

Coronavirus misinformation is the latest test for social media platforms

Enlarge / It's just you and your devices now, in this socially-distanced world we all live in for the time being. Too bad the misinformation campaigns aren't also all on hold.

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The presidential race has fallen off the top of every front page nationwide in favor of coronavirus coverage, but 2020 is still very much a high-stakes election year. Twitter, Facebook, and Google have all promised to beef up their efforts to let information spread freely while limiting falsehoods and disinformation, but it's a long uphill battle—and with a little more than seven months to go until the election, it's one they do not seem to be winning.

The problem, a report today by The New York Times points out, is that not only are foreign disinformation campaigns in full swing, but the metaphorical calls are also coming from inside the house. Some platforms seem to be handling the challenge better than others.

The Times spoke with several employees at both Facebook and Twitter about how they have to change their tactics endlessly, as their adversaries continually modify their own approaches.

“We’re moving away from a model of waiting for a report to

spotting patterns of behavior that can spot stuff before it catches fire,” Carlos Monje Jr., Twitter’s head of public policy, told the Times. “We’re constantly trying to stay one step ahead.”

Facebook, in the aftermath of the 2016 US presidential election, began identifying and knocking down what it terms “coordinated inauthentic behavior.” State-backed campaigns, such as Russia’s well-documented (PDF) use of social media to influence 2016’s outcome, fall into that category. In its most recent report, Facebook says in February alone it removed networks of accounts, pages, and groups originating in India, Egypt, Russia, Iran, Myanmar, and Vietnam.

Domestic actors, however, are proving as big a problem for platforms to solve. While Facebook permits false and misleading political ads, for example, it does have a bright line prohibiting interference with voter registration or the 2020 census, currently in process. The site did in fact follow through earlier in March, pulling several Trump campaign ads with misleading census information—after the social media giant was called out by reporters, at least.

And yet even so, both Facebook and Google employees told the Times they fear to take any action that could lead to partisan blame. Some employees, “said they feared being blamed by Democrats for a Trump re-election, while others said they did not want to be seen as acting in Democrats’ favor,” the Times explained. “Privately, some said, the best-case scenario for them in November would be a landslide victory by either party, with a margin too large to be pinned on any one tech platform.”

Viral information

As important as the entire US democratic process is in the long run, though, for the present moment the election feels as though it may as well be a hundred years away. Much more

pressing is the challenge of misinformation related to the international COVID-19 crisis, which is very literally a life-or-death situation for billions around the world.

Information related to the COVID-19 crisis is also distressingly politicized. Social media platforms back in early March (a few weeks, rather than a few decades, ago, no matter how long it feels) were caught flat-footed trying to keep up with the flow of incorrect information about the virus. In recent days, however, they seem to be catching up.

Google finally kicked conspiracy theorist Alex Jones' Infowars app off of Google Play late last week after determining it was spreading misleading, harmful information about the disease.

In the last few days, Twitter has been particularly active with attempts to quash coronavirus misinformation—even when it comes from high-profile users. Since Friday, Twitter removed Tweets from presidential adviser Rudy Giuliani, conservative magazine The Federalist, and Brazil president Jair Bolsonaro for spreading false information about COVID-19.

Neither has Twitter let up. Earlier today, the site made Fox News host Laura Ingraham delete a tweet touting misleading information about a drug that has not been proven to be effective in treating COVID-19. Patients who take the drug, hydroxychloroquine, for auto-immune conditions are facing severe shortages after President Donald Trump began publicly praising its supposed efficacy.

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