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Country: Europe

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Earlier this week, [news broke](#) that twenty “fake news” Facebook pages had been removed for spreading Italian far right propaganda, ahead of the European Union parliamentary elections next week.

“There is more proof that lies designed to sow hate are being deliberately spread on social media ahead of the EU elections,” said Christoph Schott, the campaign director of Avaaz, the US-based non-profit that flagged several of the websites.

One of the Italian pages showed a video of migrants bashing a police car—even though the video is actually a scene from a movie, that has been debunked a number of times. Another one quoted Italian journalist Roberto Saviano as claiming that he would rather save migrants than Italian earthquake victims—even though there is no proof that he ever said anything of the sort.

It isn't the first time that disinformation tactics have been used to advance the far right's agenda in the past few months. In France, many of the Yellow Vests groups on Facebook posted photos from more violent protests, blaming President Macron for looking away while the country burned. [There is even a widely-believed conspiracy theory that the recent fire at Notre Dame was started by Islamists](#) trying to attack Christianity and western civilization.

“While it isn't so much in the mainstream media, you have some websites—like Le Figaro, which is very mainstream, with a section where people can contribute,” said LICRA project coordinator Camille L'Hopitault. With non-journalists contributing their thoughts, there is little control over what is published or interpreted as verified facts.

“It is very popular, and you can see these kinds of articles.”

Ahead of next week's elections, there has been increased anxiety about fake news. A Politico investigation revealed that just two percent of online user names were generating 10 percent of the content related to the election, a trend reminiscent of Russia's suspected influence in the US election and EU referendum. As if on cue, a subsequent investigation revealed that at least 50 percent of potential voters have already been exposed to Kremlin-designed propaganda designed to advance Russian interests in the elections.

Some countries have experimented with initiatives to tackle the problem. In the United Kingdom, the BBC pulled an episode of “Have I Got News For You,” due to violating impartiality rules ahead of the election. Facebook set up a disinformation “war room” in their Dublin offices, with 28 staff members specialized in each European country working full-time to stop disinformation in its tracks. However, experts think that it started too late.

“Facebook has done a good job in taking these pages down, but it says a lot that the multi-billion dollar company is relying on a crowd-funded Avaaz investigation to defend Europe's democracy,” he said. “Facebook needs to do more, and they need to do it fast.”

Meanwhile, L'Hopitault suspects that trust in the media—and the potential influence of

disinformation—runs deeper than just social media sites.

“Many people see the media as black and white—either you are for the European election or you are against it. This makes them completely uninterested in participating,” she said, saying that recent polls show that trust in the French media is at an all time low.

Without much debate within the media itself, far right parties—and anti-European Union narrative—have been able to gain traction. Among the far right parties, there is an overriding belief that the European Union is to blame for any country’s problems, and that migration is the biggest threat of all.

“It isn’t necessarily disinformation so much as it is re-arranging facts that have been conveniently spun,” said Alina Bricman, President of the European Union for Jewish Students.

In some cases, this is being spun into absurdity and hate speech. During a recent visit to Hungary, far right Italian Foreign Minister Matteo Salvini warned that a left leaning parliament would turn Europe into an “[Islamic Caliphate](#)” while Hungarian leader Viktor Orban echoed the need for a Europe that prioritized Christian values. Perhaps most frighteningly, many far right parties are finding solidarity across their anti-migrant platforms.

“In many ways, the most united European political movement is the far right,” L’Hopitault continued, elaborating on the likes of Salvini’s appearances with Orban.

What can be done to stop the spread of disinformation and hate speech? Fact-checking website [EU vs DisInfo](#) recommends that anyone questioning information that they see check it against a second source, preferably from a reliable, mainstream newspaper. This goes for images as well—while “deep fakes” refer to heavily doctored photographs, many fake news websites will also use an image out of context, to try to give validity to their story. A reverse Google image search is a good way to see if an image is being used in the right context or not.

If you find that a website or social media page is relaying inaccurate information, here is a [guide](#) for

how to report it.

As for hate speech, our [Get the Trolls Out](#) project has a number of suggestions for how to counteract different kinds of trolls. While many advocate for social media companies to stop the spread of hate by removing hateful content altogether, others propose providing constructive commentary as a potential way to change minds—or at least, offer an alternative point of view.

To read more about different ways of cracking down on Fake News, click [here](#) . To see some of our projects aimed at amplifying migrants' voices and countering hate speech, check out our [projects page](#)

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