

# Tracking Platform Integrity

## on the Eve of the Election

By Nora Benavidez and Timothy Karr

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### Background

In April 2024, [Free Press released a report](#) on social-media companies' commitments to 2024 election integrity. We analyzed 12 major technology companies' readiness to address political disinformation, manipulation and hate on their networks.

Earlier that same month, a Free Press-led coalition of more than [200 civil-society organizations](#) issued six specific recommendations to these companies; the platforms' responses guided the Free Press analysis. The recommendations included reinstating election-integrity policies, better enforcing policies across languages and staffing up critical trust and safety teams. The coalition also called on these platforms to enable civil-society oversight of their enforcement practices, prohibit the misleading use of deepfakes in political ads and hold VIP accounts to the same standards as regular accounts.

Free Press scored the companies' responses (or lack thereof) as either "Adequate," "Partial," "Insufficient" or "Fail." No company's response was rated as adequate. We rated only three — Reddit, Snapchat and TikTok — as partial and rated the responses of four — Google, Meta, Pinterest and YouTube — as insufficient. And the four companies that failed to send substantive responses, if any at all — Discord, Rumble, Twitch and X (formerly Twitter) — rated as failures. We found in April that none of the companies committed to moderating Big Lie content about the legitimacy of the 2020 election and none agreed to bolster staffing of essential trust and safety or content-moderation teams.

### **UPDATE: The online landscape is worse in 2024 than in previous election cycles**

By all accounts, false and manipulated content is ubiquitous this election cycle as the 2020 "Big Lie" remains a persistent and worrying narrative that has evolved with new wrinkles in 2024.

Rigorous fact checking is in [decline](#) both online and at many traditional news outlets. AI tools have given online bad actors the free and unfettered ability to create fake content [faster](#) than ever, while platform algorithms enhance the delivery of this content with laser-like precision to users who might be uniquely vulnerable to the message. Political advertising is underwriting this deception, subsidizing platforms' delivery of hyper-partisan conspiracy theories to users. Facebook, Instagram, Threads, and X are failing to enforce their own political-ad policies. Elon Musk spreads his lies across X so widely that even the hundreds of millions of users who don't follow him get exposed to his violent and bigoted rhetoric.

False claims about the 2020 election result — largely left unmoderated as platforms have abandoned their political-disinformation policies — are inciting [threats of violence](#) against election officials as new conspiracies lay the [groundwork](#) for violence and discord. Researchers, reporters and intelligence agencies regularly warn about foreign-interference campaigns, from foreign efforts to sow division about vice-presidential candidate Tim Walz to the Russian "[Doppelgänger](#)" campaign designed to weaken trust in the electoral process.

Outside researchers are no longer able to adequately scrutinize this deteriorating information environment due to legal threats from Elon Musk and others seeking to undermine independent study of platform performance. Free Press [documented](#) these threats extensively in 2023. Academic centers, including ones at [Harvard](#), [Stanford](#) and the [University of Washington](#), have shuttered or are scaling back their disinformation monitoring. Musk has attempted [to sue into silence](#) various nonprofits that had engaged in this work; some organizations, including the Global Alliance for Responsible Media, have abandoned their advocacy efforts altogether or have [laid off employees](#) as the cost of defending their free speech becomes too prohibitive. These attacks warp the fundamental role of independent inquiry and inhibit the public's ability to understand how companies integral to their daily lives are operating.

## Transparency remains a problem

There were some bright spots in the promises several platforms made in their initial responses in April:

- **VIP account treatment:** Google, Meta, Pinterest, Reddit, Snapchat and YouTube told Free Press that they would hold VIP accounts to the same content-moderation standards as regular user accounts.
- **Moderation across languages:** Meta, Google, Snap, TikTok and YouTube pledged to moderate content across various non-English languages.
- **Generative AI:** Meta, Google, Snap and YouTube told us that they planned to flag generative AI that aims to confuse or misinform people.

These are meaningful steps forward in areas of concern. But the results of these supposed changes remain unclear amid continued opacity from the platforms. The labyrinth of blog posts, press releases and policy memos force users to sift through large and confusing volumes of content to assess whether the platforms are enforcing these changes. Even those who take the time to read through this tangled mass of messages are unable to determine what's actually going on inside these companies. And while we can chalk up the actions noted in the bulleted list on page 2 as progress — progress that came in large part due to pressure from civil-society and research experts — the platforms have continued to backslide on other fronts.

