HOW ARE PLATFORMS RESPONDING TO THIS PANDEMIC?

What Platforms Are Doing to Tackle Rampant Misinformation

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PHOTO: BRIAN MCGOWAN
Purpose

Given the enormous role they now play in distributing news and information, it is important that the major technology platforms help consumers navigate between fact and fiction, between helpful and harmful information distributed on the internet. Are they doing their part to help us work through the difficulties engendered by the Coronavirus crisis? Are they setting a new standard of corporate behavior to prevent the dangerous flow of disinformation, or falling down on the job? And what should our expectations be after the pandemic is over?

Public Knowledge is tracking public information about the platforms’ approaches, as well as analysis and commentary about them, to answer these questions. Our goal is to help inform policy perspectives about the digital platforms and their approaches to countering misinformation\(^1\). View our Latest Commentary and the dated entries in each case study for the most recent news on how the platforms are responding to misinformation.

Dangers of the Infodemic

Harms of Misinformation

The World Health Organization’s director-general has said that “disinformation is as dangerous as COVID-19”\(^2\). Based on current reports, the primary harms of misinformation related to COVID-19 are likely:

- Fear mongering and increasing panic and angst
- Threat to the physical safety of individuals
- Limiting the effectiveness of official efforts to curb the pandemic
- Fostering racism

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\(^1\) Many frameworks define disinformation as knowingly false content meant to deceive. Given the difficulty of assessing the intent of information sharing for CV-19, we follow the Reuters Institute practice and use the term misinformation throughout this report to refer broadly to any type of false information – including disinformation - except when other terms are used in direct quotes or footnotes.

\(^2\) [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200202-sitrep-13-ncov-v3.pdf](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200202-sitrep-13-ncov-v3.pdf)
Categories of Misinformation

Efforts to counter misinformation need to address both their source and the type of misinformation they represent. The primary types of misinformation we are seeing related to the COVID-19 pandemic are:

- potential cures
- factors that contribute to disease transmission
- conspiracies about the root cause of the disease

The primary sources of information are:

- both U.S. and foreign clickbait sites, some of which have simply been repurposed for reporting on the pandemic
- celebrities in the entertainment, news and political realm
- bad political actors, both in the U.S. and internationally

These sources may create or amplify information, or both.

Successful strategies for countering misinformation will involve both moderation and removal of misinformation, and empowering the creation and distribution of accurate and reliable information.

Overview

An army of at least 48 fact-checking organizations from 30 countries has been working since early March to debunk false information about the 2019 novel coronavirus. The collaborative project, coordinated by the International Fact-Checking Network, will be active for as long as the disease spreads worldwide and can be followed on social media channels through two hashtags, #CoronaVirusFacts and #DatosCoronaVirus.

All of the digital platforms have established dedicated websites, hashtags, and handles to communicate their response and actions in regard to the COVID-19 crisis (you'll find many marked in footnotes), and all of the platforms have formed partnerships with the WHO, CDC or other health organizations as sources of current, accurate content.

One of the most notable elements in the platforms' response is greater use of Artificial Intelligence and machine learning systems for content moderation, due to the need to allow

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3 As of this edition, this includes rumors related to the impact of 5G technology on the disease and whether Bill Gates has had a role in creating it.

social distancing for their employees and contractors. Twitter\(^5\), Google\(^6\) and Facebook\(^7\) have all issued communications noting that greater reliance on AI and machine learning systems will result in mistakes, especially “false positives” (legitimate content being removed or blocked from being shared as posts or comments).\(^8\)

The Coronavirus Misinformation Tracking Center hosted by NewsGuard has found 187 (up from 132, then 141) sites — 82% of which NewsGuard had identified as unreliable prior to the coronavirus outbreak — that are publishing false claims about the coronavirus. NewsGuard provides credibility ratings and detailed “Nutrition Labels” for thousands of news and information websites. You can read reviews of each website tracked by NewsGuard for more information.\(^9\)

**Latest Commentary (since April 22 Edition)**

**NEW:** A US national survey conducted during the early days of the COVID-19 spread showed that, above and beyond respondents’ political party, mainstream broadcast and print media use (e.g., NBC News, the New York Times) correlated with *more accurate* information about the disease’s lethality and/or *more accurate* beliefs about protection from infection. Conservative media use (e.g., Fox News) correlated with conspiracy theories including believing that some in the CDC were exaggerating the seriousness of the virus to undermine the presidency of Donald Trump. Exposure to online outlets such as Google News and Yahoo News correlated with lower belief in the efficacy of regular hand washing and avoiding contact with symptomatic individuals. Exposure to sources such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube was positively correlated with belief in the efficacy of vitamin C, the belief that the CDC was exaggerating the threat to harm President Trump, and the belief that the virus was created by the US government. The report put forward five recommendations\(^10\):

1. Proactively put forward communication about disease prevention before a crisis.
2. Focus on debunking beliefs that are considered salient in the population (10% or more) in order to avoid inadvertently increasing awareness of the problematic claim.
3. Establish a baseline for monitoring social media interventions.
4. Place public service announcements, encourage hyperlinks to the CDC information

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pages, and seek interviews on social (and conservative) outlets whose audiences are less knowledgeable, more misinformed, or more accepting of conspiracy theories.

