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To: Interested Parties
From: Opposition Research at NARAL Pro-Choice America
Date: January 17, 2020
RE: The Disinformation Threat on Facebook

In early January, Facebook announced that it would not change its current policy of allowing political ads to go without fact checks during the 2020 campaign. This was a confirmation of a policy that has sparked significant criticism from media watchdogs, disinformation experts, and progressive activists. That same week, Facebook executive Andrew Bosworth, who led the company's advertising efforts during the 2016 election, [acknowledged](#) that Facebook's advertising tools were "responsible for getting Donald Trump elected" but attributed Trump's success to "the single best digital ad campaign I've ever seen from any advertiser. Period."

Facebook's analysis elides **the most important factor in Trump's success online—the Trump campaign's aggressive social media push was centered on disinformation and propaganda, and worked to undermine a free and fair election.**

Trump campaign architect and former Breitbart executive Steve Bannon recently boasted that Trump's 2016 strategy relied heavily on the tactic of "[flooding the zone](#)" with disinformation. The campaign worked to strategically overwhelm media by **saturation the public discourse with so much false and misleading content that it could not be effectively combatted.** Bannon said: "The Democrats don't matter. The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit." When they couldn't win on facts, Trump and his allies aimed to win by making their message unavoidable and the truth unknowable.

An [internal report](#) from Facebook obtained by Bloomberg also confirmed that the Trump campaign, which spent \$44 million on Facebook advertising between June and November 2016, invested in 5.9 million unique ads and ran rapid tests to identify the appeals that would be most effective with high-value voters, who were [targeted](#) with personalized messages. The Trump campaign's ability to push narrowly tailored messages at key individuals—**regardless of accuracy or consistency, and often without detection or pushback**—was a critical component of its success in the last presidential election. It may tip the scales in 2020.

This reality has profound implications, not only for the 2020 election, but for the sustainability of our democracy. Facebook as a platform now pollutes the public sphere with disinformation, making facts almost impossible to discern. The company has also shown a willingness to accommodate right-wing demands to maintain systems that advantage bad actors and distort the political discourse. Mark Zuckerberg began holding "private dinners" to "[wine and dine](#)" conservative pundits like Tucker Carlson, Hugh Hewitt, and Ben Shapiro. [Peter Thiel](#), a Trump supporter who spoke at the 2016 Republican National Convention, has served on Facebook's board and pushed Zuckerberg not to fact-check political ads. Meanwhile, the DNC has found that Facebook [lags](#) behind its peers in tech in addressing disinformation.

Trump's tactic of "flooding the zone" takes a page from the playbook of anti-choice activists, who have always relied on disinformation to shore up support in a country that believes in reproductive freedom. The strategy isn't new, but the reach Facebook provides, coupled with the lack of traditional



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media checks on online falsehoods, has made this approach even more potent, allowing the widespread dissemination of disinformation at a low cost while crowding out factual discourse.

One particularly dangerous type of disinformation we see in the reproductive freedom space is **medical disinformation**. Unlike traditional lies in politics, medical disinformation presents an additional layer of harm because it can directly interfere with patients' ability to seek health care. In just one example, anti-choice activist Lila Rose, who leads Live Action (the anti-choice organization with the largest digital reach), has recently been pushing the [dangerous narrative](#) that "abortion is never medically necessary." Facebook's fact-checking partner worked with medical experts to review one instance of Rose's claim and [labeled it false](#). After Lila Rose and her allies [stoked right-wing outrage](#) over the decision and [Republican Senators](#) exerted pressure, Facebook removed the fact check, caving to the political demands. Facebook ended up [censoring the experts' fact check](#) rather than the original disinformation, which is [still live](#) on Facebook today. Of course, medical [experts agree](#) that abortion can "without question" be medically necessary to save the health or life of the pregnant patient.

