

Written Representation 138

Name: Google

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Submission to the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods - Causes, Consequences and Countermeasures

Google's mission is to organise the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful. Core to that mission is to help people find what they are looking for and access the wealth of information now available on the Internet. We appreciate the opportunity to provide our written views to the Select Committee on the subject matter.

Dealing with propaganda and misinformation is an ongoing challenge. Rumours, inaccurate reporting and propaganda are not new phenomena—from [pamphlets](#)¹ to [hoaxes](#)² to [false accusations](#). Even the term 'fake news' is nothing new. In 1939, a Member of the UK Parliament asked the then Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, about the publication of "demonstrably fake news"³. More recently, Members of the Singapore Parliament similarly commented⁴ that the concept of fake news is not new.

The web has created new channels to distribute misleading information, but it has also made it easier for citizens to find and access reliable information, to seek out reputable sources and get more facts. The rise of fact-checkers and a greater plurality of news sources have given citizens much greater access to information in order to consider the veracity of news stories.

In adherence to our mission, Google sees its role to help people find useful and relevant information by supporting the development and detection of quality content online, restricting the flow of money to deliberately misleading content, and ensuring our reporting and feedback tools are as effective as they can be.

Our submission highlights the efforts Google is making to address misinformation, which we hope will be helpful and relevant to the Committee as it deliberates on how Singapore can prevent and combat online falsehoods.

¹ See, for example, the Lindsay pamphlet scandal in Australia in 2007.

² Mark Twain's 1863 'Empire City Hoax' being just one example.

³ Government Communications Service, *Celebrating 100 years of government communications*, March 2017, <https://medium.com/@History100/celebrating-100-years-of-government-communications-f860181cb5cc#.qe2dcndxu>

⁴ <http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/fake-news-and-its-real-consequences>



(1) Google's efforts to support and promote quality content

Google aims to make information widely available and easily accessible. But the quality and trustworthiness of that information is just as vital; we are simply less useful if we can't show accurate, authoritative information in response to users' questions or interests.

Assisting users, such as those in Singapore, to receive quality information and news from trusted sources and publications is key to any effort undertaken to tackle misinformation. In this regard, we see ourselves playing a constructive role by helping build capacity for the production and the detection of authoritative journalistic content. **This requires strong collaboration with the news industry as well as the news verification community.** We invest in many avenues to this end, from working with fact-check organisations to teaming up with newsrooms around the world to surface new indicators to help understand the expertise and reputation of a news site of trust.

(1)(a) Supporting newsrooms and journalism

Google has been supporting newsrooms and journalism via our [Google News Lab](#)⁵, a team dedicated to collaborating with and training journalists all around the world. Google, via our News Lab, is a founding member of the First Draft Coalition, an organisation dedicated to addressing challenges relating to trust and truth in the digital age for newsrooms. Ever since its creation in 2015, the First Draft Coalition has deemed these challenges to be serious issues for newsrooms and tech companies, and has been determined to help find ways to address them, ensuring that high-quality journalism remains at the fore.

Support for the news ecosystem is crucial as this can in turn help to realise ground-up efforts around verification and fact-checking, in a way that would be locally relevant. For instance, in early February 2017, the First Draft Coalition partnered with the Google News Lab to announce CrossCheck, a collaborative verification and fact-checking project between 37 newsrooms and technology companies ahead of the French election. It subsequently supported fact-checking efforts in Germany through the WahlCheck initiative.

At the same time, Google News Lab continues to **help journalists all around the world update their digital skills and experiment with novel ways to tell stories.** This is important as innovation will become increasingly more important for newsrooms. Just as the bad actors have adapted, newsrooms will have to transform in tandem with changing news consumption behaviours. Through our collaboration with newsrooms, we hope to enable them to reach more readers, in more compelling ways and to experiment with new business models.

