

15 January 2021

January Update on Microsoft Corporation's Efforts to Tackle COVID-19 Disinformation

Microsoft Corporation welcomes the opportunity to provide this report on the steps we have taken, and continue to take, to combat COVID-19 disinformation during the month of December 2020. This report supplements, and should be read in conjunction with, our reports to the Commission of August 15, September 15, October 15, November 15, and December 15 entitled *Report of Microsoft Corporation on Tackling COVID-19 Disinformation* ("August report" available [here](#), "September report" available [here](#), "October report" available [here](#), "November report" available [here](#), "December report" available [here](#)).

Microsoft has taken substantial steps to promote the safety of our users and customers during the pandemic, and we are continually working to refine our efforts to combat COVID-19 disinformation on our services as these threats evolve. As explained in our August report, however, because many Microsoft services are offered primarily or exclusively to enterprise customers, or tend to be used primarily by individuals acting in a professional capacity (e.g., LinkedIn), our services tend to be targeted less frequently by COVID-19 disinformation than many other services. This fact necessarily affects how we have responded to the COVID-19 disinformation threat. In particular, Microsoft has tailored its efforts to combat COVID-19 disinformation to the unique attributes of our respective services. Also, because few of our actions to fight COVID-19 disinformation are limited to the individual Member States, we generally track and report these efforts on a global or EU-wide basis. In those instances where our efforts are limited to a certain Member State, we have stated that below.

We would note again that the steps we are taking to address COVID-19 disinformation, while important, are only a small part of the efforts we are taking to help our customers, partners, employees, and the communities in which we operate respond effectively to the COVID-19 crisis. For more information on these efforts, please see our dedicated website, "[Responding to COVID-19 together](#)".

A. Initiatives to promote authoritative content

Point A of the Commission's Information Request asks platforms to "provide data on the actions taken to promote information from national and international health agencies, national and EU authorities, as well as professional media, including information on the use of trustworthiness indicators for news sources." The Request also asks platforms to provide "relevant output indicators to assess the impact of such initiatives."

Microsoft services continue to take actions responsive to these points based on the nature of the service and the type of COVID-19 disinformation threats that the respective service confronts.

1. Bing

In our August report, we discussed how Bing regularly refines its search algorithms, and the metrics it uses to measure them, in order to elevate the prominence of authoritative, high-quality content in search results and to prevent manipulation of search results by bad actors—including those seeking to spread disinformation about COVID-19 (more information on Bing's organic search ranking practices can be found [here](#)). Our August report also discussed additional, proactive steps that Bing is taking to present users with authoritative information about COVID-19. This includes placing "Answers" and/or Public Service Announcements about COVID-19 at the top of search results for a number of COVID-19-related search queries, which provide information and statistics from authoritative sources such as the World Health Organization and relevant national health authorities. Bing is also showing "task panes" in prominent places on the first page of search results, which provide users with authoritative information about COVID-19, such as how to reduce the risk of catching or spreading the virus.

As we also noted in our August report, for specific queries, Bing will point users to special COVID-19 "[information hubs](#)" on Microsoft News. The articles in these information hubs, currently available in 39 markets globally, are sourced from over 4500 trusted news brands worldwide. These hubs also contain links to official tools and information sources on the crisis. The screenshot below provides an example of how Microsoft presents these various sources of information to users when they input a search term related to COVID-19 (in this case, the word "coronavirus"):

Microsoft Bing

coronavirus

ALL WORK NEWS IMAGES VIDEOS MAPS SHOPPING

263.000.000 Results Date Language Region

Coronavirus Statistiken Impfstoff Prävention Symptome Behandlung Mehr Informationen

Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

News about coronavirus

Coronavirus in Deutschland Mehr als zwei Millionen Infektionen
Das Robert Koch-Institut meldet 22.368 Corona-Neuinfektionen in Deutschland. Damit wurde die Mark...
Tagesschau · 39m

dpa AFX

DGAP-News Baumot Group AG muss aufgrund der Covid-19-Auswirkungen insolvenzrechtlichen Schu...
wallstreet online · 1h

Mehr als zwei Millionen Menschen haben sich in Deutschland mit Covid-19 infiziert
Westdeutsche Zeitung · 2h

Coronavirus im Winter Die härteste Zeit der Pandemie
Stuttgarter Zeitung · 1h

Top resources

- COVID-19-Impfstoffe
vaccination-info.eu
- Coronavirus-Krankheit
bundesgesundheitsministerium.de
- Prävention
bundesgesundheitsministerium.de
- Weitere Informationen
bundesgesundheitsministerium.de

Data from: CDC · WHO · ECDC · Wikipedia · The New York Times · See full list

Data is collected from multiple sources that update at different times and may not always align. Some locations may not provide complete information.