5. Encourage or fund newspapers to take down paywalls on coverage of medical crises.

NEW: According to new research from Carnegie Mellon University, nearly half the “people” talking about the coronavirus pandemic on Twitter are not actually people, but bots. They are feeding Twitter with harmful, false story lines about the pandemic, including some inspiring real-world activity, such as the theory that 5G towers cause COVID-19, or state-sponsored propaganda from Russia and China that falsely claims the U.S. developed the coronavirus as a bioweapon or that American politicians are issuing “mandatory” lockdowns. In many ways, the bots are acting in ways that are consistent with the story lines that are coming out of Russia or China, according to researchers. The Carnegie Mellon team identified more than 100 false narratives relating to coronavirus worldwide, which they divided into six different categories: cures or preventative measures, weaponization of the virus, emergency responses, the nature of the virus (like children being immune to it), self-diagnosis methods, and feel-good stories, like dolphins returning to Venice’s canals.11

NEW: China, Iran, and Russia are each using the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to spread disinformation related to the United States, according to a State Department report viewed by Business Insider. The messaging from each government aligns with the others, the report says. They include the baseless narratives that the coronavirus is an American bioweapon and is being spread by US troops, that the US is scoring political points from the crisis, and that all three governments — unlike the US — are managing the crisis well, according to the document. The report, which is produced by the department's Global Engagement Center, is not public. The report makes the case that propaganda from the three governments have converged as coronavirus has spread. Some of the information is produced by state-run media, and some has been put out by the governments, the report says.12

12  https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-china-iran-propaganda-us-disinformation-narratives-echo-each-other-2020-4
NEW: A preliminary analysis of the online conversation surrounding the coronavirus pandemic prepared by social network analysis firm Graphika suggests that conservative and right-wing voices played an outsized role in spreading mis- and disinformation online about the coronavirus pandemic worldwide. Graphika produced a set of three global network maps that capture the mainstream global conversation around coronavirus at monthly intervals as part of an effort to map and analyze what the World Health Organization called an “infodemic”. Their key findings were:

1. The online conversation about the pandemic has become more complex over time; a large “mega cluster” of US right-wing accounts became diminished by the mainstreaming of the coronavirus conversation online over time.
2. Particularly in the US, Italy, and France, more right-wing accounts are involved in the conversation and these accounts are more active in their engagement than their leftwing counterparts.
3. A number of groups are leveraging the conversation around coronavirus to propagate racism and anti-immigration sentiment, or to draw attention to immigration policy in their respective countries.
4. At first, conspiracy theories appeared to revolve around the causes of the outbreak, but as the pandemic continued to spread, conspiratorial content has become more closely focused on governmental responses to the outbreak.
5. Habitual sharers of health misinformation increased their share of voice in the coronavirus in February; the data highlights a serious distrust of established and official sources of health information.
6. Narratives designed to stoke geopolitical tensions, including some seeming to originate with the Kremlin, seem focused on undermining trust in global institutions and drawing attention to the failures of other governments, predominantly the Chinese response.

The core narratives of the misinformation efforts were: racism and xenophobia, conspiracy communities, health misinformation, and geopolitical tensions. Conversely, the spread of #FlattenTheCurve is a small case study in the efficacy of science communication that attests to the positive, and likely life-saving, impact of credible information online.

NEW: The U.S. State Department has assessed that Russia, China and Iran are mounting increasingly intense and coordinated disinformation campaigns against the U.S. relating to the outbreak of the new coronavirus. All three countries are using state-controlled media, social media and government agencies and officials to disseminate information to domestic audiences and global audiences alike that denigrates the U.S. and spreads false accounts, the State Department report says.

NEW: A group of scholars and nonprofit organizations have asked web platforms to keep track

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of the content they're removing during the coronavirus pandemic so they can make it available to researchers studying how online information affects public health. The signatories — including Access Now, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and EU DisinfoLab — sent an open letter to social media and content sharing services, urging them to preserve data even as they remove misinformation. The letter urges companies to preserve content that is removed from the service, including accounts, posts, and videos. It also encourages them to keep records of the removal process itself, like whether a takedown was automated or received human oversight, whether users tried to appeal the takedown, and whether content was reported but left online. Some of that information could be included in public transparency reports, and other pieces could be released specifically to researchers.\textsuperscript{15}

**NEW:** On the April 28 edition of his show on Fox News, Tucker Carlson complained about the “ludicrous” measures taken by leading technology companies to combat misinformation about the coronavirus pandemic. Referring primarily to YouTube’s removal of a highly circulated video featuring Dr. Daniel Erickson, in which Erickson alleged that doctors were encouraged to link deaths to COVID-19 to amplify concerns about the pandemic, Carlson accused the service of “cracking down on free expression” and “banning dissent” from medical orthodoxy. Carlson maintained that “the big technology companies are using this tragedy to increase their power over the population”.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{16} https://www.foxnews.com/media/tucker-carlson-youtube-coronavirus-censorship-science
Disinformation Mitigation by Digital Platform

This summary lists what companies have communicated specifically in response to the coronavirus, and in some cases how this has been reported.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Digital Platform</th>
<th>Approaches to Disinformation Mitigation</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Priority Level 1</strong></td>
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<td>Facebook/Facebook Messenger</td>
<td>• On April 22, removed “pseudoscience” from the list of categories advertisers can use to target people, following an investigation from The Markup. The social media platform’s ad portal showed more than 78M Facebook users were interested in pseudoscience, The Markup reported. We’ve removed this targeting option to prevent potential abuse in ads,” a Facebook spokesperson confirmed in an email.¹⁷</td>
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<td>• On April 22, announced extra steps to make Pages and accounts with large audiences more transparent: Facebook will provide the location of high-reach Facebook Pages [and Instagram accounts] on every post they share, so people have more information to help them gauge the reliability and authenticity of the content they see in their feeds. This step, primarily focused on protecting election integrity, will be piloted in the US, starting specifically with Facebook Pages [and Instagram accounts] that are based outside the US but reach large audiences based primarily in the US. It builds on a past effort to include the primary country location of the people who manage a Page.</td>
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<td>• On April 21, announced that Facebook was taking steps to bring content reviewers back on a voluntary basis to assist with moderation.¹⁸</td>
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<td>• On April 20, on Good Morning America, Mark Zuckerberg stated that protests of stay-at-home orders in violation of state social distancing rules organized through Facebook qualify as &quot;harmful misinformation.&quot;¹⁹ This does not impact all lockdown protests - only those that are prohibited by government's guidance on social distancing.</td>
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<td>• On April 20, announced it is shutting down event pages for anti-quarantine protests in states with stay-at-home orders amid the coronavirus</td>
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¹⁹ https://thehill.com/homenews/media/493649-zuckerberg-says-stay-at-home-protests-organized-through-facebook-qualify-as
pandemic. A company spokesperson told Politico that it has removed protesters’ event pages and messages encouraging rallies in California, New Jersey, and Nebraska after state governments advised those events are currently prohibited by law. “...events that defy government’s guidance on social distancing aren’t allowed on Facebook,” the spokesperson said. A Facebook representative also told CNN that it’s in discussions with four other states — New York, Wisconsin, Ohio, and Pennsylvania — to determine if planned protests would violate those states’ stay-at-home orders.20