⁵ <https://newslab.withgoogle.com/>



(1)(b) Our Efforts in Singapore

Google is committed to helping quality journalism thrive. To date, we have helped train more than 500,000 journalists across the world via our [online training centre](#)⁶, [advanced online learning partnerships](#)⁷, and in-person trainings. These efforts are both global and **local in scope and attention**:

- In July 2017, we held our very first News Lab Asia Pacific Summit in Singapore, where we welcomed 180 guests from 150 news organizations across 15 countries. Product specialists and experts from newsrooms across the region came together to share best practices, learn about emerging technologies, and engage in open dialogue on challenges critical to the news industry. In particular, the Summit tackled areas such as trust and verification, data journalism, immersive storytelling, and inclusive storytelling -- areas relevant to the issue of misinformation. Recognising the need to address the challenge of misinformation, we held an additional hands-on fact-checking and online verification workshop to help build capacity around fact-checking. Nine reporters from local news platforms attended the summit, including The Straits Times ("ST"), Channel NewsAsia ("CNA"), Mothership, TODAY, The Business Times, The Drum and Campaign Asia.
- During the UNESCO World Press Freedom Day 2017, First Draft Coalition conducted its first regional outreach in Jakarta to kickstart its efforts to build a network of fact checking organisations and engage the broader community in the Asia Pacific. We sent four members of the Singaporean press (from CNA, ST and TODAY) to attend the event where they learnt how local newsrooms can verify social content and build it into their workflow.
- We also held multiple trainings involving Singapore newsrooms. For instance, we delivered newsroom training on verification at the Singapore Press Holdings' ("SPH") office and provided broader trainings (that include verification tools) for the Singapore Press Club. More recently, we brought two journalists from SPH to our offices in Mountain View to provide our perspectives on news and gain feedback on ways we can better collaborate.

Google's efforts to help the local news ecosystems will only grow. We will be holding multiple trainings in Singapore in partnership with Storyful (train-the-trainer verification training), First Draft (verification training) and the International Fact-Checking Network at Poynter (fact-checking training).

Empowering the Community

Our efforts to tackle misinformation extend beyond working with newsrooms. We believe the wider community, e.g. universities, academia and nonprofit organisations,

⁶ <https://newslab.withgoogle.com/training>

⁷ <https://newslab.withgoogle.com/training/moocs>



can **play an enabling role in areas such as fact checking and helping citizens be better consumers of information.**

Last October, together with the Media Literacy Council, Google worked with and supported the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) to put together a “Fake News Must Die” hackathon⁸. The hackathon was organised with the objective of developing ideas and prototypes of ways to tackle misinformation through technology.

The hackathon saw newsrooms participating as mentors/advisors to the student groups during the event. About 140 tertiary students participated, contributing creative ideas ranging from a fact-checking platform for the community to chatbots that would alert readers before they share news which might not be true. Google is currently supporting and working with the winning teams from SUTD to develop working prototypes of their solutions. Most recently, we sent these students to a regional Google News Lab workshop, where we convened a working group of developers and top practitioners in the verification community in Asia-Pacific to advise on the design and build of verification tools for journalism.

We have also invested in media literacy initiatives by partnering the Media Literacy Council (“MLC”) to help citizens of all ages develop critical thinking and promote an astute and responsible participatory culture online. For instance, we are active supporters of the MLC’s Better Internet x Youths Call for Proposals (CFP); specifically, we are providing co-funding support and advice to community projects and initiatives focused on tackling misinformation.

We will continue to **support and build the capacity of the Singapore community.** Doing so enables more bright ideas to come forth as illustrated by the results of the “Fake News Must Die” hackathon and realises ground up efforts which are more locally relevant and scalable in terms of outreach. **This in turn will help build a society of astute users who are resilient against malicious attempts to mislead them.**

(1)(c) Continual Efforts

More projects involving newsrooms and the community will follow. For instance, Google has been funding [The Trust Project](https://thetrustproject.org/)⁹, which is investigating ways to distinguish authoritative journalism from promotional content and fakery. The Trust Project has [produced 8 indicators of trust](#) that newsrooms can add to their content to help users distinguish between quality content and misinformation. This information will help readers understand more about what type of story they are reading, who wrote it, and how the article was put together. Our next step is to figure out how to display these trust indicators next to articles that may appear on Google News, Google Search, and other Google products where news can be found.

