
FAR-RIGHT FACEBOOK NETWORKS REMOVED BEFORE SPAIN ELECTION

- 25.04.2019

EU Observer (26 April 2019)

Three far-right Facebook networks in Spain were removed earlier this week following a months-long investigation by Avaaz, a global activist NGO.

Unidad Nacional Espanola (Spanish National Unity), Todos contra Podemos (Everyone against Podemos) and Lucha por Espana (Fight for Spain), had created multiple and duplicate accounts whose pages peddled messages against Muslims, the LGBTI community, immigrants, and women.

Christoph Schott, Avaaz campaign director, told this website on Wednesday (24 April), that the exploitation of Facebook by individuals behind such networks is posing a threat to democracy.

"The system is being gamed in a way where hate can go viral, like using duplicate accounts, fake accounts, and then pretend that those ideas are super supported," he said.

The three networks had over 1.4m followers, more than any of the Spanish party leaders ahead of the general election this weekend. They also counted some 7.4m interactions in the past three months alone, posing questions on how easy it is for people to skew public opinion.

The take downs come at a sensitive time in Spain given the general elections on Sunday (28 April).

Unidad Nacional Espanola alone had attracted some one million followers and was created and coordinated by Javier Capdevila Grau, a far-right activist based near Barcelona.

Grau told Spanish newspaper El Pais that he was being censured for his views because of his possible influence on the elections.

Avaaz also says an Antonio Leal Felix Aguilar was behind Todos contra Podemos.

The two networks were managed by multiple accounts, in breach of Facebook's own rules.

Some had been up and running for years and include page names like Ejercito espanol (Spanish army) and Barcelona se queda en Espana (Barcelona stays in Spain).

Aside from hate, Avaaz says the groups had also spread false and misleading information, including doctored images of Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias doing the Nazi salute.

Avaaz handed over their findings to Facebook in a 60-page report on 12 April.

Facebook then removed the networks on the 23 April, the same day the European Commission released its monthly report on how social media is tackling online disinformation.

Facebook not doing enough

But Schott says Facebook shouldn't be relying on Avaaz or others to bring forward such material.

"They should have found all this stuff and taken action and not having someone like us finding it," he said.

He said Avaaz are currently making other Facebook probes in France, Italy, and Poland. They may also launch an investigation in Hungary, he said.

The European Commission has similar concerns on the role of social media when it comes to the spread of fake news.

On Tuesday, it said Google, Facebook and Twitter are not fully meeting their voluntary commitments to tackle disinformation.

The three giants had last October vowed to prevent the spread of fake news via a code of conduct amid threats by the commission to impose binding regulations.

But critics like the Brussels-based NGO, European Digital Rights (EDRi), say the social media giants are doomed to fail in their efforts given their profit-driven motives, opacity and lack of oversight.

"Facebook, the company that is involved in a ridiculously long list of scandals, should not be praised and put in the driving seat to regulate our free speech," said EDRi, in a tweet.

Kaynak/Source: