Clipboard

Big Tech Engagement Action Plan

Background: Russian civil society and independent media face significant challenges in overcoming government censorship and reaching their target audiences inside Russia. This has been exacerbated by the decisions of private sector tech companies to either stop operating inside Russia or deny service to Russian passport holders in order to comply with sanctions and not be seen to promote the war. In some cases, existing and well-meaning policies have similar effects. While the intent of these policies is sound, denial-of-service policies do not generally impact supporters of Putin's regime whose enablers can leverage dual citizenship and contacts abroad to accomplish their goals, but significantly handicap those who oppose the war. This has required anti-war and democratic actors to spend significant time and resources overcoming the policies of U.S. tech companies in addition toinstead of countering Kremlin disinformation. **The result is that USAID's partners and others speaking out against the war face effective censorship from two sides, and are unable to reach audiences that are eager for their content.** They claim that regular channels to contact tech companies about these issues have not proven fruitful.

The State Department has also heard similar concerns from its partners in this area, and they have undertaken scattered working-level outreach with tech companies to address some of them with uncertain success. Due to the number of offices involved, they do not have a complete accounting of that outreach or how it might conflict with anything proposed in this action plan.

Current USAID actions:

Interagency Discussion: USAID has discussed this plan with the State Department due to their own ongoing engagements with tech companies on similar issues relating to their own partners. They ask that USAID engagement be prefaced by an interagency discussion through the NSC to decide on a more unified policy for approaching companies; this can be accomplished through existing sub-IPC processes. USAID should maintain a policy to support our partners by approaching tech companies when they ask us to do so.

The primary recommendation in this plan to create an inclusion list of trusted actors has been discussed internally at State and opposed because of concerns about representing specific actions or actors to receive special treatment as the U.S. government, raising freedom of

expression issues. What we propose here is not a list that would be curated by any U.S. department or agency, but rather to connect tech companies with actors that we trust who would be willing to curate an inclusion list on behalf of any companies that are willing to follow one. We recognize that it is up to the companies to determine for themselves whether and how to implement any policies with regard to an inclusion list curated by a third party.

Key Recommendation 1: Tech companies implement an inclusion list for verified actors. These lists should be private and managed in a decentralized manner through trusted third-party implementers, which are already interlocutors with the tech companies on similar issues in other countries. ASK companies how to create an inclusion list using 3rd party curators/verifiers that results in maximum response and requires minimal level of effort from tech companies.

Key Recommendation 2: Companies should avoid opening offices ('landing') inside Russia as it increases the Russian government's ability to coerce companies to comply with censorship measures.

Key Recommendation 3: Tech companies should consider working collectively to fight authoritarian cyber-censorship and propaganda as outlined in a proposal by Nobel prize winner Dmitry Muratov and other journalists to create a community of "Engineers Against Dictatorship."

Prioritized Company Recommendations:

1. **Alphabet**
    a. **YouTube:**

    Issue: YouTube has deactivated monetization for anyone located in Russia and for any views that occur in Russia.

    Recommendation: Online publishers should allow organizations on the inclusion list to monetize their content inside Russia.

    Issue: CSOs and independent media can't target or advertise content to audiences inside Russia.

    Recommendation: Allow organizations on the inclusion list to buy and publish ads in Russia and target content to users in Russia.

    b. **Google**:

Issue: Websites blocked in Russia are being downgraded in search results. Search algorithms register user behavior such as whether a user who clicked on a search result returns to the results page (i.e. they didn't find what they were looking for). If so, the page is considered a low quality result. If a website is blocked, then many users return to the search results. This sends a false signal to the search engine and search algorithms become amplifiers of censorship.

Recommendation: Search engines should not downgrade pages belonging to entities on the inclusion list for reasons related to blocking. Search engines should also warn users that websites belonging to entities on the inclusion list may be blocked and offer recommendations for VPNs or other circumvention technology to bypass the blocking.

Issue: Google's recommendation algorithms (Google Discover in particular – detail here) promote those articles that have the most likes. This gives advantage to the official media. The same algorithms demote independent media with an anti-war agenda.

Recommendation 1: review recommendation algorithms to ensure they do not promote pro-war or government controlled content (could be identified with the use of natural language models with high precision as prototyped by ENP 2.0 partners) . Review algorithms to ensure that entities on the inclusion list are not demoted for spurious reasons.

Recommendation 2: Analyze the effect of bot-attacks and bot-manipulations on recommendation algorithms. Activists and experts suspect that the domination of recommendation algorithms by propaganda may be connected to big tech's inability to defend itself from bot manipulations (e.g. thousands of bots like state-sponsored propaganda pieces thus bringing it up to the top-10 of recommended content). It is believed that big tech could do better when it comes to combating automatic inauthentic behavior (bots).

