

Misleading clickbait is prevalent on Facebook and Instagram in Canada after Meta's news ban. Could it happen in Australia?

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Misleading viral clickbait dominates Facebook and Instagram in Canada after Meta pulled news from its platforms nine months ago, according to an expert. Now Australia could face a similar scenario online with the company preparing to battle the Australian government over payments to news organisations. Last week Meta announced it would no longer pay Australian news publishers, prompting the Australian government to explore the use of legislative powers to force the platform to negotiate with news media for payment. The dispute has raised the possibility Meta will block Australian news outlets from posting links to their content on Facebook and Instagram, as it did for six days in 2021, and has done in Canada since mid-last year. Experts say the Canadian ban has done little to hurt the social media giant, but has inflicted damage on the news outlets Canada wanted to help most. Canada's federal government passed bill C-18, the Online News Act, in June 2023, with the aim of boosting revenues at Canadian journalism outlets by requiring Meta and Google's parent company, Alphabet, to compensate publishers for hosting and linking to their content. Both tech companies initially balked at the prospect, but Alphabet eventually agreed to a deal with the government in November. Under the terms of the agreement, Google's parent company would contribute C\$73.6m (A\$83m) a year to be distributed among Canadian news publishers. The deal came in part, experts have said, because C-18 targeted link sharing and indexing – a key aspect of Alphabet's business model. But Meta has resisted the constraints of the legislation, arguing it is "fundamentally flawed". In response, it blocked all news-sharing on its platforms, including Instagram and Facebook. Ahead of the ban Meta also announced it would end its partnership with the Canadian Press wire service, an agreement that helped fund 30 reporting fellowships for early career journalists from 2020. The ban came into effect in August amid the country's worst wildfire season on record, and lawmakers feared it would prevent Canadians accessing up-to-date news in their communities and hamper evacuations. Broadcasters blasted the move as "anticompetitive conduct" and claimed it violated a provision of a federal law. Meta said in a statement at the time: "The Online News Act is based on the incorrect premise that Meta benefits unfairly from news content shared on our platforms, when the reverse is true. News outlets voluntarily share content on Facebook and Instagram to expand their audiences and help their bottom line." Non-news content created by viral content makers has filled the space left by news stories. "A real-world, newsless Facebook turns out to be more toxic than I had anticipated," Quebec University journalism professor, Jean-Hughes Roy, said. In 2022, Roy conducted a simulation of what users would see on

Facebook if news was banned, but said he found the reality of the ban worse than his simulation predicted. “Viral content producers feed on news content, make it more sensational by adding misleading or false details and publish it on their Facebook pages or Instagram accounts. Such content isn’t blocked by Meta, while actual news is.” But the move does not appear to have dented how Canadians use Facebook. Figures from two digital analytics companies, shared with Reuters, show the number of daily active users on Facebook, and time spent on the social network, are largely unchanged since the news block began. Part of Meta’s argument against compensating Canadian journalism outlets was that news article links made up less than 3% of Facebook’s feed in the country – a claim it also made in relation to its Australian decision. Chris Waddell of Carleton University’s school of journalism said Meta was increasingly wary of its place in the news industry. “I don’t think they’ve lost any advertisers,” he said. “I don’t know if their decision has really made a huge amount of difference [to the company].” “I think Meta would like to get out of the news in other places. I can’t imagine the company really wants to get caught in the controversy of the US election coming up, with all the fake, AI-generated information that’s going to be on Facebook. It’s just a minefield for them. If they’re right, they’re only getting 3% to 4% of their revenues from news, I can see why they would just bail out of it.” News Corporation’s CEO, Robert Thomson, told reporters on Monday that Meta’s 3% claim is “obviously a fiction – a preposterous figure”. “I mean how much discussion is there around news? You have the core news and then I can tell you 100% of the contemporary factual information on Facebook is news. And so those are the numbers that... Facebook should be focused on, as well as being focused on its responsibility to all Australians.” Large publications, have mostly found new ways of redirecting users to their sites. But Facebook’s refusal to share links on its platforms has had an outsized impact on smaller publishers. Eden Fineday, the publisher of IndigiNews, an Indigenous-led online journalism outlet, said the site had lost 43% of its traffic since the ban. “Facebook is a very Indigenous platform,” Fineday told the Toronto Star. “It is where a lot of native communities come to connect with each other. So it hurts us. Indigenous folks are the least thought-about demographic, especially by American companies. It’s sad to be just forgotten, and to have these companies not consider who’s being hurt by these changes.” The New Brunswick Media Co-op said it lost 5,000 Facebook followers ahead of the ban from Meta. In an attempt to offset the loss of traffic, 20 independent outlets, including the New Brunswick Media Co-op have banded together to form Unrigged. The aim is to both strengthen their negotiating position and to more effectively share news with readers. Waddell said the smaller outlets had the most work to go regaining readers in order to survive. “The people who have been hurt most, ironically, are the small startup publications or those that have been around for a while that were using Facebook as a promotional tool to try and bring a wider audience,” he said. Roy said he feared what the disappearance of news from Meta’s platforms would mean for Canadian democracy. “Forty-five percent of Canadians cite social media as a source of news, according to the latest Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism Digital News Report – the proportion is the same in Australia – I worry young citizens grow up in a digital world where news simply doesn’t exist anymore.”