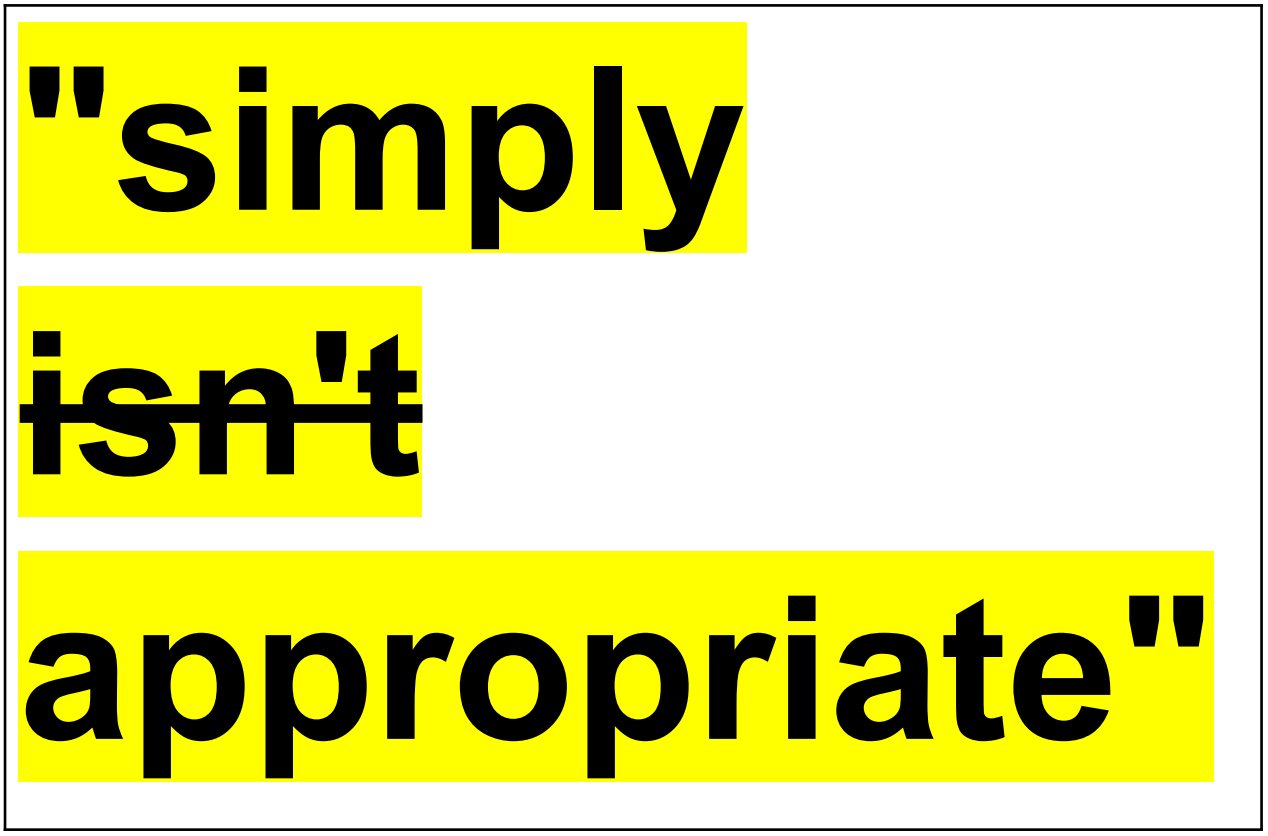


The videos that show why **YouTube needs fact-checking**, just when they announced they don’t

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PERIODISMO PARA QUE NO TE LA CUELEN

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Introduction

In 2022 YouTube formally committed to collaborate with European fact-checking organizations and to use their fact-checks in its service for the benefit of the users. It was a key part of its participation in the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation. Three years and many broken promises later, YouTube has officially announced it is backtracking on their word.

As the Code of Practice on Disinformation becomes an official code of conduct under the Digital Services Act and its commitments gain legal relevancy, YouTube have decided they do not want to collaborate with fact-checkers - suddenly what was OK as a voluntary commitment becomes untenable when there is an actual obligation to change failed policies.

