Facebook takes down far-right groups days before Spanish election

Friday 26 April 2019, by [GRAHAM-HARRISON Emma](#), [JONES Sam](#) (Date first published: 25 April 2019).

Investigation uncovered networks reaching 1.7m people that were spreading fake news.

Facebook has taken down several networks that were spreading far-right content to nearly 1.7 million people in Spain, days before [national elections](#)that are expected to see a surge in support for the far-right Vox party.

The networks were uncovered in an [investigation by the campaign group Avaaz](#), and taken down only after it presented Facebook with its findings.

The discovery of a large network, spreading politically sensitive content unmonitored days before a key European election, is likely to add to concerns about social media firms' willingness and ability to control hate speech and criminal activity on their sites.

On Wednesday [British MPs condemned](#) [Facebook](#), Google and Twitter for their refusal to report users to the police when they remove criminal posts, except in rare cases when there is an immediate threat to life or limb.

Avaaz found that the networks in Spain were spreading fake news, including a doctored photo of a political opponent giving a Hitler salute, and misogynist, Islamophobic and homophobic messages. They were also coordinating the publication of identical posts apparently designed to look like spontaneous messages.

However, unlike its decision earlier this month to [ban British far-right groups](#) in a crackdown on hate organisations, Facebook said it had not taken down the Spanish pages because of their content, or for "coordinated inauthentic behaviour" – the network's sanitised term for manufacturing and spreading fake news.

Instead, Facebook said they were targeted for breaking network rules. "We have removed a number of fake and duplicate accounts that were violating our authenticity policies, as well as one page for name change violations," a [Facebook](#) spokesperson said. "We aren't removing accounts or pages for coordinated inauthentic behaviour.

"As in other cases, we removed these accounts based on their behaviour, not the content they posted. Some additional pages were also disabled because they were administered solely by fake accounts."

The largest network – Unidad Nacional Española (UNE) – had more than 1.2 million followers, and others reached hundreds of thousands more. Together they had more than 7 million interactions, at a time of intense political activity and focus on the political rise of the upstart far-right party Vox.

Spain's apparent immunity to far-right politics finally wore off in December last year, when [Vox dramatically exceeded expectations to take 12 seats in the Andalucían regional election](#), then cemented its power by [backing a regional coalition](#) between the conservative People's party (PP) and the centre-right Citizens party.

Founded by disenchanted members of the PP six years ago, Vox is expected to achieve its national breakthrough in [Sunday's general election](#). Polls show [it could pick up around 11% of the vote](#), making it the first far-right party to win more than a single seat in parliament since Spain's return to democracy following the death of General Franco in 1975.

The Spanish government recently embarked on its own effort to protect both Sunday's general election and the European polls next month.

The initiative, intended to guard against cyber-attacks and fake news, is described as "a series of preventative, reactive and co-ordinated cybersecurity measures, designed to guarantee the free exercise of rights and freedoms related to electoral processes". However, it did not appear to have picked up on the Facebook networks tracked by Avaaz.

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P.S.

The Guardian
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/25/facebook-takes-down-far-right-groups-days-before-spanish-election