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TikTok algorithm directs users to fake news about Ukraine war, study says

The Guardian, March 2023

A new TikTok account can be shown falsehoods about the Ukraine war within minutes of signing up to the app, according to an investigation by anti-misinformation outlet NewsGuard.

The company, which monitors the trustworthiness of news outlets across the web, ran a pair of tests to assess how the video-sharing app treated information about the conflict. It found that a new account that did nothing but scroll the app's algorithmically curated For You Page watching videos about the war would be funnelled towards false or misleading content within 40 minutes.

"Toward the end of experiment, analysts' feeds were almost exclusively populated with both accurate and false content related to the war in Ukraine – with no distinction made between disinformation and reliable sources," the research team wrote.

"At a time when false narratives about the Russia-Ukraine conflict are proliferating online, none of the videos fed to our analysts by TikTok's algorithm contained any information about the trustworthiness of the source, warnings, fact-checks, or additional information that could empower users with reliable information."

Among the false claims shown to the researchers was the myth that the US has bioweapon laboratories in Ukraine, and the accusation that Putin was "photoshopped" on to footage of a press conference he gave in early March.

Videos also claimed that fake footage was real, and that real footage was fake: videos purportedly of the "Ghost of Kyiv" shooting down Russian jets were taken from a video game, while real videos from the war were decried as fake by pro-Russian accounts.

"Some of the myths in the videos TikTok's algorithm fed to analysts have previously been identified as Kremlin propaganda," the researchers said.

To carry out the test, NewsGuard's research team simply made new accounts on the app and spent 45 minutes scrolling through the For You Page, stopping to view in full any video that looked like it was about the war in Ukraine.

A TikTok spokesperson warned that the experiment can only offer limited conclusions about the way the app works in the real world, since it fails to mimic standard view behaviour.

"We continue to respond to the war in Ukraine with increased safety and security resources as we work to remove harmful misinformation and help protect a safe experience on TikTok," they added. "We also partner with independent fact-checking organisations to support our efforts to help TikTok remain a safe and authentic place."

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