## Companies fail to meet the moment, eroding platform integrity

Now, less than a week before Election Day, Free Press has revisited and updated its April analysis. In the past week, TikTok and X have sent us new responses to our earlier recommendations. We met with both companies on Oct. 28 to further assess whether they're moving closer to alignment with our April recommendations. Meta responded in writing on Oct. 28 with links to its election plans but did not commit to holding a meeting. We have not heard from YouTube since writing twice to company executives with updated concerns and requests for October meetings.

X continues to claim that Community Notes is sufficient for moderating content, telling us that the user-powered vetting service can address the scourge of violative and fringe content on the platform. But reporting from the [Center for Countering Digital Hate](#), the [Poynter Institute](#) and [WIRED](#) has shown that the system fails to address most of the disinformation coursing across the network, and in some cases makes it even worse. While the company is preparing its teams to respond to different election scenarios, X has not committed to moderating the rise of misinformation and election lies. X claims to moderate accounts belonging to both VIPs and regular users in exactly the same way, without favor. But this promise calls into question the forced engagement many users experience with Elon Musk himself, a known [superspreader](#) of some of the most bigoted and authoritarian lies.

TikTok appears to be adhering the most to our recommendations; it has bolstered trust and safety efforts across election-related themes; is preparing scenarios for possible dangerous content and violative election-interference attempts; and actively seeks out the expertise and counsel of other sectors and platforms alike. TikTok is attempting to shore up its review and approval process for political ads, though it has not promised to treat all users equally. And while TikTok unfortunately laid off [hundreds of global moderators](#) in October, none of those employees were tasked with moderating U.S.-based election content.



The company representatives that Free Press met with appeared to have good-faith intentions about their work. Participating in election meetings with these companies is a reminder that highly competent teams are essential. So too are the executives who make the final calls on Election Day and thereafter about where to place resources and whether to keep platform-integrity mechanisms in place.

Overall, the platforms' responses to our inquiries have left a lot to be desired, indicating a continued retreat from 2020 commitments to protect U.S. elections, as [we reported in late 2023](#). Several dynamics mark the current moment:

**1 Posture of avoiding dialogue and accountability:** The problem has worsened since our 2023 research report found that the largest and most widely used platforms — Meta, X and YouTube — were backsliding on previous commitments they made. Companies are largely unresponsive: **Free Press** and allies like **ISD** and **Issue One** have documented myriad weaknesses regarding both platforms' preparedness and failures in applying existing policies. Meta has continued to lay off employees. YouTube has failed to even respond to inquiries about its enforcement of election policies. And while X responded to Free Press, it's in the process of moving its headquarters to Texas, where the company will enjoy conservative judicial cover, and even the **possibility** of a state law granting state officials the authority to dictate content moderation. This could provide the perfect cover for Musk to say his hands are tied when these officials require disinformation to remain on the platform.

**2 Depoliticized feeds:** Recent reporting and research indicate a trend of **declining social-media engagement** on public posts that provide useful information about voting. This trend has been most extensively documented on Meta-owned platforms, including Facebook, Instagram and Threads, that have hundreds of millions of users in the United States. Meta executives were singing a different tune when they responded to the coalition letter in April. They wrote: "We are focused on connecting people with reliable information about voting. On Facebook and Instagram, through in-app notifications, we're continuing to connect people in the U.S. with details about voter registration and elections from their state and local elections officials." But research from Free Press ally **Accountable Tech** found that the company has largely decided to stop fact checking the flood of election-related lies across its platforms. Instead, the social-media company is suppressing or hiding political commentary, including helpful information about exercising the right to vote.

**3** ***Inadequate political-ad disclosures and enforcement:*** Between Jan. 1, 2023, and Aug. 31, 2024, political advertising on Google and Meta alone **totaled** \$619 million. (According to eMarketer’s research, the total amount is projected to be nearly double this figure by Election Day.) Of the \$619 million figure, 45 percent came from spenders that conceal some or all of their donors. This includes nonprofit groups that typically don’t disclose any of their donors, which spent \$106 million; \$65 million classified as “gray money” from political groups that can partially conceal their donors; and \$109 million from entities whose form of organization is unknown. (There are currently no federal regulations that would require platforms to publish data about political ads, but this is something that Congress can and should address).

