

TECH

YouTube Takes Aim at Conspiracies, Propaganda

Google unit to provide more context around some videos



YouTube's logo is seen in Berlin. The video-sharing giant has come under fire for spreading misinformation online. PHOTO: SOPHIA KEMBOWSKI/ZUMA PRESS

By Jack Nicas

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YouTube said it is planning changes to give users more context for videos promoting conspiracy theories or state-sponsored content, the latest effort by an internet giant to clean up its platform amid criticism over its role in spreading misinformation.

YouTube said starting Friday it would label all videos coming from what it identifies as state-funded broadcasters, a category that would include even the U.S.'s Public Broadcasting Service, or PBS. The step is significant in part because YouTube has been a major conduit for RT, the Russian state news organization that U.S. intelligence officials called "the Kremlin's principal international propaganda outlet."

YouTube, which is part of Alphabet Inc. [GOOG 1.31% ▲](#)'s Google unit, is also considering surfacing relevant videos from credible news sources alongside clips peddling conspiracy theories, such as those claiming the moon landing was a hoax, YouTube Chief Product Officer Neal Mohan said in an interview. YouTube has long been rife with such videos.



 KBS is a publicly funded South Korean broadcaster

A label on a video by the Korean Broadcasting System, the national public broadcaster of South Korea. YouTube will on Friday begin labeling videos from state-funded channels. PHOTO: COURTESY YOUTUBE

The company said that approach was early in development, so it is unclear when it would take effect—or how the site would select conspiracy theories. YouTube relies heavily on algorithms to analyze and recommend videos but choosing which conspiracy theories to target would likely be too nuanced for software.

Google and other Silicon Valley giants have scrambled in recent months to address a wave of criticism from Congress, academics, and others about how their platforms influence public opinion and discourse. The debate was stoked in part by evidence that Russian actors seeking to manipulate U.S. voters before and after the 2016 election reached more than 100 million people via the tech giants' sites.

After initially playing down the influence of their platforms last year, the companies have offered a string of mea culpas and proposed solutions. Facebook Inc. Chief Executive Mark Zuckerberg pledged last month to fix problems on his site, including by promoting “broadly trusted” news sources. Twitter Inc. said this week that it has notified roughly 1.4 million people who interacted with accounts now known to be backed by a Russian government-linked group.

Journalists and academics over the past year uncovered an abundance of objectionable content on YouTube, including videos that promoted racist and extremist views and placed children in compromising situations. In many cases, YouTube ran ads before the unsavory videos, prompting many top advertisers to pull spending from the site.

Mr. Mohan said that last year he directed his team to improve YouTube as a place to get news, including moves to promote “an ever-changing list of authoritative news sources” that it selects with the Google News team.

“The principle here is to provide more information to our users, and let our users make the judgment themselves, as opposed to us being in the business of providing any sort of editorial judgment on any of these things ourselves,” he said.

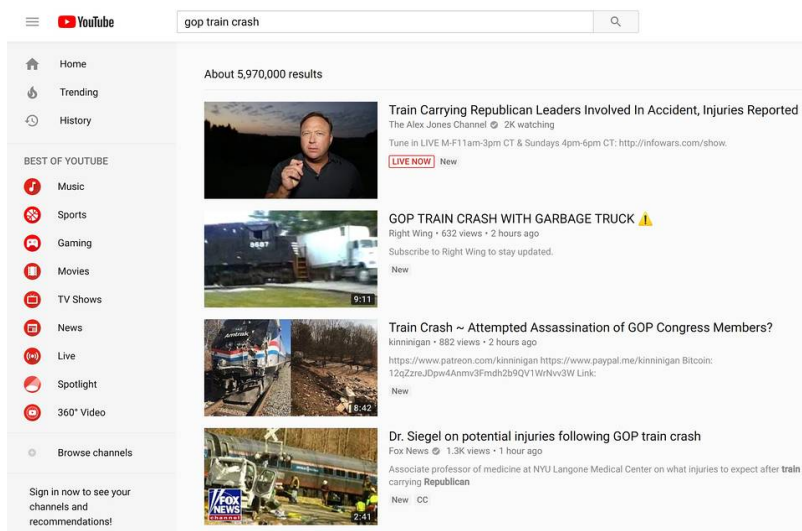
He declined to comment on RT, which as of late last year had nearly 5.5 billion views across more than 20 YouTube channels— among the site’s most-watched news networks.

The new policy to label state broadcasters would extend to any news organization that received government funding, he said. In the case of RT’s videos, they will carry a label at the bottom of the frame that says, “RT is funded in whole or in part by the Russian government.” PBS will bear a label calling it a “publicly-funded American broadcaster.”

YouTube in recent months also quietly expanded a change to its search engine intended to show more mainstream news sources in response to news-related queries.

YouTube first tweaked its search results for breaking news in October after it was criticized for surfacing conspiracy theories about a mass shooting that killed 59 people during a concert in Las Vegas.

The change appears to have enhanced the search results for some key news events that have attracted conspiracies. Three days after the Las Vegas shooting in October, for instance, the fifth result for a search on YouTube about the attacks was a video titled: “Proof Las Vegas Shooting Was a FALSE FLAG attack—Shooter on 4th Floor.” But on Thursday night, the results were all mainstream news sources.



A search for “GOP train crash” on Wednesday yielded as the first result a stream from controversial Alex Jones, of the conspiracy-theory site Infowars. PHOTO: JACK NICAS

The policy hasn’t always worked, though. On Wednesday, after a train carrying some Republican lawmakers collided with a truck, searches for “GOP train crash” on YouTube returned as the first

result a live stream from Alex Jones, the founder of conspiracy-theory site Infowars, and as the third a video titled, “Train Crash ~ Attempted Assassination of GOP Congress Members?”

YouTube said its algorithm hadn’t recognized the search quickly enough as a news-related query.

“With several other major events over the past few months we have been pleased with the results, but there is more work to do,” it added.

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