- On April 16, announced in a blog post that “in the coming weeks” it will begin notifying users who have interacted with misinformation about the novel coronavirus that is subsequently removed from the platform. Users who liked, reacted to or commented on potentially harmful debunked content will see a message in their news feeds directing them to the World Health Organization's Myth busters page. There, the WHO dispels some of the most common falsehoods about the pandemic.21 Facebook said the design in its blog post is an “early version” and that it’s also testing “more explicit” variations.22

- Facebook is also adding a new section to its coronavirus information center dedicated to vetted articles that focus on debunking misinformation, and said that during March it applied warning labels on about 40 million posts related to the pandemic, based on roughly 4,000 articles reviewed by its third-party fact checkers.

- On April 14, announced that an interactive Health Alert interactive service in partnership with the WHO already on WhatsApp is being expanded to Facebook Messenger. Messenger’s 1.3B monthly active users will be able to ask questions and get quick answers about the virus.23

- On April 7, Consumer Reports ran an article about a “test” designed to see how well Facebook is policing coronavirus-related advertising. Seven ads, including two that described dangerous claims Nick Clegg (below) had specifically said would trigger rejection, were approved and scheduled to

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run on Facebook. Only one ad, with an image of a stock shot of a respirator-style face mask, was rejected, suggesting Facebook is using image recognition—one of its strong suits—to flag posts. Consumer Reports pulled all the ads from the schedule before they had the chance to actually appear. When contacted, Facebook confirmed all the ads violated their policies and closed the fake account created to run them.24

- On April 1, COO Sheryl Sandberg participated in a podcast, “Skimm’d from The Couch”, in which she maintained that the lessons learned from its numerous mistakes over the past couple of years has prepared it to deal with the crises caused by the coronavirus pandemic. She said, “Some of the troubles we had and some of the mistakes we made over the past years, we worked so hard to correct those and set ourselves up, they’re serving us well”.25

- On March 30, in response to an investigation by Politico26, Facebook said it removed private groups that spread falsehoods from recommendations shown to users about communities that they may want to join. Within these invite-only online communities, the company also has added an information box that links directly to official government advice.

- On March 30, pledged $100M to support journalists; $25M is in the form of an emergency grant for local news through the Facebook Journalism Project (the first round went to 50 local newsrooms in the US and Canada) and $75M will go towards “additional marketing spend to move money over to news organizations around the world.”27

- In India on March 30, launched a Corona Helpdesk Chatbot on its Messenger platform to raise awareness and provide authentic and accurate information in order to debunk fake news about coronavirus. Users can go to the Facebook page on MyGov Corona Hub and start a chat in either English or Hindi by typing ‘Get Started’, which will prompt them to either type in a query or choose from a list of frequently asked questions.28

- On March 26, Facebook Messenger introduced Coronavirus Community

Hub, offering tips, authoritative information and other resources, weeks after launching a similar information hub on WhatsApp, its other messaging service.  

- On March 25, Nick Clegg, FB’s vice president of global affairs and communications, in an interview with NPR, again distinguished their approach to the virus as distinct from how they may handle political misinformation in the future: “…in a democracy with an independent press and with the claims and counterclaims that politicians make about each other, we think it’s very important that private companies should allow voters for themselves to make their own judgments about what politicians are saying, about the future of their country, whereas when it comes to a medical pandemic, as I say, underpinned by science and by authoritative institutions such as the CDC and the WHO and others, it’s, of course, much easier for us to act under the strict expertise and guidance from those institutions themselves.”

- On March 25, in an effort to encourage social distancing, Facebook communicated that they released a series of Physical Distancing Profile Frames that allow people to place frames around their profile pictures with various phrases and hashtags like: Stay Home Save Lives, #Quaranteam, #StayHome.

- On March 23, Facebook began enlisting outside developers to create ways its Messenger service can help health organizations; they invited software experts to take part in an online “hackathon” aimed at creating ways to use Messenger to ease social-distancing and deliver accurate information about the pandemic.

- On March 18, Facebook announced that it is launching a Coronavirus Information Center, featured at the top of NewsFeed, to provide a central place for people to get the latest news and information.

- Facebook is limiting the number of people a user can forward a message to in Messenger in order to curb the spread of misinformation.