Brussels Region cases

Updated 15. Jan. at 09:57 local

Confirmed	Deaths	Recovered
84.582 +342	0	0

Belgium cases

Updated 15. Jan. at 09:57 local

Confirmed	Deaths	Recovered
672.886 +2.637	20.294 +44	-

See breakdown

Global cases

Updated 15. Jan. at 09:57 local

Confirmed	Deaths	Recovered
93.158.547 +845.348	1.995.273 +17.280	51.421.906 +463.836

See breakdown

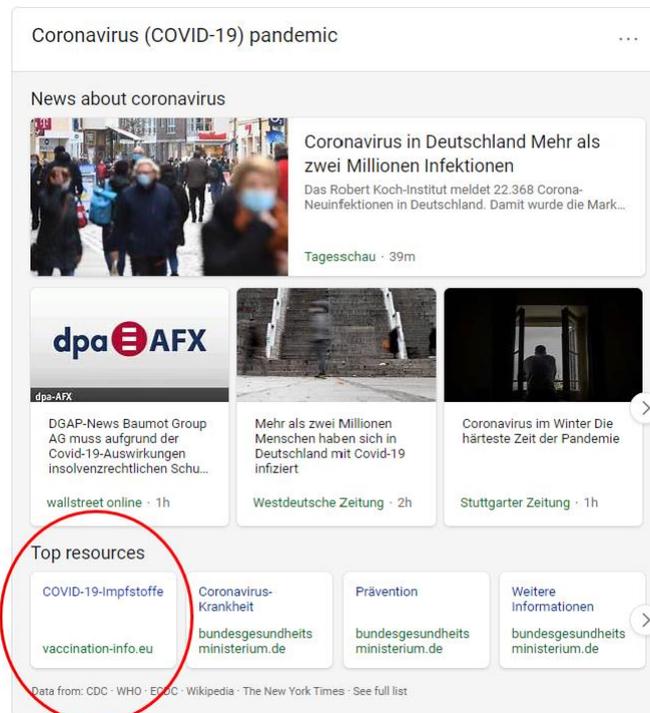
Confirmed cases

Map showing global distribution of confirmed cases.

As a result of these efforts, a person entering a COVID-19-related search query on Bing is almost certain to be presented with authoritative content from trustworthy sources. In December 2020, the Bing COVID experience had 19,378,414 visitors, including 2,766,336 from EU countries:

EU Country	December Monthly Visits
Bulgaria	15179
Czech Republic	48091
Denmark	29246
Austria	148244
Switzerland	51025
Germany	547187
Greece	19379
United Kingdom	260971
Ireland	51433
Spain	270036
Estonia	2846
Finland	31148
Belgium	25209
France	308453
Luxembourg	1141
Croatia	203
Hungary	63519
Iceland	2034
Italy	295958
Lithuania	3900
Latvia	3971
Netherlands	101021
Norway	14
Poland	179047
Portugal	92106
Romania	82921
Slovakia	5301
Slovenia	2781
Sweden	123972
TOTAL	2,766,336

Moreover, a person entering a vaccine-related search query on Bing is presented with reliable COVID-19 vaccine-related information, news, and authoritative sources, for example, the [EU vaccination information portal](#).



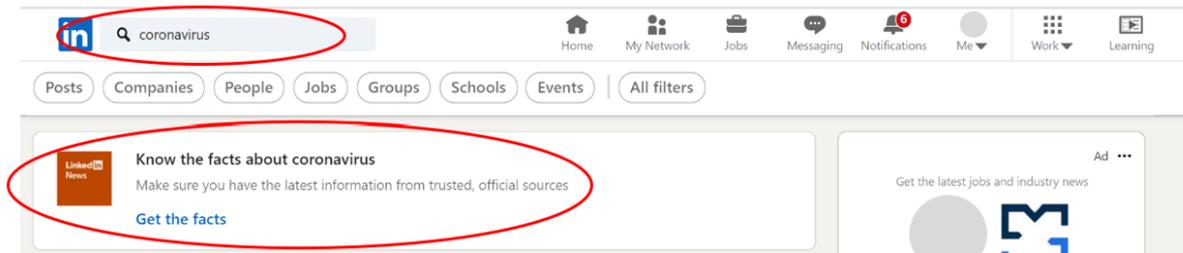
2. Microsoft Advertising

As described in our August report, Microsoft Advertising takes action against advertisements that contain disinformation about COVID-19 through our [Misleading Content policy](#), which prohibits advertising that can "reasonably [be] perceived as being deceptive, fraudulent or harmful to site visitors." On the basis of this policy, we have prohibited all advertising that seeks to exploit the COVID-19 crisis for commercial gain, spreads misinformation, or that may pose a danger to user-health or safety. As a result of these efforts, in December 2020, Microsoft Advertising prevented a total of 1,317,626 advertiser submissions directly related to COVID-19 from serving to its users globally, 323,573 of which in European markets. These numbers include vaccine-related disinformation.