According to Axios, Google's President of global affairs Kent Walker announced their decision to the European Commission in a letter in which **he said that fact-checking "simply isn't appropriate or effective for our services"**. As fact-checkers do, we have looked for the evidence around that claim as well as some additional context that might be useful to understand it. Now we would like to present that evidence to you.

In the following pages you will learn of four YouTube videos containing extremely harmful disinformation in four EU official languages. All of them are possibly in violation of YouTube's own community guidelines and, at the time of publication, none has received any kind of action by the platform. Some have accumulated over a million views for as long as 7 years, while others are hosted on channels with hundreds of thousands of subscribers that have been publishing this kind of content for a decade. YouTube has been either unwilling to apply its own policies on them or generally unaware of the existence of those contents, which both would point to the need of revising its risk mitigation measures.

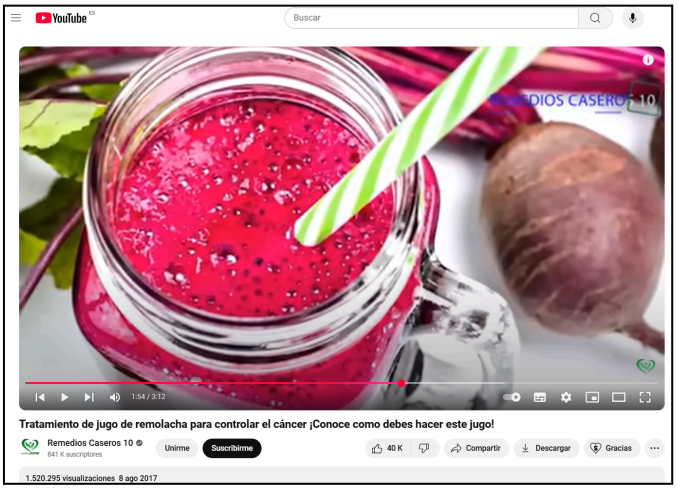
Obviously, none of the videos has a fact-checking label or any kind of concrete misinformation warning because YouTube does not use them, but we sure think it would have been "appropriate" for their users to see some additional context when **they are told not to follow medical advice if they have cancer, or when they hear the president of the EU commission is resigning in disgrace, or if they are concerned about a war with China, or if they are about to give their credit card number to a YouTube channel that really looks like their utility company but is not**.

#1. (Not) curing cancer with red beet juice

1.5 million views, 7 years untouched by YouTube

Language: Spanish. **Debunk**: Maldita.es (Spain). **Archived**: Ghost Archive. **Views**: 1.5 million

"Cancer starts dying in only two days" is the ambitious yet false promise in the first words of this video that has reached **1.5 million people over the last 7 years**. The narrator offers a recipe for a juice whose main ingredient is red beet and that has allegedly "already cured over 50,000 people".



The video adds that actual treatments such as chemotherapy are "very painful", though probably not as painful as the testimonies in the comments -more than 800- where cancer patients and their families desperately seek for this miraculous cure:

"I already went through it but now it might have come back so I'll treat it with this"
"I am 23 and I have uterus cancer. I don't want to die and I'll take any remedy"
"I will give it to my sick father, thanks for the video"
"I was just diagnosed with throat cancer, I'll take that juice"
"God bless you for this medicine!"

From the comments of the video, over the last 7 years

As Maldita.es explains, there is evidence of nutrition being a factor that increases or decreases the risk of getting cancer, but there is no scientific proof of any combination of food that serves as a cure against cancer.

The channel has over 800,000 subscribers and hosts more than 750 videos in which it often promotes different "natural cures" for very grave ailments. YouTube's Medical Misinformation Policy prohibits the promotion of "practices that have not been approved by local health authorities or the World Health Organization as safe or effective". Specifically, YouTube lists as an example of what is not acceptable in its platform **"content that claims that there is a guaranteed cure for cancer outside of approved treatment".** Yet this video, and dozens of others, accumulate millions of views and face no action by YouTube despite being there for years.

Simply appropriate?

