

# FakeWatch

/BACKGROUND FOR MEDIA



Disinformation on social media is a rising threat to democracy: It is now widely acknowledged that fake news influenced voters in the Brexit referendum, the 2016 US elections and the 2017 Brazilian presidential elections, and has influenced public opinion in countries around the world on critical issues from immigration to climate change.

Former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen recently said that “disinformation campaigns constitute one of the biggest challenges to democracies the world has seen in 70 years.” At a recent conference in Brussels, he concluded, “We must act now to defend our democracies for future generations, before it is too late.”

In an effort to protect Europe’s democracies, the global citizens’ movement Avaaz launched a crowdfunding campaign to kickstart an unprecedented EU-wide anti-disinformation investigation, powered by social media analysts, investigative journalists, data researchers and our network of almost 20 million members across the EU.

Our research reviewed thousands of public pages, groups and websites identified by independent fact-checkers as spreading disinformation, or content that is hateful or inciting violence, so we can identify fake news before it spreads, rooting out the networks driving it and working with platforms and governments to correct false information ahead of the upcoming European Parliament elections.

At the same time, we recruited tens of thousands of volunteers all across Europe who flagged thousands of pieces of disinformation, fake news and hate speech through the website [www.fake-watch.eu](http://www.fake-watch.eu), WhatsApp and other channels.

Our work serves not only to increase awareness among voters about potential manipulation on social media, but also to put pressure on tech companies to take the necessary measures to limit the damage to democracy. One such measure would require social media companies to show corrections to all users who have seen false information.

The investigation by the Avaaz “Elves” team uncovered over 500 suspicious pages and groups, which were then reported to Facebook. Together, these pages and groups were followed by 32 million people and generated 67 million “interactions” (comments, likes and shares) in the last three months alone.

As a result of the Elves’ work, Facebook took down 77 of these pages and 230 accounts, from Germany, UK, France, Italy, Spain and Poland, the content of which, together, had been viewed an estimated 533 million times in three months.

The disinformation pages shut down had more than 13 million interactions and 6 million followers - almost three times the number of followers as the pages of the main far-right and anti-EU parties (League, AfD, VOX, Brexit Party, Rassemblement National and PiS) combined (2 million). Content from the networks was viewed on average 6 million times a day.

But the team has not only focused on Facebook. In Spain, just days after Avaaz released its findings on Facebook disinformation networks, it was ready with another report, this time focusing on WhatsApp, the most widely used social media in that country. The report showed that disinformation and hatred on that network reached about 9.6 million potential voters ahead of the Spanish legislative elections.

Because it is encrypted, WhatsApp is more difficult to research than Facebook. But Avaaz, a member-driven organization, asked its Spanish supporters to forward WhatsApp messages they deemed false, misleading or hateful to a special number. About 2,500 crowdsourced submissions served as the basis of the investigation, and the final findings were sent to WhatsApp with a demand for urgent action to limit the spread of disinformation ahead of the EU elections.

Avaaz’s campaign was launched in March with a report showing that fake news circulating during the French Yellow Vest protests reached over 105 million views.

The campaign in Europe follows a pilot campaign Avaaz ran in Brazil, where a small team of researchers discovered a disinformation network with 12.6 million followers supporting now president Jair Bolsonaro, which Facebook took down after a major media expose.

The Avaaz community has 50 million members worldwide, including about 20 million in Europe.

### **Recent Avaaz reports on disinformation and elections:**

- [Far Right Networks of Deception](#)
- [Yellow Vests Report](#)
- [Executive Summary of Spain Far-Right Facebook Networks Report](#)
- [Full Spain Networks Report](#) (for background only, can be quoted with approval from media team)
- [Spain WhatsApp Report](#)

### **Samples of recent coverage from around the world:**

On Avaaz’s Top Platform Policy Demand-Correct the Record:

Time Magazine: [How This Radical New Proposal Could Curb Fake News on Social Media](#)

## Yellow Vests:

- Le Monde: [« Gilets jaunes » : l'ONG Avaaz dénonce la diffusion massive d'infox sur Facebook](#)
- BFM TV: [Gilets jaunes: les fake news consultées 105 millions de fois sur Facebook](#)
- ARD: [Report Mainz \(from minute 21:50\) and REPORT MAINZ fragt Christoph Schott](#)
- FAZ: [Gelbwesten“ haben 105 Millionen Mal Fake News gesehen](#)
- Politico: [Yellow Jackets 'fake news' shared millions of times on Facebook](#)
- La Stampa: [I gilet gialli “inondati da fake news”: così sfruttano Facebook per diffondere disinformazione](#)
- VentureBeat: [Avaaz: Facebook is a festering hive of fake news about France's Yellow Vests](#)
- L'Obs: [Les fake news partagées sur Facebook par les “gilets jaunes” visionnées plus de 105 millions de fois](#)
- Euronews: [El movimiento de los chalecos amarillos, influenciado por las 'fake news' y el Kremlin](#)
- NiemanLab: [A European movement encourages Facebook and Twitter to contact every person who has seen fake news](#)

## Spain Far-Right Facebook Networks:

- TechCrunch: [Facebook has quietly removed three bogus far-right networks in Spain ahead of Sunday's elections](#)
- The Guardian: [Facebook takes down far-right groups days before Spanish election](#)
- El Pais (English): [Facebook removes three far-right networks ahead of Spanish election](#)
- El Pais (Spanish): [Facebook suprime tres redes de ultraderecha con casi 1,5 millones de seguidores a cinco días de las elecciones](#)
- EUObserver: [Far-right Facebook networks removed before Spain election](#)
- Euronews: [Spain's election and the battle for control of social media](#)
- El Mundo: [Facebook contra la derecha radical: cierra decenas de páginas con millones de seguidores](#)
- El Diario: [Facebook borra 17 páginas españolas de extrema derecha con 1,4 millones de seguidores](#)
- El Confidencial: [Facebook desmantela tres importantes redes de extrema derecha a cinco días del 28-A](#)

## Spain WhatsApp Report:

- VentureBeat: [Spanish WhatsApp users reportedly flooded with 'disinformation and hate' ahead of elections](#)
- Euractiv: [As election looms, Spaniards are hit by WhatsApp disinformation campaign](#)
- La Vanguardia: [Casi diez millones de votantes han recibido bulos y mensajes de odio en WhatsApp durante la cam](#)
- El Diario: [9,6 millones de personas han recibido por WhatsApp bulos contra la izquierda y discurso de odio, según un estudio](#)
- ADSL Zone: [Acusan a WhatsApp en España de ser “la dark web de las redes sociales” por difundir fake news](#)
- Levante EMV: [Los bulos en WhatsApp se ceban en la izquierda](#)