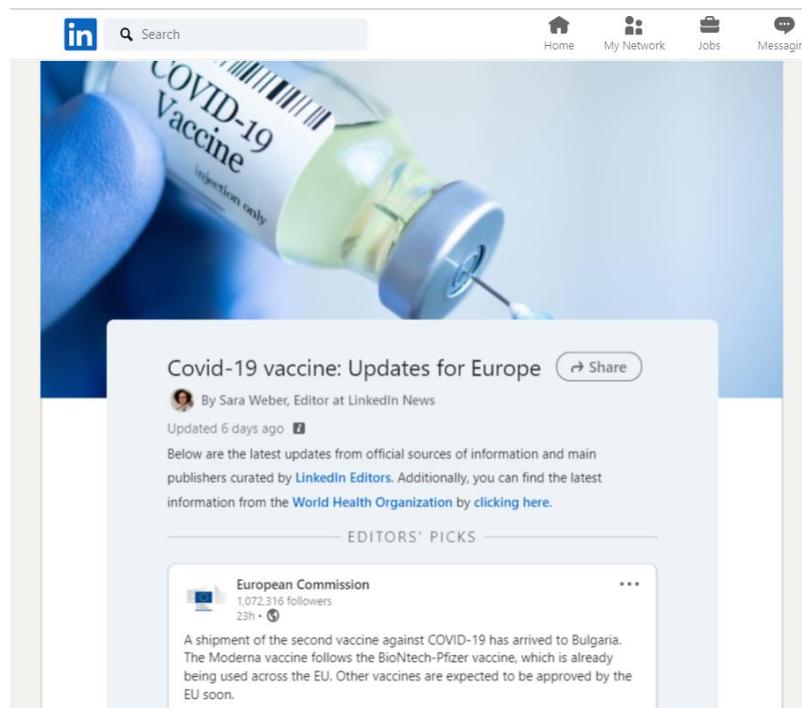
3. LinkedIn

As described in our August report, given LinkedIn's focus on enabling our members to meet other professionals in a network of trusted relationships, the service is an infrequent target of disinformation. This holds equally true with regard to COVID-19 disinformation. Accordingly, our efforts on COVID-19 have primarily focused on supporting the European Commission's efforts to combat disinformation by promoting trusted sources of information, and by extending the reach of authoritative government communications to local audiences.

For instance, as illustrated in the screenshot below, we redirect any LinkedIn member that entered a search for the term "coronavirus" or "#covid" to a link labelled "Know the facts about coronavirus," which appears first in the list of search results:



By clicking on this link, members are directed to [LinkedIn's own official page on the coronavirus](#), which displays current information and broadcasts from verified international sources. To prevent misinformation on vaccines, we extended the coverage to include official information about vaccines and vaccination. The page is regularly updated by LinkedIn editors and is also featured as Storyline in all local Daily Rundowns. We continue to cover other COVID-19 related news and conduct interviews with pharma leaders, for example with CEO of Sanofi.



LinkedIn also sends interested members a "European Daily Rundown," which is a summary of the day's news that is written and curated by experienced journalists. Members receive this in the form of a notification either in the news feed on their LinkedIn profile or by email.

The European Daily Rundown is distributed to LinkedIn members in all 27 EU member states and has a reach of approximately 9.7 million members. In addition, LinkedIn has local editions of the European Daily Rundown that are published in French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch and German. They are written and curated by a team of 18 experienced journalists based across the EU.

The chart below provides a list of the key trusted sources that the LinkedIn News team relies upon to source official information related to COVID-19. This list includes official pages of various Member State governments, as well as those of international organizations.

