

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-4305

August 14th, 2024

Mr. Sundar Pichai
Chief Executive Officer
Alphabet
1600 Amphitheatre Parkway
Mountain View, CA 94043

Dear Mr. Pichai:

The recent findings revealed by Axios concerning the Kamala Harris campaign's use of Google search ads to manipulate news headlines signify a deliberate attempt to mislead voters by falsely suggesting endorsement from major news publications.¹ This tactic, which involves editing headlines within Google ads to imply endorsement, operates within a gray area of Google's advertising policies but raises profound ethical and legal questions regarding election interference. Despite these ads being labeled as "sponsored," their integration and presentation closely mimic genuine search results, potentially deceiving voters into believing that these views are directly reported by news sources rather than being campaign-generated content. Google's position that these manipulations do not breach their advertising policies does little to ease concerns about this blatant attempt to deceive voters and interfere in the 2024 Presidential election.

Responses from the media entities mentioned in these ads, such as The Guardian, have expressed concerns over the misuse of their brands, reflecting broader implications for media credibility and public trust in journalistic sources. Unlike Google, Facebook ended the disingenuous practice of allowing campaigns to purchase favorable headlines and descriptions that appear with them in 2017, citing their "continuing efforts to stop the spread of misinformation and false news".² It is crucial for Google to protect the integrity of the upcoming election by implementing clear guidelines to prohibit political campaigns, like the Kamala Harris campaign, from intentionally manipulating results on your platform to mislead voters.

¹ Axios, "Harris Campaign Uses Google Political Ads to Appear Like News Publishers," August 13, 2024. Available at: <https://www.axios.com/2024/08/13/harris-campaign-google-political-ads-news-publishers>.

² Wall Street Journal, "Facebook Bars Advertisers from Altering News Headlines," September 14, 2017. Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-bars-advertisers-from-altering-news-headlines-1505411363>.

Google has a disturbing track record of implicit bias and election interference that overwhelmingly benefits one political party.³ There have been numerous attempts this election cycle by Google to hinder former President Donald Trump's ongoing campaign for the presidency, including censoring stories relating to the July 13 assassination attempt on him in Pennsylvania; Google searches for President Trump mostly returning and prioritizing results to show positive stories on Kamala Harris first; and Autocomplete not showing President Trump's name in response to searches for "President Donald" and similar terms.⁴

The systematic bias in disseminating information to disproportionately benefit certain political parties or candidates may be violating federal law that ensures equitable treatment of electoral candidates by broadcasting services.⁵ Additionally, the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) categorizes in-kind contributions as "anything of value" intended to influence an election outcome under this umbrella.⁶ The manipulation of search results and autocomplete functionalities aimed at favoring one candidate over another constitutes a violation, as defined by FECA. Rest assured, all efforts to ensure transparency and accountability at Google ahead of the 2024 election remain on the table.

In order for the American people to gain a better understanding of Google's deliberate efforts to mislead voters ahead of the 2024 election, please respond to the following questions and provide the documents requested no later than September 3rd:

1. What specific protocols has Google implemented to ensure that voters can easily recognize when news content has been altered or sponsored by political entities? Please provide details on any visual cues or disclaimers that will be made clear to users.
2. Since Google's advertising practices negatively impact the reputation of established media brands, what steps is Google taking to prevent manipulation of news by political campaigns and advertisements? How does Google plan to uphold and protect the integrity and public trust of media outlets whose names or content might be co-opted in ads?
3. Recently, your company claimed, "*Google is committed to fighting the spread of misinformation online. We take the task of providing access to high quality, trustworthy, and credible content very seriously*". How does Google reconcile this stance with the monetization of political ads that may contain manipulated headlines or misleading content? What ethical guidelines or standards does Google enforce to balance profit motives with the imperative to provide truthful and reliable information?

³ Fox News, "Big Tech Censored 2024 Presidential Candidates 169 Times, with Biden Accounting for Only Seven, Study Finds," Date Not Specified. Available at: <https://www.foxnews.com/media/big-tech-censored-2024-presidential-candidates-169-times-with-biden-accounting-only-seven-study>.

⁴ House Judiciary Committee, "Letter to Sundar Pichai Regarding Briefing Questions," August 5, 2024. Available at: <https://judiciary.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/republicans-judiciary.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/2024-08-05%20JDJ%20to%20Pichai%20re%20briefing%20questions.pdf>.

⁵ Communications Act of 1934, 47 U.S.C. § 315, amended by Telecommunications Act of 1996.

⁶ Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA), 52 U.S.C. § 30101 et seq.

4. What is the total revenue Google and its associated companies have accrued from political advertising during the current election cycle?
5. All internal policies or any other documents related to how Google Search ads are designed, reviewed, managed, and updated to take into account and incorporate recent newsworthy events.
6. All internal policies or any other documents related to how Google Search ads feature is designed, trained, managed, reviewed, or updated to edit headlines on stories they didn't create.

To arrange for the delivery of responsive documents or ask any related follow-up questions, please contact my Washington, D.C. office at (202) 225-3484.

As I look forward to your response, please know if Google is unable or unwilling to take basic steps to safeguard the integrity of our elections, I will work with my colleagues to use every tool at our disposal to ensure accountability.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lance Gooden". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Lance Gooden
Member of Congress