

Facebook groups exposed to hundreds of hoax posts, study shows

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Author: Sarah Marsh

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Members of local Facebook groups have been exposed to hundreds of hoax posts, including false reports of missing children or deadly snakes on the loose, a study shows. The fact-checking charity Full Fact found more than 1,200 false posts on the social media site's community groups across the world, and warned that these were probably just "the tip of the iceberg". These posts could lead to people becoming "overwhelmed with false information" and were "designed to terrify local communities", Full Fact said. The charity said it could mean genuine posts about dangers were more likely to be ignored. It is unclear why this content is being spread, although Full Fact said it could be a way of making money or promoting a product or service. Often a post is edited after it has gained likes and engagement to promote everything from cashback sites to nappy giveaways. Full Fact's investigation found misinformation was present in more than 100 areas in the UK from Dundee in Scotland to Bicester in Oxfordshire. In Dundee, it was claimed that a serial killer may be at large last year. People have also been falsely begging for help to find missing dogs or children. Hundreds of people shared a hoax Facebook post about an injured dog apparently found after a "hit and run incident" in Dunfermline. Full Fact found a lot of the shared content focused on missing children and pensioners. Other reports claimed serial killers and men with knives were stalking the streets. The investigation exposed multiple posts claiming that a man armed with a knife was attacking people in Aberdeenshire, Bicester, Chesterfield, Glasgow and Northern Ireland. The charity found dozens more examples of the same post from further afield, including in the US and Australia. The claim was confirmed to be false by multiple police departments. In April, Full Fact raised the alarm about these hoaxes with the Facebook owner, Meta, stressing "the risks posed by these posts are pernicious and frequent enough to merit stronger action from Meta in terms of proactively identifying and tackling this growing trend". It did not receive a response. In 2021, Facebook introduced changes to the way its public groups were run. The new system made it possible for members to join without approval by administrators. Full Fact warned this change potentially made some local groups more accessible to those from outside the area. Administrators are still able to restrict posts and comments. Steve Nowotny, the editor of Full Fact, said the "sheer scale" of the hoax posts it found "is hard to fathom" and said they were likely to be "the tip of the iceberg". He added: "The hoaxers have clearly identified the massive reach these posts can have and local Facebook groups across the world are now becoming overwhelmed with false information." These posts "sow needless fear and confusion" and "terrify" local communities, Nowotny said, adding: "Genuine warnings about dangers and genuine posts from people desperately appealing for help, such as those looking for missing loved ones or missing pets, are now at a much higher risk of being ignored." Lynne Parker, who runs a dedicated Facebook group exposing hoax missing dog posts, said: "I'm just tearing my hair out with these fake posts. They are beginning to damage genuine owners of missing

dogs or finders of lost ones who are now falsely being accused of posting fake posts.” Facebook users clicking on links in edited hoax posts are often taken to the real website of a legitimate company or organisation but arrive via an unconnected third party website and an affiliate link, which earns a small fee. Some of the edited posts make exaggerated claims about a legitimate company. For example, edited posts promoting the legitimate site Cashback UK claimed consumers could earn hundreds of pounds for completing a single task or £150 as a “sign-up bonus”. Cashback UK told Full Fact it was not possible to earn this much on its platform by completing a single task. A Meta spokesperson said: “We’ve built the largest global fact-checking network of any platform, partnering with more than 90 independent fact-checking organisations including Full Fact, to tackle misinformation online. “Fraudulent activity is not allowed on our platforms and we removed the posts Full Fact brought to our attention for violating our Community Standards. “While no enforcement is perfect, we continue to invest in new technologies to stop scams and the people behind them.”