Company Page	Link	# of Followers on 31 December 2020
Pan- European		
European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC)	https://www.linkedin.com/company/ecdc/	32,095
European Public Health Association (EUPHA)	https://www.linkedin.com/company/eupha/	1,663
European Commission	https://www.linkedin.com/company/european-commission/	1,064,233
World Health Organization (WHO)	https://www.linkedin.com/company/world-health-organization/	3,733,405
Unicef	https://www.linkedin.com/company/unicef/	2,932,636
Red Cross	https://www.linkedin.com/company/ifrc/	164,910
United Nations	https://www.linkedin.com/company/united-nations/	3,402,573
France		
Government	https://www.linkedin.com/company/gouvernementfr/	80,011
Ministry of Health	https://www.linkedin.com/company/minist%C3%A8re-des-solidarites-de-la-sant%C3%A9/	111,971
Ministry of Labour	https://www.linkedin.com/company/minist%C3%A8re-du-travail/	216,466
Santé publique France	https://www.linkedin.com/company/sante-publique-france/	82,323

DACH		
Germany Ministry and minister of health (Bundesgesundheitsministerium)	https://www.linkedin.com/company/bundesgesundheitsministerium/	34,051
KfW Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau	https://www.linkedin.com/company/kfw/	40,921
German Bundesagentur für Arbeit (Federal Employment Agency)	https://www.linkedin.com/company/bundesagentur-fuer-arbeit/	12,110
Switzerland Ministry of Health (Bundesamt für Gesundheit)	https://www.linkedin.com/company/bag-ofsp/	70,382
Netherlands		
Ministry of health (Ministerie van VWS)	https://www.linkedin.com/company/ministerie-van-vws/	104,446
Governmental institute RIVM	https://www.linkedin.com/company/rivm/	41,662
Italy		
Ministero della Salute	https://www.linkedin.com/company/ministero-salute/	32,234
Presidenza del Consiglio (government)	https://www.linkedin.com/company/presidenza-del-consiglio-dei-ministri/	62,867
Unicef Italia	https://www.linkedin.com/company/unicef-italia/	4,620
Spain		
Minister of Health	https://www.linkedin.com/company/sanidadgob/	17,022
Minister of Science	https://www.linkedin.com/company/cienciagob/	64,286
Minister of Social Security	https://www.linkedin.com/company/ministerio-de-inclusi%C3%B3n-seguridad-social-y-migraciones/	2,206
Unicef Comité Español	https://www.linkedin.com/company/unicef-spain/	21,479

In addition, more government officials were onboarded on LinkedIn like the [European Medicines Agency director](#), and healthcare leaders such as [Sanofi CEO](#) or [Pfizer CEO](#).

B. Initiatives and tools to improve users' awareness

Point B of the Commission's Information Request asks platforms to "provide data about implementation of their policies to inform users when they interact with disinformation" about COVID-19.

An important element of combatting disinformation is the ability to maintain the integrity and authenticity of news articles and other media as they are shared across the Internet. As discussed in our August report, Microsoft has partnered with the BBC, CBC/Radio-Canada, and The New York Times to help meet this need through "[Project Origin](#)," which helps users authenticate the sources of content and identify when it has been manipulated.

Another important effort in Microsoft's fight against COVID-19 disinformation, also discussed in our August report, is our long-standing partnership with [NewsGuard](#). NewsGuard operates a coronavirus misinformation tracker that lists all of the news and information sites in France, Italy, Germany, the UK, and the United States that it has identified as publishing materially false information about the virus. When users of Microsoft's Edge browser who have installed the NewsGuard plug-in navigate to these sites, a label appears warning the user that the information on the site is unreliable (further details on the NewsGuard coronavirus misinformation tracker is available [here](#)). NewsGuard has also [published fact checks](#) of common misinformation and misconceptions surrounding the coronavirus pandemic, which are available for free on its website.

In addition to these cross-company efforts, Microsoft services also have taken steps to alert users when they might be interacting with disinformation.

1. Bing

As discussed in more detail in our August report, another way in which Bing helps users determine the reliability of content displayed in Bing search results is through its "[Fact Check](#)" feature, which gives users additional information with which to judge the trustworthiness of information online. Bing determines whether an article might contain fact checks by looking for the [schema.org ClaimReview](#) markup. In addition to this markup, Bing also looks for sites that follow commonly accepted criteria for fact checks, including of third-party fact checking organizations.

2. Microsoft Advertising

As described in response to Information Request 1, Microsoft Advertising takes action against COVID-19 disinformation through our policies that prohibit advertisements that can "reasonably [be] perceived as being deceptive, fraudulent or harmful to site visitors." When we learn that an advertisement on our system contains misinformation about COVID-19, we

remove it (rather than leave it in place and merely alert users about the misinformation it contains). We provide more information on our practices in response to Point D, below.

C. Manipulative behavior

Point C of the Commission's Information Request asks platforms to "report all instances of social media manipulation and malign influence operations or coordinated inauthentic behavior detected on their services."

Microsoft employs several cross-company efforts to combat inauthentic and malicious actions on our services. We are using our AI and human intelligence capabilities to stop attacks designed to exploit COVID-19. For instance, we have been putting an emphasis on protecting critical services, especially hospitals, against [ransomware](#) attacks, and earlier this year extended our AccountGuard email protection service to healthcare workers, human rights organizations and humanitarian organizations in order to offer additional protections to those who are on the frontlines of responding to the pandemic.