⁸ <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/hackathon-sprouts-ideas-to-tackle-fake-news>

⁹ <https://thetrustproject.org/>



(2) Helping people find quality news content online

Alongside our efforts to support and promote quality content is our commitment to the development of tools and technology to help people find information they are looking for, including news content.

News content can appear in Google Search results in response to a user's query, and Google News provides access to news sources around the world. Google News is an aggregator of news content from more than 80,000 sources around the world. In order to be considered for inclusion on Google News, outlets must fulfill a number of publicly available criteria, which have been adjusted over time to maintain the quality of these sources. These criteria include:

- Sites included in Google News must not misrepresent, misstate, or conceal information about their owner or their primary purpose;
- Sites should primarily offer timely reporting or analysis on recent events
- News sites should be accountable, with author biographies and clearly accessible contact information
- Limited use of distracting ads, with advertising and promotional material not exceeding content

(2)(a) Improving our products

Google News aims to provide consumers access to a broad range of media outlets and information. While we aim to ensure the quality of the information users find on Google Search and Google News, we are not positioned to evaluate disputes related to facts or characterizations laid out in a news article. For both Google Search and Google News, claims that a particular article's content is inaccurate will generally not result in its removal, unless pursuant to a valid legal request.

At the same time, we are cognizant that the Internet and how people use it continues to change, not only every year, but every day. We are constantly evaluating and making improvements to our products to meet both the evolution of the web and our users' expectations. Below are a few examples of how we have been working to tackle low quality information in our products and evolving our algorithms to surface more authoritative content to our users.

(2)(a)(i) 'Fact-check' labels for Google News and Google Search

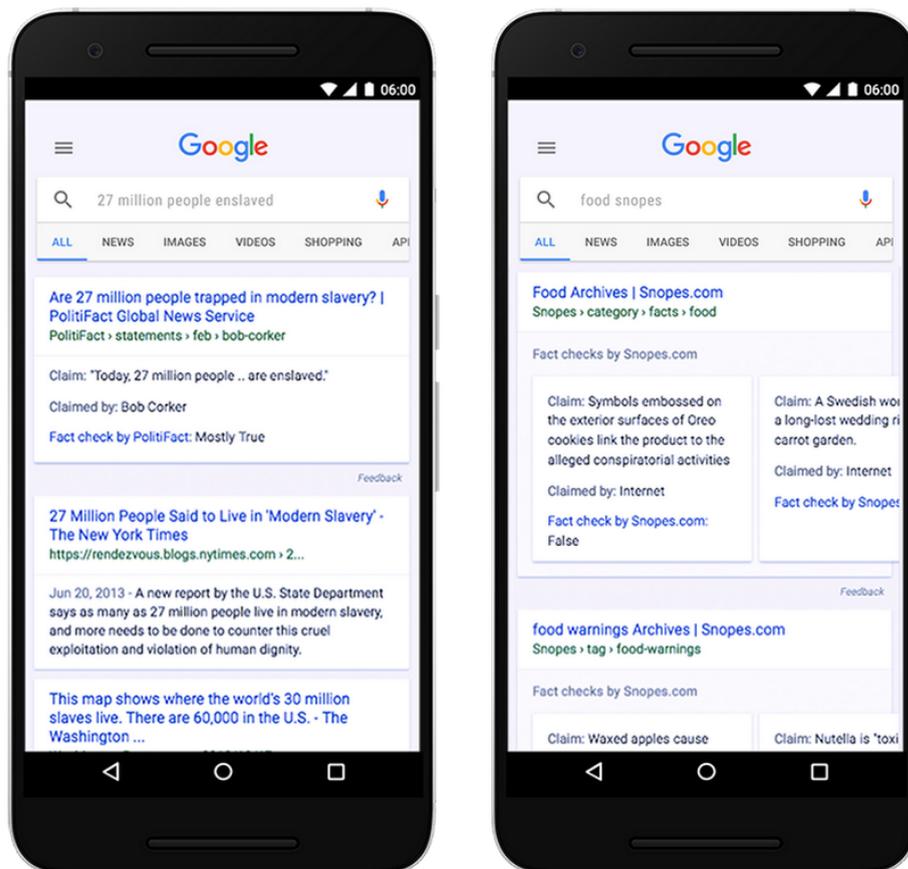
Google News recently took steps to allow publishers to highlight [fact-checked content](#)¹⁰ and **help users find and consult more easily articles that provide a critical outlook on claims made by others**. Beyond its value to users, this feature supports the work of

