

Big tech

Ukrainian ministers urge Big Tech action against Russian disinformation

Letter accuses social media giants of ‘fanning the flames of this war’



The Ukrainian ministers and advocacy groups said tech groups ‘must go much further and stop promoting these channels everywhere’ © AFP/Getty

Patrick McGee in San Francisco 4 HOURS AGO

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Ukraine has stepped up demands for the world’s biggest technology groups to take more meaningful action to stop Russia’s disinformation campaign, accusing them of “profiting off Putin’s lies”.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine was “made possible” by state-controlled media, whose “made-up stories about a genocide against Russians” was used to justify the war, wrote Mykhailo Fedorov, Ukraine’s deputy prime minister, and Oleksandr Tkachenko, information policy minister, in a letter published on Friday.

“Your platforms are fanning the flames of this war by spreading Kremlin-backed disinformation through your various technologies,” wrote the government ministers.

The [letter](#), addressed to the heads of Meta, Apple, Google, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok and Telegram, is part of a campaign from SumOfUs, a corporate accountability group that has previously played a role encouraging Apple to adopt [a human rights policy](#).

It has garnered signatures from more than 100 advocacy groups including the American Federation of Teachers, a national union, and Transparency International EU, a Brussels-based anti-corruption movement.

The move comes after Meta-owned Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, [Apple](#) and TikTok all announced this week that they would [remove state-backed media](#) outlets Russia Today and Sputnik from their platforms in the EU, following demands from officials in the bloc designed to throttle the spread of propaganda.

Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have also been applying labels to Kremlin-backed media outside Russia and paused their ability to make money from advertising that runs alongside the content.

The letter recognises that tech companies have taken unprecedented actions in recent days, with the removal of state media marking a new frontier for the social media platforms, which have tended to focus on removing covert operations rather than any domestic propaganda apparatus.

But the Ukrainian ministers and advocacy groups said tech companies “must go much further and stop promoting these channels everywhere”.

It asks for clear ways for users to report disinformation, demands the platforms stop the “algorithmic amplification of disinformation”, and urges transparency so third-party researchers can help the public better understand the influence, reach and engagement of state-backed accounts.

Big Tech groups have tried to strike a delicate balance, as their efforts to remove or fact-check certain content have prompted Moscow to accuse them of censorship and restrict access to the platforms.

Some experts warn that clamping down on state-backed propaganda could cause Moscow to ban European media from the country.

“You don’t fight propaganda by censorship,” said Benjamin Ismail, project director at [AppleCensorship.com](#), a free speech advocacy site. “This is a godsend for authoritarian regimes.

“It implies governments are legitimate to decide ‘what is truth’, and ‘what is fake news’. And it encourages governments to criminalise speech under the guise of fighting disinformation.”

Rewan al-Haddad, campaign director at SumOfUs, said tech platforms needed to step up their game against disinformation campaigns, rather than profiting from them.

“These tech execs already have blood on their hands, but there’s still time to act to protect the Ukrainian people.”

Additional reporting by Hannah Murphy in San Francisco

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