The content contained in these ads calls into question the veracity of these companies’ enforcement policies altogether: There is ample evidence that they’re failing to effectively moderate, label or remove false content. A **BBC investigation** of Facebook and Instagram finds hundreds of political ads spreading the widely disproved conspiracy theory that noncitizens were voting in the runup to Election Day. TikTok has **failed** to remove political ads containing false content despite having a written ban on political ads. And X, which reversed a previous ban on political-ad sales, announced last year that it would share data on these ads. But its initial disclosures have **omitted** most ads — and many users are still seeing **misleading ads**.

**4** ***Musk gives oxygen to lies and a platform for superspreaders:*** Despite its occasional willingness to engage with Free Press and the coalition, X still has no interest in reining in election disinformation. Elon Musk uses the platform as a megaphone to amplify lies about voting and campaign for Donald Trump’s election. The strength of a company’s trust and safety is only as strong as its leader’s commitment to these principles. Musk’s “for me and not for thee” attitude about free speech bleeds into how his tweets are showcased across user feeds, irrespective of whether people follow him. These tweets **drown out** accurate information shared by officials attempting to counter his lies. He amplifies toxic and **bigoted** values while campaigning for and fundraising for a specific candidate.

**5** ***Dwindling access for independent researchers:*** Platforms have restricted access to information for third parties. Meta shut down social-media monitoring tool Crowdtangle a mere four months before the U.S. elections against the urging of researchers, **civil society** and **bipartisan** members of Congress. X has increased the cost of API access, which now costs about \$42,000 for monthly access to the platform’s full data.

## Timeline of backslides and/or developments since our April report:

APRIL

- ..... In a “[restructuring](#)” of the company's Training and Quality team, TikTok cuts up to 300 jobs.

JUNE

- ..... Google announces further layoffs, [including](#) cuts to its Legal Investigations Support team — the team charged with vetting the legality of government requests for users’ private data.

AUGUST

- ..... [Meta shuts down CrowdTangle](#), a social-media monitoring tool that researchers relied on to track mis- and disinformation across the tech company’s platforms. Meta claimed its replacement, the Meta Content Library (MCL), would be easier for researchers to use but subsequent [independent analysis found](#) this was false.

AUGUST

- ..... Reddit began allowing users to [opt out of seeing political ads](#).

AUGUST

- ..... Musk [hosts](#) X interview with Donald Trump.

OCTOBER

- ..... TikTok announces [hundreds of content-moderator layoffs](#) as it shifts the work toward AI. However, those laid off were not employees tasked with moderating U.S. content.

OCTOBER

- ..... Research from Global Witness [documented](#) TikTok approving “50% of ads containing false information about the election.”

OCTOBER

- ..... Meta platforms — Instagram, Facebook and Threads — began [suppressing](#) election-related content entirely.

OCTOBER

- ..... Meta platforms — including Instagram, Threads and WhatsApp — made additional layoffs to unspecified teams.

OCTOBER

- ..... X [increases](#) the cost of API access, which is now about \$42,000 per month for full platform access.

OCTOBER

- ..... A [BBC investigation](#) of Facebook and Instagram finds hundreds of political ads spreading the widely disproved conspiracy theory that noncitizens were voting in the runoff to Election Day.

## Failure to implement safeguards is bad for business and democracy

After new reports on the scale of disinformation campaigns during the 2016 election, platforms took much-needed action to bolster and expand their trust and safety mechanisms. They created new monitoring teams and adopted new policies to moderate content that was designed to deceive voters about the democratic process. Some of these safeguards were triggered in the aftermath of the 2020 elections as “Big Lie” content flooded social media. And while enforcement wasn’t consistent during that period, we now know that platforms have the expertise to implement such measures.

It’s disappointing that many of the companies remain reluctant to implement our recommendations at this critical phase of the 2024 elections. Musk may not care that X has [lost nearly 80 percent](#) of its value and many of its major advertisers since he took over the platform. But the other platform owners must recognize that such a reckless approach to content moderation is bad for business. Free Press will continue to remind them of this as we monitor platform performance in the few remaining days before the election and during its aftermath, when we expect to see a flood of new disinformation about the vote itself. While we’re encouraged that platforms like TikTok continue to engage with advocates on these issues, we remain deeply concerned that these services are still not doing enough.