

TECH

YouTube Tweaks Search Results as Las Vegas Conspiracy Theories Rise to Top

Debunked claims appear in top 5 videos for news about Las Vegas shooting, NFL anthem protests



YouTube searches for Sunday's mass shooting in Las Vegas yielded a video claiming there were multiple shooters. PHOTO: GINA FERAZZI/GETTY IMAGES

By Jack Nicas

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YouTube this week surfaced videos peddling misinformation, hateful messages and conspiracy theories to users tracking major news events—prompting the site to change its search results to promote more authoritative sources.

For example, the fifth result when searching “Las Vegas shooting” on YouTube late Tuesday yielded a video titled “Proof Las Vegas Shooting Was a FALSE FLAG attack—Shooter on 4th Floor.” The video said there were multiple shooters in Sunday’s mass shooting, a claim dismissed by law enforcement. Posted by a channel called the End Times News Report, it amassed more than 1.1 million views in about 27 hours.

The fourth result when searching “NFL anthem protest” on Wednesday was a video that claimed Anheuser-Busch InBev BUD -0.47% ▼ NV was considering pulling its sponsorship of the National Football League over national anthem protests—and urged viewers to push the company to do so. The claim had been widely debunked days before.

In response to criticism on social media of some search results this week, a person familiar with YouTube said the company is accelerating the rollout of planned changes to its search engine. On Wednesday night, the video service began promoting more authoritative sources in search results, especially pertaining to major news events, the person said. YouTube doesn't disclose how it determines which sources are authoritative.

YouTube, a unit of Alphabet Inc. 's Google, has long been full of fringe content. But as the world's largest video site and a growing rival to television, with more than 1.5 billion monthly users, YouTube's feeding of such spurious content shows how the site can contribute to the spread of misinformation. Google also faced criticism this week after the "top news" section of its search results misidentified the Las Vegas shooter by featuring a thread from a fringe message board.

Many large brands pulled spending on YouTube earlier this year after news reports revealed their ads were running before hateful and extremist videos. As a result, the site removed many videos and pull ads from others. There didn't appear to be ads on the fringe news videos this week.

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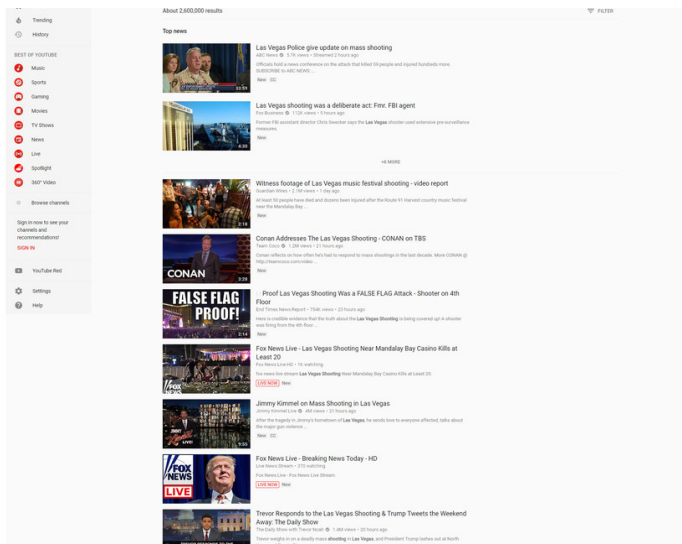
Controversial content has been on the site for years, and is highly ranked in search results. The second result for a search for "9/11" on Wednesday was a nearly 10-year-old video that presents conspiracy theories about the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks; it has been viewed 42.5 million times.

The high search ranking of the End Times News Report video claiming there was a second shooter in Las Vegas helped it gain 371,000 views over four hours late Tuesday. On Wednesday, YouTube removed the video.

Jake Morphonios, who runs the End Times News Report along with a damaged-inventory-liquidation business in Kernersville, N.C., said the video eventually reached 2.5 million views. "It was a hot topic, of course, and was going to get some views anyway, but it really did get caught in [YouTube's] algorithm and went viral from there," he said. "Clearly it got into featured videos or something." The 43-year-old said he has posted about 800 videos and typically gets about 5,000 views each.

Mr. Morphonios said YouTube gave his account its first penalty strike for the video. YouTube terminates accounts that get three strikes within three months.

He said he aims to offer viewers information on news events that mainstream news sources won't. "It's my opinion, it's my analysis, and everyone's got an opinion, and I can understand that maybe they don't want me to be considered the equivalent of The Wall Street Journal or the New York Times or something like that," he said. "But still, I'm not presenting myself as mainstream



Top results on YouTube for 'Las Vegas shooting' PHOTO: YOUTUBE

media. I’m just a guy with a computer offering an opinion. And to be punished for that is, well, it’s draconian.”

YouTube said it has previously made changes to try to promote authoritative sources for breaking-news events by featuring their videos on its home page and by giving them top spots in search results and labeling them “Top News.” The company added that its site is

designed to present diverse perspectives.

“When it comes to news, we have thousands of news publishers that present a variety of viewpoints,” the company said in an email.

YouTube employs algorithms that determine how clips are ranked in search results and which videos to serve up to users in its prominent “Up next” column adjacent to its video player. The algorithms take into account factors such as a user’s history and a video’s popularity, but YouTube doesn’t reveal exactly how it works. The company has said it designed the algorithms to get users to watch more YouTube videos—a key factor in a surge in YouTube viewership in recent years. People now watch more than 1 billion hours of YouTube videos a day.

When a user watches a dubious video, YouTube typically suggests similar videos, a practice that can confirm users’ existing biases. But The Wall Street Journal found cases this week in which YouTube suggested conspiracy-theory and highly politicized videos next to videos from mainstream news sources, suggesting the site was also pushing fringe content to users who haven’t shown an interest in it.

For instance, alongside a CBS News video of an interview with the brother of Las Vegas shooter Stephen Paddock, YouTube recommended a video titled “Stephen Paddock Las Vegas Gunman Was Set Up By The Illuminati CIA Occult?” Similarly, next to a Fox News video about mothers criticizing the NFL anthem protests, YouTube suggested a video titled “SHOCKING Discovery! Brother of Shooter Don’t Add Up INSIDE JOB.”

The Journal conducted all of its searches on YouTube in private browsers with tracking turned off to prevent previous history from influencing the search results or recommendations.

The person familiar with YouTube said the company recognizes there are problems with its “Up next” algorithm and it is examining changes to promote more authoritative results.

YouTube has been working on the changes to its search results for months but decided to implement them ahead of schedule, although they still need work, this person said. Searches for “Las Vegas shooting” late Wednesday returned nearly all mainstream news sources, but searches for “NFL anthem protest” and “9/11” still yielded misleading videos.

Write to Jack Nicas at jack.nicas@wsj.com

Corrections & Amplifications

This article has been updated to include a corrected quote from Mr. Morphonios. An earlier version incorrectly quoted him as saying “I know I’m not as authoritative as The Wall Street Journal or The New York Times.” (Oct. 5, 2017)

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