In recent months, Microsoft has [detected](#) cyberattacks from three nation-state actors targeting seven prominent companies directly involved in researching vaccines and treatments for COVID-19. Most of the attacks were blocked by security protections built into our products. We have notified all organizations targeted, and where attacks have been successful, we have offered help.

We have also [published](#) extensive information and data, derived from our threat intelligence efforts, on how cybercriminals are seeking to capitalize on the pandemic and how their behaviors and strategies have evolved over the course of the pandemic. Because so many of these efforts involve the dissemination of disinformation or other deceitful practices, publishing this information can help users of all kinds more effectively identify and protect themselves against these harms.

In our August report, we provided information on the steps that Bing and Microsoft Advertising have taken to combat inauthentic behaviors on their services. In the interests of brevity, we do not repeat that information here.

Given the professional focus of LinkedIn and its members, it is rarely the target of social media manipulation, malign influence operations, or coordinated inauthentic behavior in relation to COVID-19. This might also be attributable in part to the fact that LinkedIn strictly enforces the LinkedIn User Agreement, which prohibits the use of "bots or other automated methods to access the Services, add or download contacts, send or redirect messages." In addition, LinkedIn has systems and automated defenses in place for different types of content that may violate our User Agreement or Professional Community Policies (PCPs). On September 29, 2020, we strengthened our PCPs to further clarify the types of content and behavior that are permitted on the platform, and that will ensure that LinkedIn remains a safe and trusted professional network. In addition to this, our ongoing efforts to address any activity that falls foul of these PCPs can broadly be grouped into three categories: (1) Fake accounts; (2) content uploaded by members; and (3) advertisements. Detailed information on LinkedIn's efforts to address the three categories is provided in our September report.

D. Data on flows of advertising linked to COVID-19 disinformation

Point D.1 of the Commission's Information Request asks platforms to "provide data on policies undertaken to limit advertising placements on their own services" relating to COVID-19 disinformation. Point D.2 asks platforms to "provide information on policies to limit advertising placements on third-party websites using disinformation around COVID-19 to attract advertising revenue."

As discussed in our August report, all Microsoft services that display advertising have adopted and vigorously enforce policies prohibiting disinformation. In addition, Microsoft Advertising works both with advertisers and online publishers, and employs a distinct set of policies and enforcement measures with respect to each, to prevent the spread of disinformation through the advertising that it serves.

1. Advertisers

As described above, Microsoft Advertising's [Misleading Content policy](#) prohibits advertising that can "reasonably [be] perceived as being deceptive, fraudulent or harmful to site visitors." On the basis of this policy, we have prohibited all advertising that seeks to exploit the COVID-19 crisis for commercial gain, spreads misinformation, or that may pose a danger to user health or safety. Moreover, and as explained in our August report, every ad loaded into the Microsoft Advertising system is subject to enforcement methods that leverage machine-learning techniques, automated screening, in-house expertise, and dedicated user safety experts. Microsoft Advertising conducts a manual review of all advertisements flagged to its customer support team and removes advertisements that violate its policies.

As noted above, as a result of these systems and related efforts, in December 2020, Microsoft Advertising prevented a total of 1,317,626 advertiser submissions directly related to COVID-19 from serving to its users globally, 323,573 of which in European markets. These numbers include vaccine-related disinformation.

2. Online publishers

Microsoft Advertising utilizes a distinct set of policies and measures to combat the display of advertising on — and thus disrupt the flow of advertising revenue to — sites involved in spreading disinformation. These policies and measures apply to all types of disinformation, including disinformation relating to COVID-19.

Specifically, Microsoft Advertising requires our publishing partners to abide by strict brand safety-oriented policies to avoid providing revenue streams to websites engaging in misleading, deceptive, harmful, or insensitive behaviors. As discussed in our August report, these policies include a comprehensive list of prohibited content that our ads cannot serve against, including disinformation. We require publishers to maintain a list of prohibited terms and provide us with information on their content management practices where applicable. In addition, we require publishers to abide by restrictions against engaging in business practices that are harmful to users.

Microsoft Advertising reviews publisher properties and domains for compliance with these restrictions and promptly notifies publishers of properties or domains that violate Microsoft Advertising's policies. Microsoft does not approve properties that violate our policies for live ad traffic; if a property or domain that violates our policies is already live, we remove it from our ad network until the publisher remedies the issue. We also give advertisers the option to block their ads from being displayed on particular web domains.