In Race Against Fake News, Google and Facebook Stroll to the Starting Line

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SAN FRANCISCO — Google and Facebook have been taking steps to curb the number of false news articles propagated across their sites. On Wednesday, the Silicon Valley companies showed that they were still in the early stages of their battle to limit misinformation online.

In a blog post, Google said it had permanently banned nearly 200 publishers from its AdSense advertising network near the end of last year, after putting into effect a policy in November to choke off websites that try to deceive users from its online ad service.

On the same day, Facebook introduced changes to its Trending Topics feature — a part of the social network that some have blamed for spreading false information — to better promote reliable news articles.

Yet taken together, the efforts showed how the fight against fake news remains a work in progress. Google's bans were a drop in the bucket compared with the almost two million publishers that use AdSense. Facebook's new measures were part of a continuing series of small experiments by the company to find out what worked best in displaying news to its users.

"We genuinely asked Google and Facebook for 'moonshots,'" said Jason Kint, the chief executive of Digital Content Next, an online publishing industry group. "We appreciate the work, but based on the numbers, that's hardly even running in place."

Google and Facebook have been in something of a no-win situation in recent months when it comes to fake news. Both companies have been grappling with a widespread backlash over how their sites may have spread rumors on a vast scale, and how little responsibility they take for any of the content that appears on their platforms. The issue came to a head after the American presidential election, when commentators accused Facebook in particular of swaying voters to President Trump through misleading and untrue news articles.

In response, both companies have tried various measures to limit fake news. Google in November said it would ban sites that spread misinformation from AdSense as a way to impair how such sites make money. That same month, Facebook updated some of its policy language, which already said it would not display ads on sites that show misleading or illegal content, to include fake news sites. Facebook has since introduced other changes, including consulting third-party news organizations like The Associated Press and ABC News about the accuracy of articles that users report as being false.

Google's blog post on Wednesday was the first time the company explained the results of its moves against publishers that spread misinformation. The search giant said it reviewed 550 sites "suspected of misrepresenting content to users, including impersonating news organizations" in

November and December. It took action against 340 of those sites and kicked nearly 200 publishers off its network permanently.

Google was careful not to say that these were fake news sites, only sites that deceive users by misrepresenting themselves or their content. This month, Media Matters noted that Google changed the language of its advertising policy, removing the words "fake news." Google said the language change noted by Media Matters involved examples that help explain its policy but were not changes to the actual policy. Google declined to identify the sites or publishers it banned.

Before taking steps to thwart fake news publishers, Google had an existing policy that outlawed publishers of "misrepresentative content," such as websites peddling weight-loss schemes or counterfeit goods. It expanded this policy to include sites impersonating news organizations.

Google was pulled into the fake news debate when Mediaite reported that, in the days after the election, the top result on a Google search for "final election vote count 2016" was a link to an article that incorrectly stated that Mr. Trump, who won the Electoral College, was ahead of his Democratic challenger, Hillary Clinton, in the popular vote.

Google said that its search algorithms fell short but that the company would continue to work to improve its results.

The AdSense system is a major revenue driver for independent web publishers who rely on the network to deliver display advertising on their sites. The publishers are paid when a reader views or clicks on those ads, with a portion of the proceeds going to Google. AdSense is one of the largest advertising networks on the web with nearly two million publishers using the system.

Facebook did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the number of sites it has banned since November.

Trending Topics is a feature on the social network that tells people what popular topics are being discussed on the site. Apart from more transparency around headlines, the changes to the feature on Wednesday included identifying popular topics through the number of publishers posting articles on Facebook about a piece of news, rather than engagement around a single article.

"Today's update may also help prevent hoaxes and fake news from appearing in Trending because the updated system identifies groups of articles shared on Facebook instead of relying solely on mentions of a topic," the company said in a blog post.

Still, industry watchers remain skeptical about the efficacy of these moves.

"Nothing drives clicks better than when the headline is exactly what people want to hear or believe," Ian Schafer, the chief executive and founder of Deep Focus, a digital advertising agency, referring specifically to Google. Mr. Schafer said that without significant changes to the economics and technology of online ads, banning individual sites would not produce change in the long run.