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31 Email dated March 25 from Shaarik Zafar, Public Policy at Facebook, to partners and coalition members


34 https://www.phonearena.com/news/Facebook-Messenger-limit-forwarding_id123205
• Although Facebook doesn't usually remove content, it is removing coronavirus misinformation because it could cause physical harm.\(^{35}\)
• Introduced a pop-up at the top of search results that directs users to credible health information\(^{36}\)
• Sending alerts to users who have shared or attempted to share misleading content.\(^{37}\)
• From the outset, Facebook has tried to distinguish its approach on the pandemic to how it may act in future cases of misinformation. In an interview with NY Times, Mark Zuckerberg noted, "When you're dealing with a pandemic, a lot of the stuff we're seeing just crossed the threshold...So it's easier to set policies that are a little more black and white and take a much harder line."\(^{38}\)
• Partnered with International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) to support the fact-checking community by broadening the #CoronaVirusFacts Alliance, the COVID-19 related misinformation effort, with a budget of $1 million in grants\(^{39}\). USA Today has joined Facebook's third-party fact checking network.
• Prohibiting ads from making health or medical claims related to the coronavirus in product listings on commerce surfaces, including those listings that guarantee a product will prevent someone from contracting it\(^{40}\)
• Banning ads and commercial listings for medical masks, hand sanitizer, surface disinfecting wipes, and COVID-19 testing kits, and prohibiting exploitative tactics in ads\(^{41}\)
• Providing free ads to global health organizations; in their updates they describe giving WHO "as many free ads as they need" and "millions in ad credits to other health authorities"\(^{42}\)
• Adopted a 3 tiered approach to mitigating misinformation: (1) "disrupting economic incentives because most false news is financially motivated;" (2) "building new products to curb the spread of false news;" and (3) "helping people make more informed decisions when they encounter false news."\(^{43}\)

\(^{36}\) Id.
\(^{39}\) https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2020/flash-grants-of-up-to-50k-are-now-available-for-fact-checkers-fighting-coronavirus-misinformation/
\(^{40}\) https://about.fb.com/news/2020/03/coronavirus/#banning-ads
\(^{41}\) https://about.fb.com/news/2020/03/coronavirus/
\(^{42}\) Id.
\(^{43}\) https://www.facebook.com/facebookmedia/blog/working-to-stop-misinformation-and-false-news
<table>
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<th>Google</th>
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<td>• On April 22, changed its advertising policies to require all advertisers, not just those with political affiliations, to complete an identity verification program to show ads on its platforms, which include Google Search, Google News, and YouTube. Advertisers will need to submit personal identification, business incorporation documents or other information that proves who or what they are and the country they operate in. Google will start rolling out the policy with U.S.-based advertisers in a phased approach and will release it internationally over the next few years.44</td>
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<td>• On April 16, various tech sites reported that Google detects and blocks an average 18M daily malware and phishing emails related to COVID-19, representing almost 20% of the total 100M daily phishing messages. Meanwhile, there are more than 240M coronavirus-related spam messages a day. For the most part, existing malware campaigns have just been repurposed to take advantage of the current pandemic. That commonality helps Google’s Safe Browsing system flag and warn against nefarious links in Gmail, Chrome, and other services that use the API.45</td>
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<td>• On April 6, announced it is launching a COVID-19 hub on Google News; the hub organizes news from authoritative global and local sources to help readers access the latest guidance regarding the virus. You can select which regions you want to be updated on in particular. It can also highlight stories by topics such as the economy, health, and travel, and emphasizes results from local news most relevant to you, including tweets from local authorities.46</td>
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<td>• On April 2, in a letter to partners and clients, communicated it would adjust the enforcement of its sensitive events policy, which blocks ads that try to capitalize on short-term events like natural disasters. Google first allowed health information PSA ads from government entities, supported by $250 million in donated ad grants (see below), then explored ways to support ads from hospitals, medical providers, government entities, and NGOs, and will extend it to additional sectors, including politics, &quot;as soon as we’re able to do so safely&quot;.47</td>
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<td>• On April 2, announced it would spend $6.5 million toward fighting the spread of misinformation around the coronavirus pandemic; funding will go toward fact-checkers, news organizations and nonprofits around the world. Part of the money will go toward fellowships at Stanford University to help reporters covering the coronavirus pandemic, and to groups supporting the</td>
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44 [https://www.axios.com/google-advertisers-identity-97d6a071-2e19-45fe-9f82-c9a151e1861e.html](https://www.axios.com/google-advertisers-identity-97d6a071-2e19-45fe-9f82-c9a151e1861e.html)
45 [https://9to5google.com/2020/04/16/gmail-coronavirus-spam/](https://9to5google.com/2020/04/16/gmail-coronavirus-spam/)
47 Email from Chanelle Hardy, Policy Partnerships and Strategic Outreach, Google, to Chris Lewis, Public Knowledge, April 2, 2020
ability of journalists to access research around the virus. Google Trends will be made more widely available for reporters, health care workers and law enforcement, with funding to train journalists on how to spot health misinformation.

- On March 31, the impact of Google’s ban on ads capitalizing on the virus on political messaging was called out in an article in Protocol. As a result of the policy many political and advocacy campaigns are focusing paid ads on Facebook.
- On March 27, announced a new $800M commitment to support small- and medium-sized businesses (SMBs), health organizations and governments, and health workers. Of this, an estimated $610M takes the form of “ad credits” and “cloud computing services”; these in-kind donations have been met with some skepticism.
- On March 21, CNBC reported that Google (and Apple) have added features to their voice assistants to provide users with a step-by-step questionnaire if they ask variations of, “Hey Siri, do I have the coronavirus?”
- On March 20, launched google.com/covid19, offering education, prevention and local resources related to the novel coronavirus. At the top of the site, there’s an information box describing virus symptoms, treatment and prevention tips from the World Health Organization. Google also included links to state departments of health across the U.S., search trends related to COVID-19, and other resources for individuals.
- Working to quickly remove any content that claims to prevent the coronavirus in place of seeking medical treatment.
- Searches related to the virus trigger an “SOS Alert,” with news from mainstream publications including National Public Radio, followed by information from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization displayed prominently.
- Promoting WHO’s “Do the Five” campaign on the homepage to raise awareness.

Links:
49 https://www.protocol.com/google-coronavirus-ad-ban-democrats
50 https://blog.google/inside-google/company-announcements/commitment-support-small-businesses-and-cr
awareness of simple measures people can take to slow the spread of the disease.