¹⁰ <https://blog.google/topics/journalism-news/labeling-fact-check-articles-google-news/>



the Fact-checking community -- a fast-growing field, with more than 120 organisations trying to tackle accuracy in the media-- and traditional publishers engaging in fact-checking work. This fact-checking feature first appeared in the UK and the US, and has since been added to Google News in Germany, France, Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina.

We have now made this feature globally in Google News and are expanding it to Google Search globally in all languages. These labels in Search will make it easier **for publishers to highlight their fact-checking work that shows users the origin of a claim and clearly display their verdict on the veracity of the claim**. This work has been a deep collaboration with the global fact-check community, and started with sharethefacts.org, a collaboration between the Duke University Report's Lab and Jigsaw, a team within Alphabet. Share the Facts enables fact-checkers to more easily share the claims they looked at and their fact-check findings, and also makes it easier for others to highlight their fact checks, for example in Search results.



For publishers to be included in this feature, they must be using the [Schema.org ClaimReview](https://schema.org/ClaimReview)¹¹ markup on the specific pages where they fact check public statements, or they can use the [Share the Facts widget](http://www.sharethefacts.org/)¹² developed by the Duke University Reporters

¹¹ <https://schema.org/ClaimReview>

¹² <http://www.sharethefacts.org/>



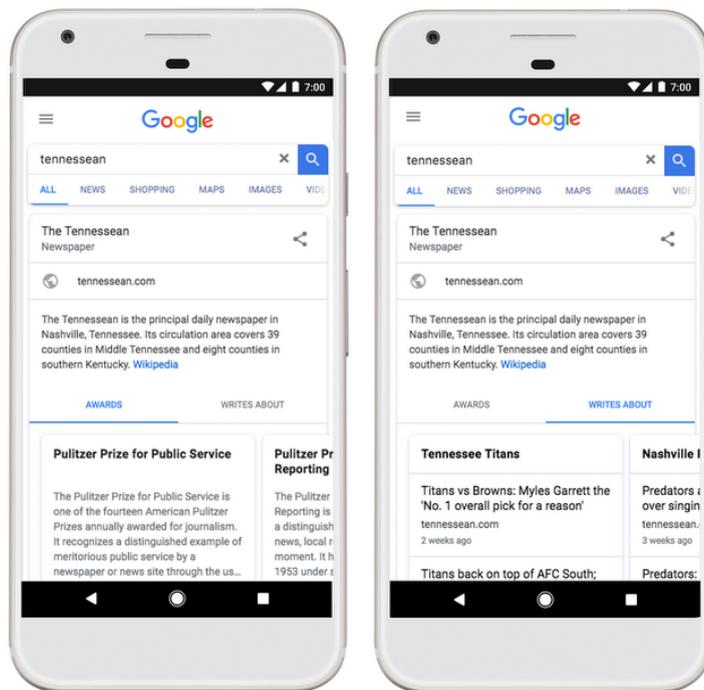
Lab and Jigsaw. Finally, the content must adhere to the [general policies that apply to all structured data markup](#)¹³, the [Google News Publisher criteria for fact checks](#)¹⁴, and the standards for accountability and transparency, readability or proper site representation as articulated in our [Google News General Guidelines](#)¹⁵. If a publisher or fact check claim does not meet these standards or honor these policies, we may, at our discretion, ignore that site's markup.

