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Google's misinformation chief talks fact-checking the pandemic: 'I've never seen anything like this'

Hugh Langley Apr 3, 2020, 10:43 AM



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Google is paying out \$6.5 million to help fact-checking organizations around the world.

Google's head of information credibility explains the thinking behind the strategy: 'It's more global than ever, and it demands an answer that's more global than ever.'

The company says it's also looking at ways to better surface fact-checked stories on Google News.

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Google announced it will contribute \$6.5 million to fund to fact-checking organizations and nonprofits that are battling the spread of incorrect information about the coronavirus.

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Google's News Lab, told Business Insider. "This is for that subset that is dealing with

misinformation head-on.”

It's the latest example of Big Tech being surprisingly proactive in fighting the effects of the pandemic, even though Google is still [cleaning up misinformation on its own platform](#). Facebook recently announced it was investing \$1 million to support fact-checkers during the pandemic.

The \$6.5 million for fact-checkers will come out of the Google News Initiative, which works with journalists and publishers to combat misinformation. Some will go towards supporting the nonprofit First Draft, which provides various training tools for journalists, as well as to the International Fact-Checking Network. The initiative will also be giving to other organizations around the world including Full Fact and Maldita.es in Europe, PolitiFact and Kaiser Health News in the US, Data Leads in India, and Africa Check in Nigeria.

According to [data](#) from the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), the number of fact-checking organizations around the world grew to 188 in more than 60 countries in 2019, but 22.7% of those operate with budgets under \$20,000.

Mantzarlis says Google chose to distribute the funding based on "where it can have most impact fastest in an ethically grounded way." Some of the partners have been supported by Google in the past.

However, among those getting money from Google there are some exceptions, not least of all Snopes, [which is currently buckling](#) beneath the huge weight of misinformation it's working through. Google would not comment on Snopes specifically, but said it works with fact-checkers where it thinks it can add value.

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reporters with.

The biggest challenge right now, Mantzarlis believes, is how fact-checkers coordinate internationally to fight the rapid spread of misinformation between countries. "It's more global than ever, and it demands an answer that's more global than ever," he said. "I think the community of fact checkers is at a place where it's recognized it, and we want to turbo-charge that."

He points to trend lines showing topics of incorrect information moving from country to country. Google has targeted its funding to organizations in such a way that it hopes will combat this problem.

"I've never seen anything like this, where something in India is almost identically phrased as something in the United States or in my home country of Italy," Mantzarlis said. "The posts are literally making the same types of claims, transforming so the person who's allegedly the expert quoted in the WhatsApp message is no longer the nurse from Milan but your uncle the doctor in Seattle who's seeing the hospital system collapse."

Mantzarlis said health misinformation is most likely to be harmful, and is one of the topic Google sees the need to target most urgently, fake cures are the big one. "With COVID the wrong types of cures are the types of things people might be looking at and acting upon, and we're seeing real-life harm," he told Business Insider. "We're seeing people die of bootleg alcohol overdose. Those are the fact checks that we would like to find ways to surface to users who might be seeing the misinformation in their messages."

Google currently displays fact-checks in search results and on Google News, and says it plans to launch a dedicated fact-check section of its COVID-19 News page in the US

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But Mantzarlis said Google is also thinking about how it can better bring fact-checked

stories to the forefront on its news search results in general. "We are looking at how, with the higher number of fact-checks we're seeing on COVID, whether there are ways to surface these more prominently to Google News users," he said.

"It is of course true that reporters fact check their work before they publish, that's not what's in question here," Mantzarlis said. "It's reflecting the fact we're getting our

information from a million other sources that might not be fact-checked, and that there's value in that work as a standalone."

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