- Expanding Knowledge Panels to include CV-19 symptoms, prevention and treatments
- May eventually need to address its deal with Twitter to show tweets in search results, especially for queries about live and recent events.
- Google Ads: claims they are blocking all ads capitalizing on the coronavirus; have blocked “tens of thousands” over the last six weeks. Also helping WHO and government organizations run PSA ads.
- Google Play: prohibits developers from capitalizing on sensitive events; existing policy prohibits apps that feature medical or health-related content or functionalities that are misleading or potentially harmful.

### Twitter

- On April 22, broadened its guidance on “unverified claims that incite people to engage in harmful activity, could lead to the destruction or damage of critical 5G infrastructure, or could lead to widespread panic, social unrest, or large-scale disorder”. Material of this nature may be considered in violation of Twitter's policies.
- On April 8, briefly locked the account of online personalities Diamond and Silk over a tweet that violated the company’s rules against coronavirus misinformation.
- On April 6, Ad Age reported (via Ad Exchange) that Twitter had lifted its ban on coronavirus-related advertising. Twitter will allow marketers to feature their pandemic responses in paid tweets. Twitter initially banned COVID terms to forestall misinformation, but now feels that “the messaging that brands and businesses can provide to the world … are going to be positively received”.
- On March 23, Daily Beast and The Hill reported that Twitter was leaving up

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60 [https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/08/diamond-silk-twitter-coronavirus-175914?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoieyJpIjoiWTJKaE5qUTNZMlpqTTJFdyIlnQilOiJRTTF5anFZN251b1c0SWhSZ3p2VtgwV2JQexXtGWE9cL0xNVWjMzRRYUISmnE3ZDVHazi5NDFId29hbDlTvWWlWiWvdK2FZSS3VoYXdhTXBQenBCSEv5MVNFTXB4TnRIRUo5XC9cL0t1ENWc4NThYV3dsSlpJSm8yTzNXYlpzdDZ0YyJ9](https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/08/diamond-silk-twitter-coronavirus-175914?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiWTJKaE5qUTNZMlpqTTJFdyIlnQilOiJRTTF5anFZN251b1c0SWhSZ3p2VtgwV2JQexXtGWE9cL0xNVWjMzRRYUISmnE3ZDVHazi5NDFId29hbDlTvWWlWiWvdK2FZSS3VoYXdhTXBQenBCSEv5MVNFTXB4TnRIRUo5XC9cL0t1ENWc4NThYV3dsSlpJSm8yTzNXYlpzdDZ0YyJ9)
61 [https://www.adexchanger.com/ad-exchange-news/monday-06042020/](https://www.adexchanger.com/ad-exchange-news/monday-06042020/)
misinformation about U.S. origins of the virus attributed to the Chinese
government.\textsuperscript{62} Twitter confirmed only that “official government accounts
engaging in conversation about the origins of the virus and global public
conversation about potential emergent treatments will be permitted, unless
the content contains clear incitement to take a harmful physical action”.
They also acknowledged “we will not be able to take enforcement action
on every Tweet that contains incomplete or disputed information about
COVID-19”.\textsuperscript{63}
\begin{itemize}
\item On March 20, announced it will accelerate its notoriously opaque process
for verification (the blue checkmark) for accounts that are providing
credible updates around COVID-19. They are prioritizing verification for
Twitter accounts that have an email address associated with an
authoritative organization or institution. They explained steps academics
and others who work for public health organizations or academic
institutions can take in order to ensure their accounts can be verified.\textsuperscript{64}
\item On March 19, banned paid ads and commerce listings for masks, hand
sanitizer, and surface disinfecting wipes to help protect against inflated
prices and predatory behavior. Will be ramping up automated enforcement
for ads and commerce the week of March 23. If Twitter sees abuse around
these products in organic posts, they will also be removed.\textsuperscript{65}
\item On March 19, announced it will implement a new policy on "synthetic and
manipulated media," primarily focused on the 2020 election. When users
scroll through posts, they may see a new labeling system: a blue
exclamation point and the words "manipulated media" underneath content
the platform believes to have been tampered with or deceptively shared
(deepfakes,"cheepfakes", low-tech editing).\textsuperscript{66}
\item On March 18, expanded its safety rules; it will no longer allow content that
could place people at a higher risk of transmitting COVID-19, including
"Denial of expert guidance," "Encouragement to use fake or ineffective
treatments, preventions, and diagnostic techniques," and "Misleading
content purporting to be from experts or authorities."\textsuperscript{67} It will also take
action against posts alleging that any particular group or nationality is more
or less susceptible to coronavirus.\textsuperscript{68}
\end{itemize}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[63] https://twitter.com/TwitterSafety/status/1242221132956061697
\item[64] https://twitter.com/TwitterSupport/status/124115570182476288
\item[65] https://twitter.com/robleathern/status/124074132243826880
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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Twitter</strong></th>
<th><strong>YouTube</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Expanding its search feature to provide information about COVID-19 from</td>
<td>• On April 28, communicated to partners that YouTube is expanding the use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>credible sources. In January, it launched the COVID-19 Search Prompt in</td>
<td>of “fact check information panels” - a feature launched in Brazil and India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64 countries and 20 languages in partnership with the CDC.(^6^9)</td>
<td>last year — to the United States. The panels are designed to highlight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increasing its use of machine learning and automation to act on potentially</td>
<td>relevant, third-party fact-checked articles above search results for relevant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>abusive and manipulative content, (i.e., using tech to make more</td>
<td>queries. A fact check information panel will appear when there is a</td>
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<tr>
<td>enforcement calls). Due to the risk of errors, will not permanently</td>
<td>relevant fact checked article available from an eligible publisher, and it will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suspend any accounts based solely on automated enforcement systems; will</td>
<td>only show when people search for a specific claim.(^7^1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>layer in human checks.</td>
<td>• In her first interview on the topic on April 20, chief executive Susan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Instituting a global content severity triage system to prioritize rule</td>
<td>Wojcicki said YouTube would remove anything it deems &quot;medically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>violations with biggest risk of harm and reduce the burden on people to</td>
<td>unsubstantiated&quot;. The move follows YouTube banning conspiracy theories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>report them.</td>
<td>falsely linking Covid-19 to 5G networks. “Anything that would go against</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Executing daily quality assurance checks on content enforcement</td>
<td>World Health Organization recommendations would be a violation of our policy”,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>processes to ensure agility in responding to this rapidly evolving,</td>
<td>she noted, and added that YouTube had seen a 75% increase in demand for news</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>global issue.</td>
<td>from &quot;authoritative&quot; sources.(^7^2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Engaging partners around the world to ensure escalation paths remain</td>
<td>• On April 20, the Wall Street Journal reported that Alphabet wants to</td>
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<tr>
<td>open and urgent cases can be addressed.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Reviewing the Twitter Rules in the context of COVID-19 and considering</td>
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<tr>
<td>ways in which they may need to evolve to account for new account</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>behavior.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Dedicated COVID-19 page at top of timeline with accurate, current</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>information.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Using @TwitterSafety for updates on policies(^7^0).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Using @TwitterSafety for updates on policies(^7^0).</td>
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\(^7^1\) [https://youtube.googleblog.com/2020/04/expanding-fact-checks-on-youtube-to-united-states.html](https://youtube.googleblog.com/2020/04/expanding-fact-checks-on-youtube-to-united-states.html)

