
8 August 2023

We, the undersigned, write with concern about the recent legal moves by X —formerly known as Twitter— against the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) and efforts to silence criticism of the platform.¹ We view these efforts as a threat to the right to the freedom of expression, resulting in a dangerous chilling effect on civil society, experts, and advocates – and ultimately the public, which deserves to know how X and similar platforms are spreading hate and disinformation.

When Elon Musk became the owner of X in October 2022, he committed to making radical changes to the platform.² Within months, Mr. Musk welcomed back previously banned users, including neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and known superspreaders of disinformation.³ He even banned journalists with whom he disagreed.⁴ At the same time, Mr. Musk slashed the Trust and Safety Team, and senior managers departed in quick succession, contributing to rising toxicity on the platform.⁵

Since then, CCDH has been studying and publishing research on the startling rise in hate speech, disinformation and incitement to harm on X.⁶ Academic research has further corroborated a dramatic increase in the number of tweets advancing hateful narratives, including antisemitic, anti-LGBTQ+, and racist speech, since Mr. Musk's takeover.⁷ Misinformation superspreaders were found to receive a huge spike in engagement in this period.⁸ Research from multiple organizations also documented a rise in antisemitism on the platform following Mr. Musk's purchase.⁹

Instead of fixing these mounting issues, X has made a series of decisions that have made the platform less transparent and accountable for its failings. In February, the platform ended free access to its API, introducing paid tiers for access which priced out academics and researchers.¹⁰ In May 2023, X withdrew from the European Union's Code of Practice on Disinformation.¹¹ Yet another Head of Trust and Safety departed in June.¹²

In March, members of Congress wrote to X about the changed pricing model and accessibility of its API, which could pose a huge cost to researchers each month for the most comprehensive package.¹³ They received no response. They have further asked for independent third-party verification of whether there has been a real reduction of the amount of content that violates X's terms of service, including hate speech and extremism.¹⁴

The company has now taken formal legal action against civil society researchers. Specifically, in July 2023, after issuing a legal letter through attorney Alex Spiro, X filed a lawsuit against CCDH in response to reports that the organization published about hate and disinformation on the X platform. This lawsuit joins a flurry of other litigious actions

and threats from X/Twitter against various individuals and entities.¹⁵ Obviously, civil society should not be intimidated from undertaking independent research that is clearly in the public interest, but that is exactly the intended impact of these legal actions and threats from X.

We are concerned there will be a chilling effect on the research and advocacy community if these efforts to discredit, intimidate, and disrupt independent researchers and advocates continue. The bullying of experts is gravely concerning.

Instead of using scare tactics to shut down independent research and evade accountability, we strongly believe that it is time for X — and all major social media platforms — to embrace independent researcher access, transparency and accountability.

In the wake of these attacks on independent research and the continued undermining of experts, institutions, and authorities, we urge:

- Transparency, equitable and independent data access, and third-party verification of platforms' own research outputs to be the standard in proposals for regulation moving forward.
- Social media platforms cannot mark their own homework. Platforms should commit to providing regular, independently-verified updates to the public about the violations of the terms of service on their platforms, particularly on instances of hate speech, abuse, and disinformation, and about company actions in response to these violations.
- The misuse of the legal system and other forms of intimidation against researchers, experts, and advocates who seek to hold social media companies accountable is an attack of the right to freedom of expression and access to information and must cease. The bullying of those seeking to speak truth to power cannot be tolerated.

Signed,

Organizations:

Accountable Tech
Amnesty International
Antisemitism Policy Trust
Aspiration
CARD Strategies
Center for Democracy & Technology
Center for Digital Democracy
Check My Ads

Coalition for Independent Tech Research Board
Dangerous Speech Project
Ekō
Fairplay
Fight for the Future
Free Press
Friends of the Earth
GLAAD
Global Project Against Hate and Extremism
Greek Helsinki Monitor
HateAid
Institute for Strategic Dialogue
Justice for Prosperity – JfP
Kairos
Media Diversity Institute
MediaJustice
Minority Rights Group – Greece
Mozilla
'NEVER AGAIN' Association
News Media Association
PFLAG National
ProgressNow New Mexico
Public Interest News Foundation
Reproaction
Reset
The Gemini Project
The Sparrow Project
The Tech Oversight Project
UltraViolet
Union of Concerned Scientists

Individuals:

Roger McNamee
Sander van der Linden, University of Cambridge
Stephan Lewandowsky, University of Bristol
Flavio Azevedo, University of Groningen
Anastasia Kozyreva, Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin
Almog Simchon, University of Bristol
Stefan Herzog, Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin
Dr. Ramit Debnath, University of Cambridge

Dennis Redeker, University of Bremen
Ullrich Ecker, University of Western Australia
Matthew S. Nurse, Australian National University
Colin Klein, Australian National University
Matthew Hornsey, University of Queensland
Dr Andrew Scott, LSE Law School
Piers Howe, University of Melbourne
Cecilia Rollano, UNED
Christoph Abels, University of Potsdam
Prof. Winnifred Louis, University of Queensland
Marten Risius, The University of Queensland
Annie Pohlman, University of Queensland
Saoirse Connor Desai, University of Sydney
Emma Thomas, Flinders University
Cassandra Chapman, University of Queensland
Dr Saphira Rekker
Dr Daniel Thomas, University of Strathclyde
Dr Rafal Pankowski, Professor at Collegium Civitas, Warsaw

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