

## **2021-001-FB-FBR**

### **MapLight's submission to the Oversight Board**

As the Oversight Board begins its review of Facebook's initial decision to suspend Donald Trump's accounts indefinitely, it is important to analyze the events that led to the siege of the U.S. Capitol, and the role that Facebook's newsworthiness exemption played in amplifying Trump's dangerous propaganda. At the same time, the board should also consider the ongoing threat of home-grown terrorism, and what lessons we can learn about the impact of disinformation from the highest level of government on our digital public square.

Trump's messages to the violent mob that stormed the Capitol with the intent to lynch former Vice President Pence and Speaker Pelosi in an attempt to disrupt what they considered to be a 'stealing' of the election were but the latest installment in a long, ugly history of online incitement to violence and [voter suppression](#), much of it targeting Black communities. Taken together, the events of the past four years [provide compelling evidence](#) of how the former President systematically weaponized the platform to [disenfranchise Black and other marginalized communities](#), [destroy trust](#) in our democratic institutions, [incite white supremacists](#) and militia groups, and finally [summon them to breach the U.S. Capitol](#). For the sake of the health and future of our democracy, the Oversight Board should permanently ban Trump from Facebook.

MapLight, a non-profit organization that has been fighting online political deception since the 2016 election, was among the first to [sound the alarm](#) about Trump's unfounded allegations of vote-by-mail fraud and the risks for the public legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election. In June of 2020, Maplight also [called on](#) social media platforms to take action against Trump's dangerous posts discrediting mail-in ballots, and glorifying violence. At the time, MapLight argued that the consistent application of Facebook's policies on violence and civic participation would have contained Trump's attempts to undermine our democracy.

Despite repeated violations of Facebook's Community Standards, CEO Mark Zuckerberg decided not to enforce the platform's own rules against the President due to the ostensible "newsworthiness" of Trump's posts, turning a deaf ear to his [employees' advice](#). Zuckerberg's subsequent decision to [add a prompt](#) to newsworthy posts violating the company's policies [failed to slow](#) the spread of Trump's false claims of voter fraud and did nothing at all to prevent people from engaging with this toxic content.

MapLight [expressed](#) additional concerns in September when Facebook decided not to remove candidates' posts declaring victory before races were formally called, deeming it sufficient to provide links to unbiased information. As predicted, these new labels [weren't effective](#) in dispelling unfounded claims of voter fraud allegations by Donald Trump and his surrogates. At the same time, Facebook's algorithms [continued to reward](#) incendiary posts by the President which helped them go viral.

One month since the removal of the former President from the platform, his falsehoods continue to endanger our democracy. At the end of January, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued for the first time a [national terrorism bulletin](#), warning about the growing threat of

“ideologically-motivated violent extremists with objections to the exercise of governmental authority and the presidential transition, as well as other perceived grievances fueled by false narratives.” DHS’s alarming concerns are a stark reminder that online disinformation, if not addressed, poses a real and lingering threat to our safety, our health, and our government. Trump’s use of social media platforms to divide us, oppress Black, Indigenous, and all people of color, and to incite extremism and violence — together with Facebook’s past failures in protecting our democracy — teach us five lessons:

- As observed, under no circumstances, can Facebook abdicate its responsibility for using its data and knowledge to amplify content meant to harm, intimidate, polarize, or incite violence;
- When offline context clearly suggests that online communications are intended to incite violence, suppress the vote, or do other things that are illegal, Facebook should look at those communications in that context and hold the perpetrators accountable. In the case at hand, the platform’s decision to suspend Trump’s accounts indefinitely was not only right but long overdue;
- Once disinformation takes root in tight-knit communities, its harms are manifested long after the removal of the original source of falsehoods. Prevention is key. Continuing to permit Trump’s inflammatory falsehoods on Facebook would both be at odds with its Community Standards and galvanize extremists, conspiracy theorists, and militia groups that still see in the former President the legitimate 2020 election winner;
- The public has both a right to information and a right to truth, especially when the manipulation of facts risks impairing participation in our democratic process. Because of the greater impact that disinformation from people wielding power or influence might have on our democracy, their posts should be subject to pre-clearance, fact-checking, and human review, [at the very least on election-related posts](#) when an account has a history of Community Standards violations;
- Community Standards should be transparent, consistent, and equitable. Repeat offenders should be sanctioned according to Facebook’s rules, without exemptions. Even a former President is bound by norms and the law, and should therefore be required to comply with the platform’s rules of engagement, grounded on the values of voice, authenticity, safety, privacy, and dignity.

This Oversight Board has the unique opportunity to use its authority to help to rebuild our fragile democracy that has been seriously impacted by the manipulation of information on Facebook by holding the perpetrators of the illegal acts accountable.

Sincerely,

Ann M. Ravel, Digital Deception Project Director at MapLight