substantially limit the information a key auditor of YouTube can share about the risks of advertising on the video service. The auditor, OpenSlate, is refusing to sign a contract that would prevent it from reporting to ad clients when ads have run in videos with sensitive subject matter, including information about COVID-19.73

- On April 7, in an interview with Axios, Chief Product Officer Neal Mohan said YouTube has been focused on a twofold approach: making authoritative information more prominent and aggressively removing policy-violating content. An information panel on its home page linking to national health agencies' websites represents the first time YouTube has linked to a text site rather than a video. It has expanded its existing medical misinformation policies that prohibit promoting false cures or encouraging people not to see a doctor to include barring promoting actions that go against recommendations from national health authorities. Unlike Facebook and Twitter, YouTube's policies are entirely focused on the content of a video and not who is doing the speaking.74

- On April 6, confirmed it will remove or reduce recommendations for videos that falsely link 5G to the virus after reports of people setting phone masts on fire and attacking phone company workers. It will actively remove videos that breach its policies for CV, but content that is simply conspiratorial about 5G mobile communications networks, without mentioning coronavirus, is still allowed on the site.75

- On April 2, expanded monetization of content mentioning or featuring COVID-19 to all creators and news organizations, assuming they follow both Advertiser-Friendly and Community Guidelines.76 Subsequent to this change, the Tech Transparency Project, a not-for-profit watchdog organization, reported the company was running advertisements with videos pushing herbs, meditative music, and potentially unsafe over-the-counter supplements as cures for Covid-19. When notified of these, Google removed 4 of the videos noting that the other 3 were not misinformation but "wellness"-related.77

74 https://www.axios.com/youtube-coronavirus-misinformation-videos-google-d9ce89cb-0de0-4f50-8a25-5923e078a858.html
75 https://www.businessinsider.com/youtube-delete-5g-coronavirus-conspiracy-2020-4
76 https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/9777243?p=covid19_updates&visit_id=63719486873911680-4122912225&rd=1
77 https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/apr/03/youtube-coronavirus-treatments-profit-misinformati on
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public Knowledge</th>
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<tr>
<td>• On March 19, communicated that they will create a new “row” of verified videos on its homepage for displaying trustworthy videos about coronavirus. It will pull from a list of authoritative news outlets and local health authorities that upload to YouTube and are more reliable than just general videos on the subject uploaded by random users. Videos are generated algorithmically, with hundreds of different signals being used to help pick videos. This technique of boxing out videos, known as a shelf, has been used by the platform in the past to help promote legitimate information as world news events unfold.⁷⁸</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• On March 16, confirmed that they “will start relying more on technology to help do some of the work normally done by reviewers, which may result in some accidental removal of content that does not violate our policies”.⁷⁹</td>
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<tr>
<td>• On March 11, communicated a reversal of its Sensitive Events Policy: YouTube was previously de-monetizing videos that included “more than a passing mention” of COVID-19, but now will allow monetization for videos that discuss the coronavirus “on a limited number of channels”⁸⁰</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Added the CDC’s YouTube channel as a featured channel on its homepage; giving priority to authoritative sources in search.⁸¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Using the homepage to direct users to the WHO or other locally relevant authoritative organizations.⁸²</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Pulled ads from videos that discuss COVID-19⁸³, while donating ad inventory to governments and NGOs in impacted regions to use for education and information.⁸⁴</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• According to Bloomberg, recent YouTube searches for specific coronavirus conspiracies showed videos debunking those untruths.⁸⁵</td>
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<tr>
<th>Amazon</th>
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<td>• On April 26, confirmed to Reuters that it is piloting the use of video</td>
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⁷⁹ https://support.google.com/youtube/thread/33987650
⁸⁴ Ibid
conference calls to verify the identity of merchants who wish to sell goods on its websites, in a new plan to counter fraud.\(^8^6\)