We deem **appropriate** that the cancer patients and their families who are searching for information on YouTube would be allowed to see a fact-checking label alongside that video that could say, for example:

"Be careful. The National Cancer Institute says there is no proof that any nutrition trend, food, vitamin, mineral, dietary supplement, herb, or combination of these can slow cancer, cure it, or keep it from coming back"

#2. Von der Leyen resigned! Buy crypto!

A disinformation campaign to attract investors

Language: German. **Debunk**: CORRECTIV (Germany). **Archived**: Ghost Archive. **Views**: +300,000



This prolific channel has managed to publish more than 9.500 videos in 10 years that together have amassed over 220 million views. It has repeatedly spread sensational stories such as this one about the alleged (and false) resignation of European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen. The narrator appears astonished that "Media is not covering this story" and explains a convoluted corruption scheme that allegedly forced von der Leyen to resign. It has been watched more than 300,000 times and over 2,000 people in the comments are offering their thoughts as if it was real news.

The channel, however, has a clear stake in making its videos catchy even if untrue. Alongside the bombshell revelations, it offers personal investment advice and promotes platforms to buy stock or cryptocurrency to its more than 260,000 subscribers and the wider public. This kind of attention-grabbing clickbait disinformation has been identified by German fact-checkers such as CORRECTIV and DPA as a usual tactic to gain views and generate ad revenue, or to redirect users to websites that gather and exploit their personal data.

It appears to be one of the **"deceptive practices that take advantage of the YouTube community"** that are prohibited under the platform's Community Guidelines, so the question is: why has no action been taken more than a year later?

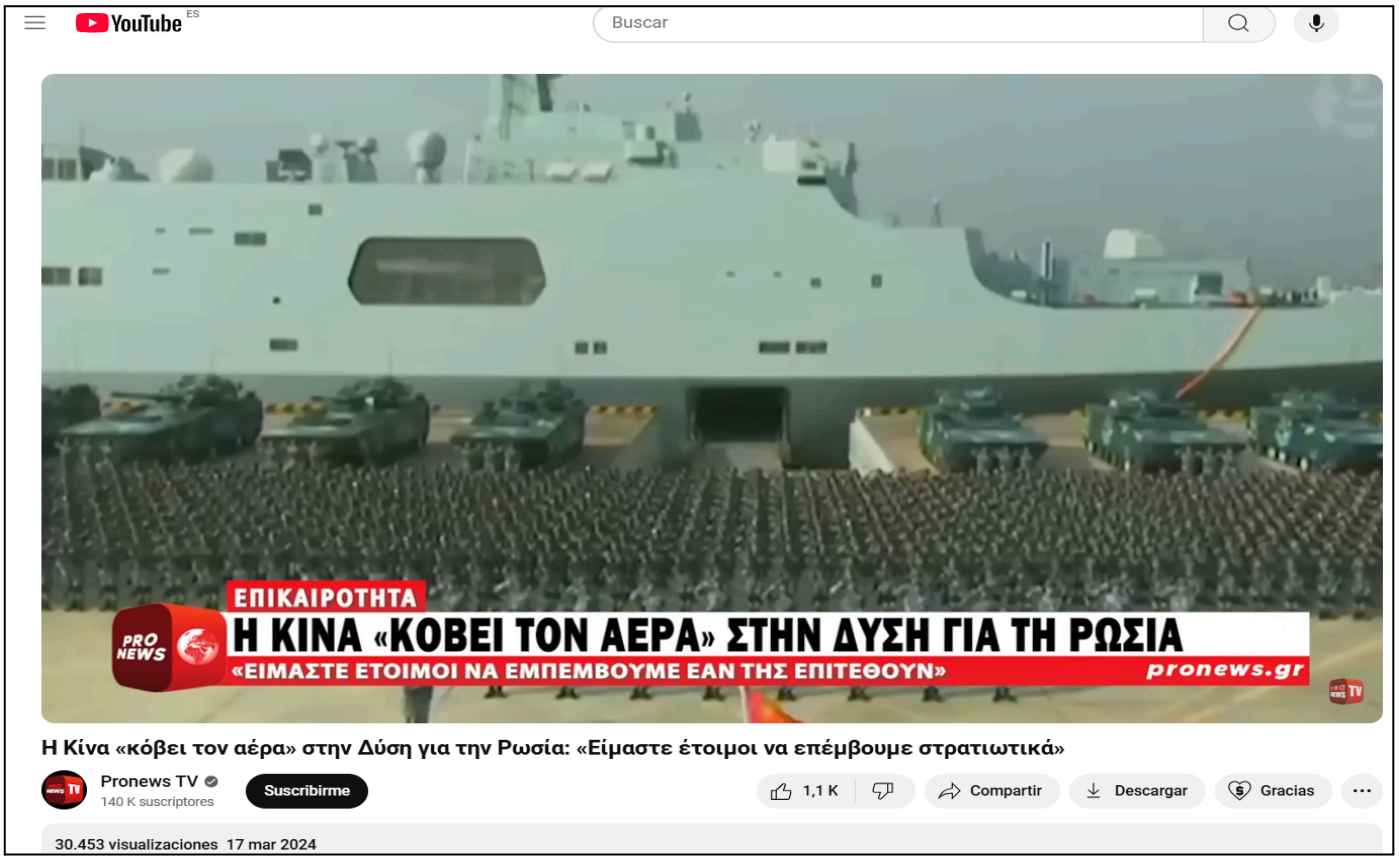
Simply appropriate?

