on Elections



Pete Aguilar
Member
Subcommittee on Elections



Teresa Leger Fernández
Member
Subcommittee on Elections

cc: The Honorable Zoe Lofgren, Chairperson
Committee on House Administration

The Honorable Darren Soto
Member of Congress, Florida's 9th Congressional District

The Honorable Nanette Barragán
Member of Congress, California's 44th Congressional District

QUESTIONS

1. Has the Commission studied, or does it plan on studying, the impact that bots and fake accounts have on political advertisements, including advertisements by candidates, elected officials, and issue-based political organizations, on social media platforms? If so, please provide details on any studies or actions you have undertaken.

2. One of the ways social media platforms generate revenue is through digital advertising on their platforms. Platforms provide to advertisers information about the potential reach and engagement of advertisements on their platform, as well as impression data for any given ad. In addition to impacting the spread of election-related disinformation, bots and fake accounts can also artificially inflate engagement and impression data. If platforms are providing false or unsubstantiated information, for example, impression data inflated by bots, that could potentially be a violation of the Federal Trade Commission Act's prohibition on deceptive acts or practices.
 - a. Has the Commission considered using its authority under the Act to assess the validity of social media companies claims to advertisers about potential reach and engagement of advertisements on their platform?

 - b. Has the Commission considered using its authority under the Act to assess the validity of social media companies claims regarding the impression data of advertisements on their platforms?

3. The sale of fake followers can influence the spread of disinformation on social media platforms by increasing the perceived influence of individuals promoting false information. In 2019, the Commission announced an enforcement action against Devumi, which was "a company that sold fake subscribers, views, and likes, to people trying to artificially inflate their social media presence."⁵ Since that enforcement action, what work has the Commission done to deter companies selling fake followers?

4. Election related disinformation is not just spreading in English, it is also being shared to a wide audience in languages other than English. What has the Commission done to study the existence and impact of social media bots and fake accounts that interact with posts or post in languages other than English?

⁵ Federal Trade Commission Report to Congress, "Social Media Bots and Deceptive Advertising," July 16, 2020.