EU steps up efforts to counter disinformation during COVID-19 crisis

Written by Martin Banks on 2 April 2020 in News

The European Commission has launched a special section on its website where people can fact-check information, including so-called “cures” for the virus.

Spearheading the anti-fake news campaign is Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who declared, “This needs to stop.”

Speaking via a video message, von der Leyen said, “Can garlic or vitamin C cure Coronavirus? No. Does the virus only infect old people? No. But we have all seen these or other false claims online or on social media.”
“There is an increasing number of ‘fake news’ about the Coronavirus outbreak that are circulating, in particular online. It’s a massive wave, breeding on the ground of uncertainty, anxiety and the rapidly-changing news cycle.”

“The platforms, she said, are facilitating access to “authoritative sources” such as public health authorities, and they “demote and even take down harmful content and exploitative or misleading ads.”

But she admitted, “more needs to be done.”

The general advice, she said, is to “trust your health authorities, trust the World Health Organization and trust reputable media with a track record of accuracy.”

Elsewhere, the European External Action Service (EEAS) has issued advice and guidance about what it calls the “proliferation of significant quantities of news, myths, and disinformation” about Coronavirus.

The EEAS guidelines seek to debunk claims, “often combined with anti-vaccination narratives” that natural remedies exist to cure the virus.

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Citing examples of fake news, the EEAS says it has been claimed that “China is coming to rescue the EU as Brussels abandons Member States” and “Schengen no longer exists – Europeans are in quarantine, but migrants can move freely.”

Thierry Breton, EU Commissioner for Internal Market and Services, told MEPs on Thursday that the EU was "keeping a close watching brief" on disinformation about the virus such as so-called "life-saving" products.

Speaking via a video link, he told a specially-convened meeting of the internal market committee that "it is important we do all we can to counter anything that could be harmful to citizens."

The issue of disinformation about the virus will be discussed in a separate video conference later on
Thursday of EU foreign affairs ministers.

Meanwhile, Europol, the EU police agency, says in a new report that the amount of cybercrime in the EU has increased, adding, “The number of fake medicines, disinfection sprays or miracle cures sold online is staggering.”

Criminals, it warns, have “taken advantage” of people forced to telework.

“They follow us online and exploit our concerns about the Coronavirus. Our fear becomes their business opportunity,” Europol added.

About the author

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