Conservatives and anti-choice activists also invest significantly in paid communications on Facebook that use disinformation to smear Democrats and build political power. Facebook's ad library also shows that they accepted paid ads where SBA List implied Democrats, Ralph Northam in particular, support "[infanticide](#)," though that claim has been thoroughly [debunked](#). Similar claims about Democrats were made in paid ads by the [Republican Party of Virginia](#), [Williamsburg James City County Republicans](#), [Colleen Holcomb For Delegate](#), [Virginia Society for Human Life](#), [Students for Life of America](#), the [Massachusetts Republican Party](#), and many more.

Facebook, thanks to its lax policies and its coziness with conservative leaders and right-wing media, has been a huge facilitator of these disinformation campaigns, and will be particularly relevant in the 2020 election. Analysts expect approximately [\\$3 billion to be spent on political advertising](#) in the 2020 election, [primarily on Facebook](#). The Trump campaign has already spent approximately [\\$27 million](#) on Facebook advertising, dramatically outpacing spending by the [Democratic field](#).

Facebook claims its refusal to contend with disinformation is a result for its deep respect for free speech protections. Yet, as Wired noted, critics have argued that, "Zuckerberg's invocation [free speech] it looks, from this perspective, like a cynical ploy to [dress up business decisions in a civil rights costume](#)."

In reality, these arguments are [twisting the meaning](#) of the First Amendment and getting it exactly "backward"—privileging politicians' speech over individuals'. At ADL's 2019 Never is Now Summit, Sacha Baron Cohen called Facebook out for its subversion of speech protections by noting that "[freedom of speech is not freedom of reach](#)." While bad actors will always exist in our discourse, companies are not required to amplify their voices, and unfairly prioritizing their speech means suppressing others'.

Facebook's decision to maintain its current policy raises serious threats for the integrity of the public sphere and the upcoming election. While the current reality with Facebook can seem bleak, **NARAL has concrete plans to engage platforms to fight disinformation.** We're working to root out false and



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manipulative narratives, prepare campaigns and allies to anticipate and mitigate the harm of common disinformation tactics, and inoculate voters against disinformation. Specifically, NARAL aims to:

- Provide NARAL members with resources and training to prepare them to recognize common anti-choice disinformation and empower them to respond to it.
- Work with allied groups and campaigns to raise awareness around disinformation and pressure social media platforms to implement systemic changes to mitigate the harm of the most dangerous false narratives.
- Where appropriate, continue our direct work with social media platforms to ensure existing standards are enforced more equitably, and that disinformation is not privileged over other types of speech.
- Leverage our opposition research report and upcoming podcast to raise awareness of the issues surrounding disinformation, and its profound impacts on our political system and access to abortion care.

NARAL's work to combat disinformation is a critical part of our 2020 election program. Trump and his allies know that the majority of Americans are pro-choice, which is why they are engaged in a concerted disinformation campaign to scare and confuse pro-choice voters and depress the advantage that pro-choice candidates should have in November. Combating their scare tactics and inoculating voters against their toxic messaging is a necessary and urgent component of our work to mobilize pro-choice voters and deliver election victories.

State elections in Virginia and Kentucky in 2019 allowed us a test run and proved our formula is a winning one. We ran layered campaigns against disinformation—including inoculation messages, positive messaging content, online and offline peer-to-peer organizing—to preempt attempts from the anti-choice movement to divide and depress pro-choice voters and ensure pro-choice voter turnout. This program helped elect a pro-choice governor in Kentucky and a Democratic trifecta in Virginia—and our 2020 political program is up and running to do the same in key states around the country.

NARAL Pro-Choice America was made for this moment. We have deep organizing networks built through years of investment in elections and mobilization, and our 2.5 million members are fired up to act. Organizing around the toxic discourse and disinformation peddled on Facebook is part of the 2020 challenge, and we are up to the task. We're utilizing innovative research tools, opposition research and communications expertise, and organizing power to mobilize across the country. NARAL is leveraging this moment, this momentum—when reproductive freedom and abortion access are front-of-mind for voters—to turn it into victory in November.