

Musk's X feeds monetization of wartime misinformation

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Influencers are seeking to profit off wartime misinformation on X.

Influencers on X are monetizing misinformation about conflicts in the Middle East, leveraging the platform's contentious policies that researchers say prioritize engagement over accuracy.

Since Elon Musk's turbulent 2022 acquisition of X, formerly Twitter, the site has restored thousands of once-banned accounts and introduced a paid verification system that critics say has boosted conspiracy theorists.

X also rolled out an ad revenue-sharing program for verified users, who often peddle hateful and [false information](#) to profit from the platform.

"Cynical pay-for-play controversialists today deliberately induce anger for engagement to game Musk's platform into giving them more visibility, and therefore more revenue for their views," Imran Ahmed, chief executive of the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH), told AFP.

X has seen a tsunami of falsehoods about the ongoing war between Israel and the Palestinian militant group Hamas, fueled partly by prominent US influencers such as Jackson Hinkle, who last month falsely claimed a video showed Iran bombing American military bases in Iraq.

The incendiary post came amid widespread concerns about a wider conflagration in the Middle East.

Using a reverse image search, AFP fact-checkers found the video actually depicted an attack in Iraq's Kurdistan region.

In another provocative post debunked by AFP, Hinkle wrongly claimed that Yemen had declared "war with Israel" in support of the Palestinians.

While Yemen's Huthi rebels have targeted Israel with missiles and drones, neither they nor the country's internationally recognized government has formally declared war.

'Topsy-turvy'

In addition to raising tens of thousands of dollars on crowdfunding sites, Hinkle offers "premium content" to subscribers on X for \$3 per month.

"Your support helps me continue exposing the Deep State after I was banned & demonetized by YouTube, Twitch, PayPal & Venmo," his appeal says.

When reached by AFP, Hinkle—whose false posts have garnered millions of views—refused to say how much revenue he was generating on X, instead criticizing coverage of the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East.

Hinkle makes at least \$3,000 a month from paid subscribers, according to a rough CCDH estimate based on the engagement data of his subscriber-only posts.

Last August, Hinkle disclosed on X that he also earned \$1,693 through the ad revenue-sharing scheme, while complaining that other users with smaller engagement were getting bigger payouts.

Britain-based creator Sulaiman Ahmed and Danish physician Anastasia Maria Loupis—both of whom AFP has repeatedly fact-checked for war-related misinformation—are also reaping the benefits of X's verification and paid subscriber programs.

Neither responded to requests for comment.

CCDH's Ahmed said Musk has "created a topsy-turvy platform on which authoritative sources struggle to be heard above the noise—while liars and hate actors are put on a pedestal, generating revenue for themselves and the platform."

X did not respond to AFP's request for comment.

'Unrealistic'

To be eligible for ad revenue sharing, users must meet requirements such as subscribing to X's \$8 per month premium subscription and having at least 500 followers.

Last year, Musk said posts with Community Notes—an X feature that allows users to refute claims and offer additional context—would be "ineligible for revenue share."

"The idea is to maximize the incentive for accuracy over sensationalism," Musk wrote on X.

But Jack Brewster, from the media watchdog NewsGuard, told AFP that "viral posts advancing misinformation frequently do not get flagged by Community Notes."

In October, NewsGuard analyzed 250 of the most popular posts promoting one of 10 prominent false or unsubstantiated narratives about the Israel-Hamas war.

Only 32 percent of them had been flagged by a Community Note, it found.

The following month, NewsGuard identified ads from 86 major companies—including top brands, governments, and nonprofits—on viral posts advancing "false or egregiously misleading claims about the Israel-Hamas war."

That included an ad for the FBI on a post from Hinkle that falsely claimed a video showed an Israeli military helicopter firing on its own citizens.

The video actually showed Israeli war planes over Gaza, NewsGuard said, adding that the post—viewed nearly two million times—did not have a Community Note.

"Community Notes as currently structured is not a system that scales to cover all contexts," Jacob Shapiro, a Princeton University professor who served on the program's advisory group before Musk's acquisition, told AFP.

"To expect volunteer labor alone to capture... deceptive content as a defense against allowing people to monetize that content reflects unrealistic expectations for what the tool can do."

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