

Fair Advertising: An Initiative Highlighting Advertising on Disinformation Websites

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The ability to make money online is one of many contributing factors to the spread of disinformation. This was highlighted in a 2017 study by the Open Foundation Society Fund¹ that focused on income generated through advertising space on websites spreading disinformation.

This study, entitled *Conspiracy Websites Sell Advertisement Worth Millions Per Year*, which reviewed 120 Czech and Slovak websites that systematically publish fake news and conspiracy theories, concluded that 64 % of these websites also sell advertising space and make approximately 23,9 to 32,4 million Czech crowns a year. Most of these websites use Google advertising network, but also networks such as AdForm, Sklik or Etarget. Of those 120 websites, 78 depend on advertising revenue as one of their few sources of income. At the same time, most of the advertising income ends up in the pockets of only a few of the biggest servers that have the highest number of readers.

Even though private companies have been able to blacklist websites spreading disinformation using one simple checkbox in their advertising campaigns on the Sklik platform since 2018², many of them – often without knowing it – still advertise on these websites. This is not necessarily due to the reluctance of individual companies, but more often a result of the online advertising system itself. In this system, advertising is not bought on individual websites, but “auctioned” online with payments based on the frequency of advertising displays or

¹ *Konspirační weby prodají ročně reklamu za miliony*, *Nadace Open Society Fund Praha* (<https://osf.cz/2017/08/22/studie-konspiracni-weby-prodaji-rocne-reklamu-za-miliony/>)

² Sklik nabídne klientům možnost neinzerovat na webech označených iniciativou Konšpirátori.sk jako dezinformační, *Sblog* (<https://blog.seznam.cz/2018/02/sklik-nabidne-klientum-moznost-neinzerovat-webech-oznacenyh-iniciativou-konspiratori-sk-jako-dezinformacni/>)

engagement with advertisements. In other words, advertisement choices are made on the basis of how much visibility and how many clicks it receives.

Specific advertisements are linked to target groups. It means that the topic of an article and the profile of a reader are matched together automatically to create an effective advertising. At the same time, however, it can lead to a situation where the advertiser might not be aware of where their advertisement is being displayed.

To raise awareness of how the advertising system works and its role in financing the spread of disinformation online, the *Fair Advertising* initiative was created by two young people in October 2019. This initiative notifies companies when their advertisements appear on websites known to be spreading disinformation so that they are aware that they are financially supporting these websites with their advertising payments.

This initiative is one of the outcomes of the hackathon called *How to strengthen free and democratic society?* held by the Institute for Politics and Society together with the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom 12th to 13th of October 2019³.

The main communication platform for the initiative is their Twitter account AdvertiseFAIR⁴. This account posts screenshots of advertisements found on websites spreading disinformation and tags specific companies connected to these advertisements so that they can react.

This project uses tweets in order to connect the public with the advertisers. The initiative itself does not focus on identifying websites spreading disinformation and relies on the list of Konšpirátori.sk website⁵, created by the civic association Konšpirátori, which identifies problematic websites and then uses a panel of experts judging the websites through publicly available criteria in order to evaluate the risks associated with them.

³ Hackathon: jak posílit svobodnou a demokratickou společnost, *Institut pro politiku a společnost* <https://www.politikaspolecnost.cz/aktualne/hackathon/>

⁴ *Twitter AdvertiseFair* (<https://twitter.com/AdvertiseFAIR>)

⁵ Zoznam stránok so sporným obsahom, *Konšpirátori.sk* (<https://www.konspiratori.sk/zoznam-stranok.php>)

In the four months following the launch of the *Fair Advertising* initiative, 129 companies were notified regarding their advertisements on disinformation websites. Only 24 of these contacted companies responded to this notification. Most of these responses, however, were positive. For example, Česká Spořitelna Bank responded that the advertisement on AC24 website was a mistake in the advertising setting and they also stressed the company's commitment not to advertise on websites spreading disinformation. Other companies were less frank in their reaction, claiming that they were not able to influence the placement of their advertisement. These comments highlight the reality that many companies have insufficient knowledge concerning how to control their online advertising space.

The small number of reactions also demonstrates that companies are not fully aware that their own advertisement can be used to finance fake news. This fact seems even more alarming as advertisements are often displayed next to articles with content that could harm the company's reputation or potentially lower sales of their products.

Raiffeisenbank, for example, advertised alongside an article entitled "Europe is so weak that China could buy it" with a banner featuring a big button "I WANT THAT".⁶ Telecommunications provider O2 advertised a new package of 6GB data next to an article warning about the dangers of 5G: "Exposed: 5G is an attack weapon"⁷, and Astratex, part of the Agrofert conglomerate, advertised their products next to an article claiming that the end of Austria was coming with the first female Muslim minister.⁸

The placement of advertisements on disinformation websites is not only an issue for companies but also for non-profit organizations and government institutions. One organization found to be advertising on a problematic website was the UN children's fund UNICEF. When notified of this by Fair Advertising, they promised to withdraw the advertisements.⁹ Additionally, advertisements from organizations like Forum 2000 and Light for the World were visible on

⁶ *Twitter AdvertiseFair* (<https://twitter.com/AdvertiseFAIR/status/1185451442418716672>)

⁷ *Twitter AdvertiseFair* (<https://twitter.com/AdvertiseFAIR/status/1203627180598743042>)

⁸ *Twitter AdvertiseFair* (<https://twitter.com/AdvertiseFAIR/status/1219193137446445056>)

⁹ *Twitter AdvertiseFair* (<https://twitter.com/AdvertiseFAIR/status/1186545297410924545>)



problematic websites, the former promoting their Democracy festival 2019¹⁰ while the latter focused on their mission of treating blindness in developing countries. On the governmental level, an advertisement of the Karlovy Vary region, for example, was placed alongside an article arguing that American nuclear arsenal is dependent on outdated information technology. Despite being notified of their financial connections to websites spreading disinformation, there was no reaction to this warning.

The debate surrounding financing disinformation websites through online advertising is taking place in the Czech Republic, but the information collected during the first four months of the Fair Advertising project demonstrates that companies still have limited knowledge of this issue. Fortunately, Fair Advertising is not the only project that seeks to increase awareness of this issue among the companies. In December 2019, the Association of Communication Agencies (AKA) urged advertising agencies not to place commercials on websites spreading disinformation because it could harm the reputation of their clients.¹¹ In February 2020, the NELEŽ initiative was created, which helps companies better control their advertising placements so as to avoid websites spreading disinformation.¹² The hope is that the unified messages that these initiatives promote will lead to better awareness of how online advertising works which will hopefully reduce financial gains for disinformation disseminators.

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¹⁰ *Twitter AdvertiseFair* (<https://twitter.com/AdvertiseFAIR/status/1184049144870178817>)

¹¹ *Neinzerujte na dezinformačních webech, vyzývá česká reklamní asociace, Lupa.cz* (<https://www.lupa.cz/aktuality/neinzerujte-na-dezinformacnich-webech-vyzyva-ceska-reklamni-asociace/>)

¹² *Postav se za pravdu proti dezinformacím, Nelež* (<https://www.nelez.cz/>)