

FAKE NEWS

WHEREAS: In the same year that the Oxford English Dictionary crowned its international word of the year, “post-truth,” Alphabet Inc.’s Google has faced sharp criticism for providing a financial mechanism supporting fabricated content or “fake news” on the Internet.

The “fake news” controversy undermines a core tenet of US democracy — an informed electorate. A December 2016 Pew Research survey found 64 percent of Americans say fabricated news stories cause a great deal of confusion about basic facts of current issues and events. This view was shared widely across incomes, education levels, and partisan affiliations.

Fabricated content reportedly impacted the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. In one instance, a gunman seeking to “self-investigate” fabricated content discharged a shotgun and jeopardized lives at a Washington, D.C. restaurant.

Many fabricated news sites utilize Google’s AdSense network to generate revenue and visibility.

Although Google has committed to “tweaking” its search algorithms and restricted “ad serving on pages that misrepresent” information, AdSense-linked advertisements were reportedly running on countless fake news websites nearly a month after Google announced the restriction.

Google’s search engine results have also been criticized for elevating the display of heinous fabricated news, such as holocaust-denier websites in searches for “holocaust.”

Alphabet is highly vulnerable for its apparent mismanagement of this issue, as fake news promoters are hacking their way to visibility for fake news through strategically gaming ad-buys and algorithms.

In light of the societal crisis generated by the explosion of fake news and related hate speech, failure to effectively manage this issue creates public policy risk. Free speech rights and freedom of expression are also at risk in the face of information blacklists, censorship, legal liability or regulation in the US or abroad.

Pew Research found about half of both U.S. Republicans and Democrats say the government has a “great deal of responsibility” to prevent the spread of “fake news.” The European Union has called out Google for failing to review reported hate speech in a timely manner. Alphabet’s handling of such content has profound implications for the Company’s brand and reputation.

RESOLVED: Shareholders request Alphabet issue a report (at reasonable cost, omitting proprietary or legally privileged information) reviewing the public policy issues associated with fake news (as well as associated hate speech) enabled by Google AdSense Internet advertising mechanisms. The report should review the impact of current fake news flows and management systems on the democratic process, free speech, and a cohesive society, as well as reputational and operational risks from potential public policy developments.

SUPPORTING STATEMENT:

The proponents recommend the report include:

- The extent to which Google’s AdSense blocks ads from fake news sites;
- Strategies and policies to appropriately manage the issue without impact on free speech;
- The extent to which technology, staff or third-parties evaluate fabricated content claims;
- How similar risks are assessed and managed by the company outside of the U.S under authoritarian regimes;
- Whether deploying media literacy programs could better enable users to distinguish fabricated content.