- Temporarily prioritizing household staples, medical supplies, and other high-demand products coming into fulfillment centers; discretionary products must be fulfilled by vendors.\(^8^7\)
- Restricted who can sell certain in-demand items (e.g., face masks, hand sanitizer) and said it pulled more than 500,000 high-priced listings and banned more than 2,000 sellers due to price-gouging.\(^8^8\)
- In a response to a letter from Sen. Ed Markey (D-MA), also said they are 1) proactively monitoring the marketplace for unfair prices and “aggressively” enforcing its fair pricing policy; 2) working with state attorneys general to prosecute bad actors; 3) using their price monitoring methods to continuously compare prices submitted by sellers with current and historic prices within and outside of Amazon; 4) using machine learning models, in part, to detect price gouging, but has recently stepped up human monitoring as price gouging has spread in light of the coronavirus. This includes “an additional dedicated team” that’s working “24 hours, seven days a week” to spot price gouging on items like protective masks and hand sanitizers. Amazon has also responded to inquiries from several attorneys general.
- Instituted additional manual audits of products in stores due to the increased risk of price gouging from unscrupulous sellers seeking to evade automated systems and take advantage of customers.\(^8^9\)
- Relies on a mix of automated tools and human moderation to enforce its policies, including price gouging, false listings, and review hijacking.\(^9^0\)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority Level 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instagram</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- On April 22, announced they will provide the location high-reach Instagram accounts on every post they share, so people have more information to help them gauge the reliability and authenticity of the content they see in</td>
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their feeds. This step, primarily focused on protecting election integrity, will be piloted in the US, starting specifically with Instagram accounts that are based outside the US but reach large audiences based primarily in the US.

- On March 25, Facebook communicated that in an effort to encourage social distancing, IG had launched the “Stay Home” sticker, modeled on one designed to encourage voting. It shows how others are social distancing by compiling accounts that you follow, that are using the sticker, in your shared story91.

- Also noted that IG has added a search module to connect people with accurate information; began downranking fact-checked misinformation in Feed and Stories; and is removing COVID-19 accounts and content from both search results and the Explore tab of recommendations, unless posted by a credible health organization. Karina Newton, Instagram’s head of policy, notes that this requires overhauling the recommendation algorithm to look at the entire spectrum of possible queries related to coronavirus, including misspellings, “type-ahead” search results, and 180 languages, and weeding out accounts with names and bio information that would ordinarily correspond to those queries92.

- On March 17, unveiled a paid partnership with WHO and @DudeWithSign, an influencer account with 6.4M followers, to “create informative memes” that raise awareness of and direct followers to accurate information and updates on COVID-19.

- In countries impacted by the virus, added a call-out at the top of homescreen feed showing links to information from the World Health Organization and local health ministries.

- Preventing users from searching for COVID-19-related augmented reality effects unless they were made in partnership with legitimate health organizations.

- Sending potentially false information to fact checkers.

- Removing known harmful misinformation related to COVID-19, and when someone taps on a hashtag related to COVID-19, showing resources from WHO, CDC, and local health authorities93

- Blocking and restricting hashtags used to spread misinformation; banning ads exploiting the situation94

- “Thinking through a longer term solution” to help connect people searching COVID-19 related terms with credible information; in the meantime, showing the accounts of leading health organizations in these searches to better connect people to credible resources.95

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91 Email from Shaarik Zafar, noted above.
93 https://twitter.com/InstagramComms/status/1235984308994703360
94 https://twitter.com/InstagramComms/status/1235984311163158529
95 https://twitter.com/InstagramComms/status/1235984311163158529
### Pinterest

- On March 24, Pinterest announced it is “moving up [the] launch of the Today tab, a source of daily inspiration with curated topics and trending Pins that makes it easy to explore popular and timely ideas”. The previous weekend, Pinterest experienced an all-time high around the world with more saves and searches on the platform than any other weekend in its history. The new tab, which will live above the home feed, will include expert information from the World Health Organization and Centers for Disease Control on topics like hand washing during the coronavirus epidemic.

- On March 24, Pinterest also noted that searches for “calming quotes” doubled and “stress relief” and “stress quotes” have tripled, so they have expanded “compassionate search” from the apps to the web. When users search for terms like “stress relief” they will see emotional wellbeing activities from emotional health experts.\(^96\) Pinterest claims these interactions are kept private and aren’t used to inform recommendations or ads.\(^97\)

- On March 24, VentureBeat reported that Pinterest uses AI to fight misinformation about COVID-19 on its platform, leveraging a machine learning system to identify pins it believes violate its health misinformation policy. Its model finds keywords or text associated with misinformation and blocks pins with that language, while at the same time identifying visual representations associated with medical misinformation.

- Pinterest’s normal strict approach to combating health misinformation likely results in less content about the coronavirus than on any other major social platform. Anyone searching for terms related to the virus is sent to a sparse page with content from the World Health Organization. Users will see a message noting, “Pins about this topic often violate our Community Guidelines, which prohibit harmful medical misinformation. Because of this, we’ve limited search results to Pins from internationally-recognized health organizations.”\(^98\)

- Normal misinformation policy prohibits promotion of false cures, or the saving of content that includes advice where there may be immediate and detrimental effects on a Pinner’s health or on public safety. Pinterest relies on information from nationally and internationally recognized institutions, including the CDC and WHO, to help determine if content violates these guidelines.\(^99\)

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98 https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/pinterest-is-blocking-coronavirus-searches-and-people-are
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Public Knowledge</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Snapchat</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Added a banner to coronavirus search results in January to warn about misinformation and rolled out a custom results page in February.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- On Thursday, March 25, rolled out a Covid-19 Myth Busting game.100</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Launched the Stay At Home Challenge through its acquisition Zenly that allows users to compete against each other using geo-location data. Whoever can stay home for the most amount of time wins.101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Released a snapchat filter that allows users to share snaps with vetted info on how to prevent the spread of COVID-19.102</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Content platform, Discover, is curated and confined to the most trusted news organizations; do not offer an open news feed where unvetted publishers or individuals have an opportunity to broadcast misinformation. Now highlighting health information shared by its Discover partners, including NBC’s Stay Tuned, Sky News, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, CNN and NowThis.103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Normal guidelines prohibit sharing content that deceives or deliberately spreads false information.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Now offering accurate Coronavirus-related coverage through vetted partners across seven countries and in six different languages.104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Working closely with WHO and CDC to ensure Snapchatters have all the latest information from the experts themselves; working with WHO to develop custom content to answer questions from the Snapchat community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Last week worked with WHO to launch a Filter promoting their safety tips and guidelines, available to all Snapchatters in the US, UK, Canada, Australia and more.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TikTok</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Hosting livestreams with the WHO to disseminate accurate information about COVID-19105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Donating prominent in-feed ad space to trusted organizations and local health authorities106</td>
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<tr>
<td>- On March 18, introduced the group of technology and safety experts that</td>
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101 [https://techcrunch.com/2020/03/24/zenly-stay-home/](https://techcrunch.com/2020/03/24/zenly-stay-home/)
will make up its Content Advisory Council (this initiative predates CV-19 but is included here for completeness).\textsuperscript{107}

