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In France, social media and news organizations partner to battle fake news

After observing the spread of fake news reports during the US presidential campaign, some European countries are taking measures to prevent the spread of misinformation ahead of their own elections.

Thibault Camus | Amanda Hoover *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 6, 2017

Ahead of France's presidential election this spring, news organizations and social media giants have partnered together in an effort to combat fake news and ensure that the country's voters receive accurate information on candidates.

Facebook, Google, and several news organizations announced the initiative, which has been dubbed "Cross Check," on Monday. They will work together to curtail the spread of fake news stories across the social media and trending news platforms. Participating companies will partner with such newsrooms as Agence France-Presse, France's BFM TV, L'Express, and Le Monde to expose false reports.

Once considered an inaccurate but benign annoyance, fake news sources have become increasingly troubling for both politicians and established news outlets. After millions of US voters engaged with sources pushing false reports before the 2016 presidential election, social media sites have responded to criticism that their platforms helped spread sources filled with false claims, and have moved to stop promoting such information on their sites.

The phenomenon has launched social media sites, which often view themselves as technology platforms rather than media companies, into the position of weighing the pros of allowing unfettered free speech on their platforms against the cons of helping to disseminate false information.

France's initiative follows efforts in Germany to crack down on fake news ahead of the September 2017 parliamentary election, during which German Chancellor Angela Merkel will seek re-election for her fourth term in office. Officials there have floated the idea of bringing criminal charges against those who write and disseminate fake news reports, and one official has proposed fining Facebook up to 500,000 euros for failing to remove fake or harassing posts within 24 hours. Legislators have also considered passing a law that would require the companies to open local offices to speed up responses to complaints.

In the fight against fake news, Germany has strict libel laws on its side. In the United States, however, bringing and winning defamation or libel suits could prove more difficult.

While Mark Zuckerberg initially dismissed claims that fake news on the platform could have swayed voters' choices in the presidential election, he's since taken more responsibility for the content shared on the site. So far, the company has corrected its trending news section to make it more difficult for one-off hoax stories to go viral, enlisted third-party fact-checking organizations to sniff out fake reports, and also unveiled a feature that allows users to flag reports they believe are false.

405 words