

# Digital Democracy Charter

## Countering Online Disinformation, Strengthening our Democracies

Our democracies are awash in digital disinformation. It manipulates political viewpoint, distorts electoral outcomes, and threatens the integrity of self-government rooted in rational public debate. This phenomenon accompanies a paradigm shift in information markets as the Internet displaces traditional media as the primary distribution channel for news. In many ways, we have benefited profoundly from the decentralization of access to knowledge and communications. But we have also undermined the traditional market for public service journalism and the foundations of democracy that rely upon it. There are fewer professional reporters, and the credibility of traditional newsrooms is declining in the public sphere.

At the center of this emerging crisis is the power of platform monopolies whose business model is to track, target, and segment people into audiences that are highly susceptible to particular kinds of content. It is a highly profitable business model for commercial advertising and personalized information. But it is also an ideal vector for manipulative publishers and advertisers (including covert agents of foreign powers) to find audiences for every type of prejudice and nonsense. Over time, these target audiences become trapped in “filter bubbles” – groups of people categorized by common predispositions that are fed a steady diet of similar content that reaffirm preexisting beliefs. To hold the attention of these groups (so they can be shown more ads), platform company algorithms raise the level of outrage and sensationalism, normalizing what were once extreme views. Fragmentation, polarization, propaganda, and manipulation in the news media are externalities of the digital economy.

We now stand at an inflection point. Our democracies are being pulled apart by the abuse of technologies that were once heralded as liberatory. We must design a public policy response to steer technological development back towards serving the wellbeing of democratic society. There are no single-solutions that can meaningfully change outcomes. Only a combination of policies – all of which are necessary and none of which are sufficient by themselves – will begin to show results over time. We cannot predict the course of the path that will restore the integrity of the democratic public sphere in a digital age. But we can begin with a reform agenda that will take us in the right direction.

### Get involved!

At Luminare – a part of The Omidyar Group – we seek to advance these principles and protect democracy from digital threats. To join an emerging network of governments and organizations that are working together on the Digital Democracy Charter, please contact:

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# 01

## **Remove**

We have a right to be protected from illegal content. The limited types of content that are already illegal in democratic societies – such as hate speech, defamation, and incitement to violence – should be removed from the Internet. The duty to remove it rapidly should be assigned to major platform companies (who have the necessary resources, technologies and responsibility) with the close supervision of regular order judicial review and a transparent process, including a fast-track appeals process. Because of the risk of overreach and infringements on legitimate speech, this practice should be strictly limited.

# 02

## **Reduce**

We have a duty to shield the public from fraudulent media. Large digital media platforms should maintain responsive channels to receive input from users, civil society organizations, news organizations and commercial partners. In this way, fraudulent media channels, inauthentic accounts, and malicious disinformation can be flagged for review and down-ranked in algorithmic curation before they can go viral.

# 03

## **Signal**

We have the right to know who is trying to influence our political views and how they are doing it. The purveyors of disinformation amplify false narratives through the opaque channels of targeted digital advertising and the amplification of bot networks. New regulations should mandate that all automated accounts are clearly labelled. And we should require that the source of an ad, the funding behind it, and the scope of its reach are explicit to the end-user.

# 04

## **Audit**

We have a right to public oversight of the social impact of technologies that automate decisions in information markets that influence daily life. The technologies that mine large data sets to make predictive judgements, target advertising, and curate digital media feeds are increasingly sophisticated forms of artificial intelligence. These technologies have the potential for enormous social impact – positive and negative – and should be subject to government review, including assessments of training data, design bias and discriminatory outcomes. These audits should mirror in form and function the health and safety inspections of conventional industries.

# 05

## **Privacy**

We have a right to data privacy. Mass collection of personal data feeds the algorithms that determine what kind of media content we will see and how often, facilitating the creation of filter bubbles that fracture our political cultures. Individuals have a right to control how data is used to shape their experiences. To counteract this phenomenon, we must tighten and enforce laws that give users more control over how data is collected, used, and monetized. In principle, the less data we provide, the less precisely we will be targeted, and the less likely we will be shunted by algorithms into media communities that reinforce false beliefs.

# 06

## **Compete**

We have a duty to protect the public against the exploitation of concentrated market power. In the realm of digital media, this means we must seek to ensure that consumers have meaningful options to find, send and receive information over digital media. The rise of platform monopolies underscores the need to open markets to new competitors and products with policies such as data portability, restrictions on mergers, and access to essential services.

# 07

## **Secure**

We have a duty to protect the integrity of our democracy from outside intervention. The recent attempts by foreign powers to use a combination of digital disinformation and cyber-attacks to influence electoral outcomes must be treated as a direct threat to democratic government. Political institutions – such as parties, campaigns and election administration – should be treated as critical infrastructure and afforded the same degree of cyber-security protection as the electrical grid and the water system.

# 08

## **Educate**

We have a duty to educate the public about the social and political impact of new technologies. We are in the early stages of digital media's rise to dominance of global information systems. The traditional standards and signals of source credibility have deteriorated along with the fragmentation of the market. As a society, we need to establish digital media literacy skills in our educational curricula. And we need to work with civil society groups and public service news organizations to generate broad public awareness about the problem of disinformation.

# 09

## **Inform**

We have a duty to foster a robust public sphere and an informed electorate. The rise of disinformation as a disruptive phenomenon in democracy coincides with the declining commercial viability of public service journalism, even as the public's need for it grows. We need public policies designed to reinvigorate journalism. These may include support for the modernization of public media channels or tax benefits for newsrooms that satisfy basic professional requirements.