Feedback on the introduction of labels (e.g. Fact Check, Most Referenced or Opinion) for articles on Google News have been positive. **Users have told us these labels identify important facets of a story and provide more context.** As a result, whenever possible, we now show a second labeled article in addition to the top headline for each story. This way, users can see additional context on stories immediately even as they are scanning.

(2)(a)(ii) Publisher Knowledge Panels on Google

In Nov 2017, we introduced a feature in the United States that shows [publisher informations in knowledge panels](#), informing users on [topics](#) covered by a publication and the [awards](#) it has received.

Doing so helps provide context about news publishers in search results. By providing additional pieces of information, we aim to help users understand the tone, expertise and history of the publisher.



¹³ <https://developers.google.com/search/docs/guides/intro-structured-data#quality-guidelines>

¹⁴ <https://support.google.com/news/publisher/answer/4582731?hl=en#fact-checking>

¹⁵ <https://support.google.com/news/publisher/answer/40787#general>



These additions are a further step toward surfacing useful information based on users' search query. Although this feature is currently only available in the United States, we aim to refine and improve this experience, and make it available globally.

(2)(a)(iii) Identifying and addressing poor quality and misleading results in Search ranking

Search has come a long way since Google started in 1998 but our goal remains the same: to provide users with the most relevant information for their searches from the most authoritative sources. Google's ranking systems sort through the hundreds of billions of webpages in our Search index to give users relevant results in a fraction of a second. The underlying content on the web is always changing, so we are constantly evolving our algorithms to improve the quality of results for the wide range of queries Google sees every day. Every day, 15% of queries are ones we have never seen before.

Unfortunately, there are always examples of sites trying to game their way to the top of Search results through deceptive or manipulative behavior, and we are continually working to improve our algorithms to address that. Recently, we have seen some examples of sites misrepresenting themselves as legitimate news outlets: sites such as abcnews.com.co, which was masquerading as a well-known news publisher, but was actually unaffiliated. **While this site is not eligible for ads under our AdSense policies against misrepresentation, we also want to address how it surfaces in search results.** Queries that return these results are only a small percentage of our overall traffic, however we recognize they are more important than their traffic share would imply. We've been working to make improvements to surface more high quality and credible results in response to our users' queries— when Google surfaces poor quality or misleading results, we have not met our goal for our users.

To that end, Google recently took steps to strengthen our understanding of low quality content, enabling us to improve and refine our algorithms for this category of queries. As for all ranking changes, we work with external Search Quality Raters to run experiments in order to gather data on the quality of our results, so we can identify areas where we need to improve. These human Raters assess how well a website gives people who click on it what they are looking for. These ratings help inform the systems that govern ranking and results, rather than having a direct effect on the particular site reviewed. They help us benchmark the quality of our results and make sure these meet a high bar for users of Google Search all around the world. To ensure a consistent approach, we publish Search Quality Rater Guidelines to give Evaluators guidance and examples for appropriate ratings. **In order to identify and address misinformation, we have updated our [Search Quality Rater Guidelines](https://static.googleusercontent.com/media/www.google.com/en//insidesearch/howsearchworks/assets/searchqualityevaluatorguidelines.pdf)¹⁶ to explicitly address misleading content.**

¹⁶<https://static.googleusercontent.com/media/www.google.com/en//insidesearch/howsearchworks/assets/searchqualityevaluatorguidelines.pdf>



In 2016, we ran over 150,000 experiments, including over 18,000 side-by-side experiments and nearly 10,000 live traffic experiments, resulting in more than 1600 improvements to Search. These improvements are possible with the help of over 10,000 search quality raters around the world, including those in Singapore. While we have made good progress, we know there is a lot more to do.