Independent fact-checkers identified a coordinated effort to disseminate this disinformation in several YouTube channels and in other platforms when YouTube could not catch it or failed to act on it. It seems **appropriate** that hundreds of thousands of users would have been able to see a fact-checking label that could read: "Ursula von der Leyen did not resign in October 2023, according to independent fact-checkers and the European Commission".

#3. China “ready” to fight alongside Russia

False statements, old videos

Language: Greek. **Debunk**: Ellinika Hoaxes (Greece). **Archived**: Ghost Archive. **Views**: +30,000



If a spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Defense would have really said that the country was “ready to intervene militarily” if there was an attack on Russia, the international media would have probably covered the story. However, it was a Greek YouTube channel the one who got the scoop and broke it to its 140,000 subscribers.

As Ellinika Hoaxes clarifies in its fact-check, there is not any record of those words being uttered but the channel used an unrelated video of the president of China speaking to some military units in what could be a contradiction of YouTube’s policy on misattributed content that bans **“content that may pose a serious risk by falsely claiming that old footage from a past event is from a current event”**.

Simply appropriate?

It would have been easy for YouTube, had it got **appropriate** risk mitigations measures to deal with this kind of content, to warn its European users that no such alarming statement had been made, while also pointing out that the footage illustrating the false claim was old and unrelated.

#4. Just like your electricity company, but a fraud

400,000 impersonations of a public utility company

Language: Polish. **Debunk**: Demagog.pl (Poland) **Archived**: Ghost Archive. **Views**: +200,000



It is not very normal that a YouTube channel with 76 subscriptors and only two videos has received almost 400,000 views. It certainly smells like someone has been using YouTube's ads to promote its content, but the really concerning aspect is that the channel is also impersonating a public energy company in Poland in an attempt to defraud users. This goes once again against YouTube's stated rules, the Community Guidelines, which establish that **impersonating a channel is not permitted**. In the listed examples of such violations, YouTube specifies that you cannot use a logo from someone else in your channel, which is exactly the case here.

According to Demagog.pl, fraudsters are using different techniques to promote their content through the impersonation of trusted institutions and also to circumvent YouTube's advertiser verification systems by using proxies in places like Gibraltar. The company itself, PGE, has denounced these impersonations.

Simply appropriate?

Had YouTube considered it **appropriate** to collaborate with fact-checkers, it would have learnt about these accounts that violate its rules and put their users at risk. Also, it would have been able to prevent those bad actors from spending money in ads to more effectively disseminate their deception.

Acknowledgements

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Special thanks to Sara Fischer at Axios whose scoop allowed everyone to read Mr. Walker's letter to the European Commission in which he said that fact-checking "simply isn't appropriate" for YouTube. Hopefully these examples can be useful for him and others to understand how mistaken that assertion is.