Facebook Fact Checks as Israel Bans Anonymous Election Ads

By Matthew Kalman   Posted March 5, 2019, 7:34 PM

- Social media giant moves to improve accuracy of news feed ahead of election

- Israel elections committee overrides opposition from ruling Likud party

Facebook Inc. said it has rolled out a third-party fact-checking partnership in Israel to reduce misinformation on the platform ahead of that country's April 9 general election.

The company announced its partnership with the Globes, a daily financial newspaper in Israel, March 5. Facebook has been under fire in the U.S. and throughout Europe for not doing enough to stop political propaganda and disinformation ahead of national elections.

"If there is anything that can be learned from recent elections in other countries, it is that digital manipulations can impact their outcomes," Tehilla Shwartz Altshuler, head of the democracy in the information age program at the Israel Democracy Institute in Jerusalem, said.

Facebook recognizes "the implications of false news on Facebook, and we are committed to doing a better job to fight it, especially ahead of upcoming elections," Jordana Cutler, Facebook's head of public policy for Israel, said in a press release. "More than 6 million people use Facebook every month across Israel, so this is a responsibility that we take very seriously, and we're looking forward to continue to build off of this in our fight against misinformation on our platform."

Facebook is also planning to release new advertising transparency tools "to help prevent foreign interference in the upcoming Israeli election and make electoral advertising on Facebook more transparent," the company said.

Facebook's fact-checking effort in Israel is its latest to try and fight political misinformation around the world.

The company announced in January that it had made "massive investments to help protect the integrity of elections" and now employed 30,000 people worldwide to work on security and safety. Facebook released details Feb. 12 about its preparations for elections in Africa, and explained March 4 how it was working to safeguard the April election in Indonesia.

"We also customize our work to individual countries based on research and threat assessments that begin many months before ballots are cast," the company said in January.

Fighting 'Manipulation'

Facebook's announcement comes about a week after Israel took legislative steps to combat foreign interference in its election and the undue impact of social media manipulation.

Israel's Central Elections Committee Feb. 27 began requiring the identities of those who publish online election advertising on websites, social networks, and search engines such as Alphabet Inc.'s Google. The committee's 39-page decision overcame strong objections from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud Party.

"This is a dramatic decision that will put an end to the Wild West practices that are all too commonplace in social media election campaigns," Altshuler said.

The committee's order will help identify "fake accounts used for propaganda, bots, WhatsApp messages and surveys disseminated through Facebook Messenger," she said. "Mandating local actors to identify digital propaganda will limit this possibility and will make it easier to detect foreign and undesirable influence on the elections."

A Facebook representative said the company was "studying" the committee's ruling. Google declined to comment, but the company in January reminded Israeli political parties and advertising agencies about its guidelines banning targeted political advertising.

The election committee's decision is "important in terms of promoting transparency and preventing voter deception," Assaf Harel, head of the cyber-security and data protection practice at Gornitzky and Co. law firm in Tel Aviv, told Bloomberg Law. Enforcement will be a challenge, given the common bots and fake social media profiles, he said.

"The expectation is that the operators of social media platforms such as Facebook will play a key role in enforcing this decision," Harel said in an email.

Gilad de Vries, senior vice president of strategy at Outbrain, the Israel-based native advertising company whose feeds deliver 250 billion recommendations per month to more than a billion people, welcomed the committee's decision.

"I don't know if it's bullet-proof, but I think it's definitely a step in the right direction," de Vries said by phone. "The important thing is it places the responsibility clearly with the advertisers themselves."

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