- Offers a library of information from WHO on the in-app landing page
- Partnered with WHO on an informational page with trustworthy information (accessed from the Discover tab, appears when users search for coronavirus-related topics, and linked from videos that may relate to coronavirus).
- Users who use hashtags related to coronavirus get an in-app notice that provides easy links to WHO’s website and reminds users to report content that violates Community Guidelines.
- Normal guidelines clearly prohibit misinformation intended to deceive or mislead the public; will remove misinformation that could cause harm to an individual’s health or wider public safety.
- Donating prominent in-feed ad space to trusted organizations and local health authorities; list organizations who now have TikTok accounts, including WHO, Red Cross, and UNICEF.
- Ads policy does not allow ads that reference coronavirus, including when promoting products or services, to create a sense of fear, or to cause widespread offense.\textsuperscript{108}

Reddit

- On April 28, updated the report flow for moderators to include “misinformation.” This allows subreddit moderators to track misinformation within their subreddit community and report users that post misinformation to Reddit’s investigations team.\textsuperscript{109}
- Launched an AMA Series on Coronavirus. Reddit communities will host AMA sessions with medical professionals, health organizations, and authoritative voices on coronavirus and its impact.\textsuperscript{110}
- Along with Twitter, removed links to a post from The Federalist suggesting “controlled voluntary infection” to the virus.\textsuperscript{111}
- Relative to other platforms, it has faced considerable criticism for its lax approach to fighting coronavirus misinformation, appearing to leave most moderation activities in the hands of unpaid moderators. The platform does not have any explicit policy against health misinformation.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{107} https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/introducing-the-tiktok-content-advisory-council
\textsuperscript{108} https://www.tiktok.com/safety/resources/covid-19
\textsuperscript{109} https://www.reddit.com/r/ModSupport/comments/g21ub7/misinformation_and_covid19_what_reddit_is_doing/
\textsuperscript{110} https://redditblog.com/2020/03/02/expert-conversation-on-coronavirus/
\textsuperscript{111} https://www.huffpost.com/entry/facebook-coronavirus-infection-parties-misinformation-policy_n_5e7faf6cc5b6cb9dc1a16f36
\textsuperscript{112} https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/how-social-media-platforms-are-responding-to-the-coronavirus-infodemic/
- Featured a banner on its front page for a week directing users to an r/AskScience Megathread where they could find appropriate resources and authoritative content.
- Allows posts on the science behind the virus to be tagged as peer-reviewed or not on the message board related to the virus.
- Featured a homepage banner promoting the r/Coronavirus community as a source of timely discussion and the Centers for Disease Control as a source for authoritative resources.
- Users see a pinned message on search results for terms related to Coronavirus that directs them to CDC.gov for the latest information.
- May apply a quarantine to communities that contain hoax or misinformation content; quarantine removes the community from search results, warns the user that it may contain misinformation, and requires an explicit opt-in.

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<th>WhatsApp</th>
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| - On April 7, imposed a new limit on message forwarding: if a user receives a frequently forwarded message – one which has been forwarded more than five times – they will only be able to send it on to a single chat at a time. The change does not completely prevent widespread forwarding, since a user can repeatedly hit the forward button. (In 2019, WhatsApp reduced the number times a message could be forwarded: users could only forward one message to five chats. Group sizes were limited to 256 members. In 2018, WhatsApp reduced the number of times a message could be forwarded from 250 chats to 20). Forwarded messages and chain messages are labeled with a double arrow icon.  
- On April 6, a group of Democratic senators sent a letter to Mark Zuckerberg saying Facebook hasn't done enough to stop coronavirus misinformation on WhatsApp. Sens. Mazie Hirono (Hawaii), Kamala D. Harris (Calif.), Richard J. Durbin (Illinois) and Robert Menendez (N.J.) acknowledged the encryption challenge but called on Zuckerberg to take more drastic steps, including a prompt asking a user whether they have verified a message is accurate before they forward it to another contact.  
- On March 20, launched WHO Health Alert, a chatbot developed with the

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113 [https://redditblog.com/2020/03/02/expert-conversation-on-coronavirus/](https://redditblog.com/2020/03/02/expert-conversation-on-coronavirus/)
| **World Health Organization** | World Health Organization that gives people (2B, in 4 languages) access to accurate information about COVID-19\(^{116}\).

- WhatsApp is partnering with governments to create official WhatsApp accounts users can reach out to for accurate information about the virus, including India's "MyGov Corona Helpdesk" and the WHO’s WhatsApp business account.\(^{117}\)
- WhatsApp announced that it is donating $1 million to the CoronaVirusFacts and DatosCoronaVirus alliance, created by IFCN in January this year to further COVID-19 fact checking efforts.\(^{118}\)
- Users can forward messages to special accounts that can verify information, and world leaders, including in Ireland, are asking their citizens to stop spreading misinformation on the app. |
| **Apple** | - Released a Covid-19 website and app, developed in partnership with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the White House’s coronavirus task force, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which ask questions to screen for Covid-19 symptoms and point the public to resources for information on testing and physical distancing.
- “Closely monitoring” new apps related to Covid-19 and updated its developer guidelines to note that only “recognized entities” — such as government organizations, health-focused nongovernmental organizations, medical or educational institutions, or “companies deeply credentialed in health issues” — should submit such apps. |

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