Issue: Google receives content take-down requests from the Russian authorities on a regular basis. Since March 2022, these requests have usually not been approved.

Recommendation: Google should continue to deny these requests. Google could also publish take-down requests or provide them to the academic community to support anti-censorship and anti-authoritarian research. This data,

now accumulated by the large companies, could be used to promote knowledge on authoritarian practices.

c. **Google Play**

Issue: Apps published by exiled media are attacked by bots on a regular basis leading to poor ratings.

Recommendation:

2. **Meta (Facebook and Instagram):**

Issue: CSOs and media can't target or advertise content to audiences in Russia.

Recommendation: Allow organizations on the inclusion list to buy and publish ads in Russia and target content to users in Russia. Because the use of VPNs obscures user location, content should be targeted based on the location of the user on registration.

Issue: Recommendation algorithms demote organically created anti-war related content ('shadow bans').

Recommendation: Review recommendation algorithms and minimize the possibility of shadow bans for the organizations on the inclusion list.

USAID Actions

For E&E Bureau

- Support civil society and media actors to develop a prototype architecture of an inclusion list that will minimize the effort from tech companies to implement.

For DRG Bureau

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For Office of the Administrator

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3. **Google**:

Issue: Websites blocked in Russia are being downgraded in search results. Search algorithms register user behavior such as whether a user who clicked on a search result returns to the results page (i.e. they didn't find what they were looking for). If so, the page is considered a low quality result. If a website is blocked, then many users return to the search results. This sends a false signal to the search engine and search algorithms become amplifiers of censorship.

Recommendation: Search engines should not downgrade pages belonging to entities on the inclusion list for reasons related to blocking. Search engines should warn users that websites belonging to entities on the inclusion list may be blocked and offer recommendations for VPNs or other circumvention technology to bypass the blocking.

Issue: Google's recommendation algorithms (Google Discover in particular – detail here) promote those articles that have the most likes. This gives advantage to the official media. The same algorithms demote independent media with an anti-war agenda.

Recommendation 1: review the algorithms so that they would demote pro-war (could be identified with the use of natural language models with high precision as prototyped by ENP 2.0 partners) and/or government controlled content.

Recommendation 2: If changing of the recommendation algorithm is not feasible, then big tech companies should be asked to analyze bot-attacks and bot-manipulations on their recommendation algorithms. Activists and experts suspect that the domination of recommendation algorithms by propaganda may be connected to big tech's inability to defend itself from bot manipulations (e.g. thousands of bots like state-sponsored propaganda pieces thus bringing it up to the top-10 of recommended content). It is believed that big tech could do better when it comes to combating automatic inauthentic behavior (bots).

Issue: Google receives content take-down requests from the Eurasian authorities. Since March 2022, these requests are usually not approved.

Recommendation: They should continue to deny these requests. Google could also publish take-down requests or provide them to the academics and thus support anti-censorship and anti-authoritarian research. This data, now accumulated by the large companies, could be used to promote knowledge on authoritarian practices.

Issue: Google Discover algorithm (used by Google News and the Chrome browser) actively suggests propaganda websites to users. Clear propaganda is blocked, but material that uses a combination of soft content to lead into propaganda narratives (such as news about holiday payments to mobilized people fighting in Ukraine that highlights Putin's so-called achievements) continues to be recommended to millions of people daily.

Recommendation: Implement an exclusion list that Google Discover can use to avoid recommending domains that are sources of propaganda.

4. **Apple App Store**

   Issue: Apps published by exiled media are attacked by bots on a regular basis leading to poor ratings.

   Recommendation:

5. **MailChimp:**

   Issue: Russian civil society organizations have been denied access to their existing paid subscriptions, their newsletters, or their subscriber databases. Email is still a good outreach method to people in Russia.

   Recommendation: Allow organizations and individuals on the inclusion list to continue to use MailChimp’s services in Russia.

6. **Slack:**

   Issue: Eurasian civil society civil society organizations no longer have access to non-profit offers of Slack. Slack remains a powerful and secure tool for project- and community management.

   Recommendation: Allow organizations and individuals on the inclusion list to continue to use Slack’s non-profit offerings in Eurasia.

7. **Sectigo**:

Issue: Certificate authorities have stopped issuing SSL/TLS certificates for Russian domains.

Recommendation: The ban on issuing SSL/TLS certificates should be lifted for organizations and individuals on the inclusion list.

8. **TechSoup:**

Issue: TechSoup has suspended its program for Russia. We believe there is room for a nuanced policy for engaging with democratic Russian civil society within similar parameters to those currently used by our existing ENP partners.

Recommendation: TechSoup should continue to engage with organizations on the inclusion list.