Google’s plan to block news links could put lives in danger as wildfires rage, minister warns

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Marie Woolf

Ottawa - Heritage Minister Pablo Rodriguez warned Friday that Google’s plan to remove links to Canadian news stories from search results in this country could put people's lives in danger, by not giving them access to information such as about wildfires raging here.

But Google said it would not block SOS safety alerts or information about forest fires or floods, or other crisis situations, if it exits from news. It told The Globe and Mail that weeks ago it began briefing federal, provincial and local public-safety officials to reassure them that it would continue to provide information during a crisis.

In a BBC interview Friday, Mr. Rodriguez said one of the "consequences" of withdrawing from news "is they're putting people's lives in danger."

“You live in a region where wildfires are going on and raging and extremely dangerous and you're going to want access to news and see what's going on and you won't be able to see it," he said.

Speaking the day after Google warned it would remove links to Canadian news stories in this country in response to the federal Online News Act, the minister said he was surprised by the tech giant's announcement, and speculated that it could be "a negotiation strategy."

Mr. Rodriguez told The Globe that Google and Meta, which owns Facebook and Instagram, are trying to send a message to other countries, including the United States and Britain, about what could happen if they bring in legislation like the Online News Act, also known as Bill C-18.

The legislation was designed to support the Canadian news industry, which has seen its advertising migrate to the Big Tech platforms. It would make Facebook and Google negotiate to compensate news outlets in Canada for posting or linking to their work.

Meta has also warned it plans to block the posting and sharing of Canadian news stories on both platforms in this country in response to the legislation, which will come into force in about six months.

"Google and Facebook are trying to send a message not only to Canada, but also to France, England, Germany, the United States," Mr. Rodriguez said.

"We're going to keep standing our ground. After all, if the government can't stand up for Canadians against tech giants, who will?"

The U.S. Congress and California are currently debating parallel legislation to make the tech giants compensate news organizations for using their work. In Washington, the legislation has support from both Democrats and Republicans.

Danielle Coffey, president and chief executive of America's News-Media Alliance, said Google and Facebook's actions in Canada were being viewed south of the border as an effort to send a warning to U.S. legislators.

"It is safe to assume that every time the platforms have threatened to pull down news, they are thinking ahead. It's to fend off legislation in other areas," she said.

But Michael Geist, the University of Ottawa's Canada research chair in internet law, said the Online News Bill, which had prompted both tech giants to plan to
exit the news business in Canada, "may become the model of what not to do" internationally.

He said the stakes were now extremely high with no chance of putting the bill on hold after an amendment tabled in the final stages of the bill in the Senate meant that it must come into force within six months of royal assent.

Jeff Elgie, CEO of the news group Village Media - which owns and operates 25 publications in Ontario - sent a note to his staff after Google's announcement this week, saying he was "happy" about it because it might force a resolution with the government. He said he thought Bill C-18 was a "bad bill from the start."

"I believe that Google and Facebook being unified and clear about their response will force the government back to the table. Why? Because if they were to abandon the industry there would be no industry left," he wrote. "A solution must now be found."

Mr. Rodriguez said in his BBC interview that Google is "looking for clarity" from the government and he expressed a hope to continue negotiations with the tech giant.

"Clarity is coming in the next few months through the regulations. So I'm not sure why they did this. Maybe it's a negotiation strategy," he said. "We have time to negotiate. Let's negotiate and see what we can do."

Now that the Online News Act has passed, the government has the power to issue regulations, setting out how it would be implemented, as does the regulator, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission.

In his blog explaining its decision to remove links to Canadian news, Kent Walker, Google's president of global affairs, implied a withdrawal from news could still be avoided if the government can find a compromise that meets the tech giants' concerns.

Google still plans to "participate in the regulatory process" that will determine how the bill is implemented, he wrote. "We hope the Government will be able to outline a viable path forward."

Google has argued Bill C-18 is heavy-handed and would impose unlimited financial liability on the company. It says that under the legislation, it has no obvious path to exemption from regulation even if it negotiates more voluntary deals with news organizations.

Paul Deegan, president and CEO of News Media Canada, predicted that Google's removing links to Canadian news stories could drive people in Canada to other search engines.

"Blocking access to fact-based, fact-checked news from authoritative publishers goes squarely against Google's stated mission to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful," he said. "It would harm user experience and devalue and degrade their search engine, which would provide an opening for Microsoft in an attractive and lucrative G7 market where Google's annual revenue is in the range of $5-billion."

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