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ADAM B. SCHIFF

MEMBER OF CONGRESS · 28TH DISTRICT, CALIFORNIA

July 15, 2019

Jack Dorsey
Chief Executive Officer
Twitter, Inc.
1355 Market Street, Suite 900
San Francisco, CA 94103

Dear Mr. Dorsey:

In testimony to the House Energy and Commerce Committee last fall, you described how Twitter—the “global town square” whose intended purpose is to advance the public conversation—was misused by foreign actors to manipulate the political conversation in advance of America’s 2016 elections. I appreciate the ongoing dialogue we have had with Twitter in the time since on the topic of disinformation and coordinated inauthentic behavior on your platform by foreign and domestic actors. As we look ahead to the 2020 election, though, I am gravely concerned the experience of 2016 may have just been the prologue.

In June, the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence held an open hearing on the national security challenges of “deepfake” images and videos generated using machine learning to depict events, actions, or speech that never occurred. As you are aware, manipulated or misleading media is already a constant feature online, but deepfake technology has the potential to make the problem far worse.

The tools to create deepfakes are widely accessible and quickly improving, which means developing sophisticated disinformation will no longer be the sole purview of well-resourced foreign adversaries, but of anyone with a computer. Furthermore, social media platforms can catapult a compelling lie into the conversations of millions of users around the world before the truth has a chance to catch up. The consequences for our democracy could be devastating: a timely, convincing deepfake video of a candidate going viral on a platform like Twitter could hijack a race—and even alter the course of history.

The nation saw a small preview of the havoc a well-timed deepfake could wreak in our current political environment when a crudely modified video of Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi was shared on several online platforms, including Twitter, in May. This manually edited video was not a deepfake and was easily debunked, but for millions of people who viewed or shared it before platforms removed it or flagged it as misleading, the damage was already done.

Twitter and other social media companies and platforms have taken a variety of actions since 2016 to address disinformation campaigns, but I am concerned they remain unprepared and

vulnerable to sophisticated and determined adversaries. With voting in the first 2020 primaries less than eight months away, I encourage you to use this time to prepare for what may come so we are not in the position in the weeks and months after the election of wishing we would have done things differently or acted more quickly.

Developing an effective response to the pernicious potential of deepfakes on platforms in which virality is a central feature is a particularly pressing concern. Accordingly, I ask that you address the following questions regarding deepfake and related content on Twitter:

1. How many views did the manually altered video of Speaker Pelosi receive directly on Twitter? How many tweets linked to the altered video on other platforms, and how many impressions, retweets, and likes did these tweets receive?
2. Does Twitter have a written policy on deepfake content? If so, will you provide it in response to this letter? If not, are you developing such a policy and when will it be finalized?
3. Are fake images or videos that realistically portray individuals saying or doing something they never did allowed on Twitter? Under what circumstances, if any, would Twitter remove such content and block its upload to your platforms?
4. Is Twitter conducting research into techniques for automatically detecting deepfakes and other forms of machine-generated posts on its platforms? To the extent machine-manipulated media is detected upon upload to Twitter, will the company take specific steps to dampen the virality of such content, take it down completely, or require a human review for politically relevant content?

Thank you for your attention to these issues. Given the importance of these challenges and the short time we have remaining to harden our democracy against further foreign interference, I request that you respond no later than July 31, 2019.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Adam B. Schiff".

Adam B. Schiff
MEMBER OF CONGRESS