

19 Mar, 2020

# Social media giants face balancing act for tackling coronavirus misinformation



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Major social media platforms have been flooded with misinformation about the coronavirus outbreak, but industry experts are mixed about how internet sites should tackle the issue.

The World Health Organization recently dubbed the spread of rumors and sensationalism online about the coronavirus an "infodemic," citing an overabundance of information — some accurate and some not — making it hard for people to find reliable guidance. Facebook Inc., Twitter Inc., Alphabet Inc.'s Google LLC, Microsoft Corp., LinkedIn Corp. and Reddit Inc.

responded with a joint statement, saying the companies are working closely together to combat fraud and elevate authoritative content. But experts warn it will be difficult, if not impossible, for companies to crack down on disinformation while still protecting the free flow of communication that is fundamental to their business models.

"When people are feeling really uncertain like they are right now, then finding information is a central goal [and] social media is perfectly designed to fill the need," said Jeff Hancock, a communications professor at Stanford University who has expertise in the psychological dynamics of social media.

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Facebook has responded to the infodemic by labeling coronavirus disinformation with "fact check" labels to inform users that such content had been rated false. It has also removed content flagged by health authorities that could discourage people from taking appropriate precautions.

Twitter, meanwhile, has upped its use of machine learning and automation to identify and remove harmful content. For its part, Google has banned ads for medical masks and created a website that features best practices for coronavirus prevention.

But through his research, Hancock found that much of coronavirus misinformation spreads through private messaging channels, making it more difficult for social media companies to weed out false information while also protecting user privacy, he said.

"That's the next big challenge, and I don't think the platforms can simply throw up their hands and say we can't see it because it's encrypted. I think

that would be shirking responsibility," Hancock said.

Company executives like Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg and Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai have previously stressed the importance of protecting user privacy, with Zuckerberg voicing his support for investing more heavily in end-to-end encryption.



**People wearing masks as a precaution against the coronavirus.**

John Gregory, senior analyst and deputy health editor at *Source: AP Photo*

NewsGuard, an organization that rates websites based on credibility, said social media's actions taken against coronavirus misinformation have so far been "opaque" and "algorithmic," and he urged the companies to be more transparent going forward.

For instance, Gregory said the companies should "explain more of the steps they're taking" when it comes to tamping down on some content and not others. He would also like more transparency about the kinds of false information they are finding.

U.S. lawmakers have urged social media firms and the agencies that regulate them to take swift action to combat coronavirus misinformation. On March 13, Reps. Frank Pallone Jr., D-N.J., Diana DeGette, D-Colo., and Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill. wrote to U.S. Federal Trade Commission Chairman Joseph Simons urging the agency to enforce rules preventing fraud and deception.

Similarly, Rep. Debbie Dingell, D-Mich., recently wrote a letter to the heads of Facebook, Twitter, Google's YouTube LLC video sharing platform and Chinese video-sharing social networking service TikTok Inc. pressing them

to do more to stop the spread of coronavirus disinformation.

But Bree McEwan, a communications professor at DePaul University who studies the connection between interpersonal and communication technology, cautioned against an overreaction.

She noted social media has been crucial in delivering quick updates on the rapidly-evolving coronavirus while also providing an element of social support that does not exist elsewhere,

While the spread of misinformation regarding coronavirus is concerning, she said, social media sites often work as a "correcting agent" by helping people critically evaluate false claims and oftentimes form stronger conclusions as a result.

"There's a balance between keeping these channels open and not cutting everything," she said.