(3) Stemming the flow of money to misrepresentative and/or misleading content and improving advertiser controls:

Google ads are an important source of revenue for legitimate news websites. We have a strict set of policies that govern the types of ads we do and do not allow on Google, so we can protect people from misleading, inappropriate, or harmful ads. In 2016, we took down 1.7 billion ads that violated our advertising policies, more than double the amount of bad ads we took down in 2015. If you spent one second taking down each of those bad ads, it would take you more than 50 years to finish. But our technology is built to work much faster. We perform similar diligence in keeping our publisher networks safe and clean for advertisers and users. When a publisher violates our policies, we may stop showing ads on their site or terminate their account. In 2016, we removed more than 100,000 publishers from AdSense, and prevented ads from serving on more than 300 million videos that were inappropriate for advertising.

In November 2016, we introduced new policies for AdSense and DoubleClick publishers that mirror our longstanding prohibitions on ads that deceive users. Our new policies against “misrepresentation” target website owners who misrepresent who they are and deceive users with their content. As our [AdSense content policies](#)¹⁷ state: *“Users don’t want to be misled by the content they engage with online. For this reason, Google ads may not be placed on pages that misrepresent, misstate, or conceal information about you, your content or the primary purpose of your web property.”* Early results of our policy change were encouraging: in just the first month after launch, we identified 550 leads for sites that were suspected of misrepresenting content to users, including impersonating news organisations—for example, hundreds of the sorts of scammer websites (as in Macedonia) mentioned in many press reports. We took action against 340 of them for violating our policies -- for misrepresentation and other offenses -- and removed nearly 200 publishers from our ads network permanently.

Finally, we have made public commitments to raise the bar on our policies, by taking a tougher stance on hateful and derogatory content, helping advertisers more easily and consistently choose where their ads appear, and increasing our investments in people and tools that help us prevent ads from appearing on potentially objectionable content. For publisher websites, we are rolling out new technology to enforce our policies at the page level instead of at the site level—to help us act more frequently and quickly on potential infractions instead of gauging whether the severity of a given violation is enough to take action against an entire site.

¹⁷https://support.google.com/adsense/answer/1348688?hl=en&ref_topic=1271507&visit_id=1-636148282125287855-3881765070&rd=1#Misrepresentative_content



International Developments

As noted in the [Green Paper](#)¹⁸ by the Ministry of Communications and Information and the Ministry of Law, Singapore is not alone in examining ways to tackle misinformation. Countries like France, Italy and the United Kingdom, as well as the European Commission, are considering measures to tackle misinformation. Importantly, the European Commission has affirmed that regulation is not optimal for tackling this thorny issue and has instead proposed four approaches:

- Encourage transparency,
- Foster diversity of information,
- Give citizens fact checking tools,
- Propose inclusive solutions to be voluntarily implemented by all actors in the infosphere.

This approach reflects the fact that misinformation is an age-old problem that can never be completely eradicated. We believe an effective way of combating misinformation is through educating citizens on how to distinguish reliable from unreliable information and equipping them with practical, user-friendly tools for determining reliability, as well as promoting quality journalism to ensure that there is a robust network of fact-checking organizations providing reliable information and debunking falsehoods.

Concluding Comments

Google remains committed to making the most useful and relevant information easily accessible to our users - that is how Google Search got started. The quality of information available on the web is a concern for everyone, and we are determined to do our part in addressing the issues it raises for our users, partners, and for the news ecosystem. We will continue to support the work of the news ecosystem and the community, and to improve our own products in order to tackle this important and complicated issue together.

¹⁸<https://www.mlaw.gov.sg/content/dam/minlaw/corp/News/Annexe%20A%20-%20Green%20Paper%20on%20Deliberate%20Online%20Falsehoods.pdf>