

International

Twitter admits phone numbers meant for security used for ads

Facebook extends fact-checking program to 10 new African states

SAN FRANCISCO: Twitter has apologized after “inadvertently” using phone numbers and email addresses for advertising even though the personal data was provided for account security. Twitter users’ phone numbers and email addresses - submitted to allow for account authentication - were matched with advertisers’ own data to enable targeted ads. “When you provided an email address or phone number for safety or security purposes this data may have inadvertently been used for advertising purposes,” Twitter said in an online post. “This was an error and we apologize.”

None of the user data was shared with partners outside the company, and it was unclear how many people were affected, the San Francisco-based company said. The issue was fixed in mid-September, Twitter said. “We’re very sorry this happened and are taking steps to make sure we don’t make a mistake like this again,” Twitter said. Privacy and internet data are hot political topics worldwide, with tech giants such as Twitter and Facebook in the crosshairs of regulators.

Fact-checking program

In another development, Facebook has announced the expansion of its third-party fact-checking program to 10 new African countries in partnership with Agence France-Presse and other media. The program will be available in Ethiopia, Zambia, Somalia and Burkina Faso in partnership with AFP; in Uganda and Tanzania with Pesa Check and AFP; in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Ivory Coast with France 24 and AFP and in Guinea and Ghana in partnership with Nigerian fact-checking platform Dubawa.

“The expansion of third-party fact-checking to now cover 15 countries in a little over a year shows first-hand our commitment and dedication to the continent, along-

side our recent local language expansion as part of this program,” said Kojo Boakye, Facebook head of public policy, Africa. “Taking steps to help tackle false news on Facebook is a responsibility we take seriously, we know misinformation is a problem, and these are important steps in continuing to address this issue.”

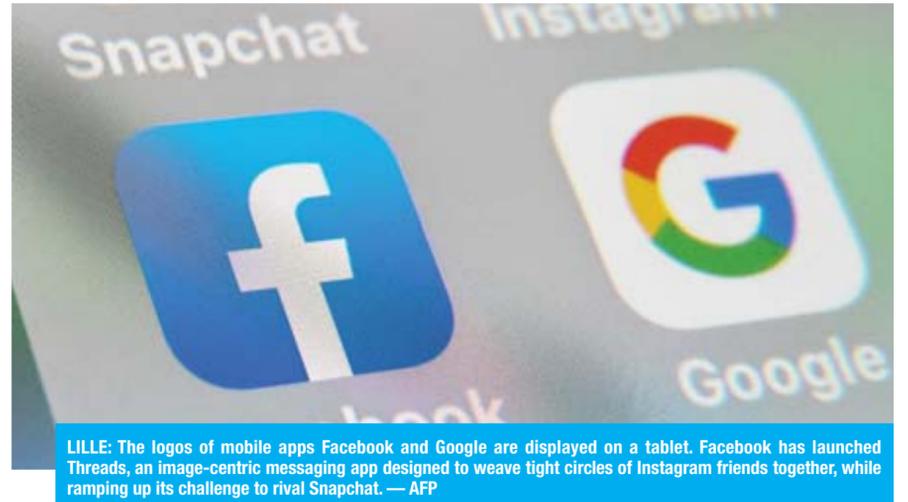
“We know that third-party fact-checking alone is not the solution, it is one of many initiatives and programs we are investing in to help to improve the quality of information people see on Facebook.” “AFP is delighted to be



Facebook plugs booming business version into Portal

expanding its fact-checking project with Facebook. We are known for the high quality of our journalism from across Africa and we will be leveraging our unparalleled network of bureaus and journalists on the continent to combat misinformation,” said AFP Global News Director Phil Chetwynd.

AFP has fact-checkers in nearly 30 countries, working in nine languages. Eric Mugendi, managing director of Pesa Check, which will provide fact-checking services in Swahili and English, said: “Social networks like Facebook haven’t just changed how Africans consume the news ... They shape our perceptions of the world. “This project



LILLE: The logos of mobile apps Facebook and Google are displayed on a tablet. Facebook has launched Threads, an image-centric messaging app designed to weave tight circles of Instagram friends together, while ramping up its challenge to rival Snapchat. — AFP

helps us dramatically expand our fact-checking to debunk claims that could cause real-world harm.”

Booming business version

Meanwhile, Facebook said Tuesday its Portal smart screens would be incorporated in its Workplace social network for businesses, which has grown to more than three million paid users. Workplace paid users grew by more than 50 percent in the past eight months, the com-

pany said as it kicked off its second annual Flow conference at a hotel in the Silicon Valley city of Menlo Park.

The Workplace platform was launched three years ago as a separate, private social network tailored for companies with tools for productivity and collaboration on the job. Workplace rivals include services fielded by Slack, Salesforce and Microsoft, which aim to foster better collaboration and eliminate dependence on overloaded email inboxes. —Agencies

Ethiopia’s peacemaking prime minister emerges as the Nobel favorite

NAIROBI: During a high-level meeting at Ethiopia’s foreign ministry in July, officials were shocked by social media reports that their prime minister was visiting Eritrea. No one in the room had been informed of Abiy Ahmed’s trip, his second since clinching a peace deal last year that ended two decades of hostility between the two neighbors. “The foreign office was not in the loop,” said a senior official who was present. “We learned of it from the Eritrean media, on Facebook and Twitter.”

The surprise visit is typical of Abiy, who both fans and critics say often relies on bold personal initiatives and charisma to drive change instead of working through government institutions. Nebiat Getachew, the foreign ministry spokesman, said policy was well co-ordinated but he did not confirm that Abiy had made the July trip without informing the ministry. The deal with Eritrea won Abiy international plaudits. He is the bookmakers’ favourite to win a Nobel Peace Prize on Friday after climate activist Greta Thunberg.

But Abiy’s unpredictable style annoys some Ethiopians. It is unclear how much of the fractious ruling coalition-some form of which has been in power since 1991 - backs his reforms, or how durable those reforms would be without his leadership. He has already survived one assassination attempt: a grenade thrown at a rally last year. Lasting change cannot be built through a “cult of personality”, said Comfort Ero, Africa program director at the International Crisis Group think tank.

“None of Abiy’s promised transformational reforms are going to have any solid foundations unless he works through the institutions,” she said. Ethiopia has been among Africa’s fastest growing economies for more than a decade. But uncertainty over Abiy’s ability to carry out all his reforms worries both citizens and the foreign investors he has been courting to develop the country’s antiquated telecoms and banking sectors.

Personal style or canny strategy?

Some observers say Abiy, a former military officer specializing in cyber intelligence, will sometimes bypass ministries because his reforms must maintain their breakneck momentum or become mired in bureaucracy. Those reforms - including unbanning political parties, releasing imprisoned journalists and prosecuting officials accused of torture - have drawn ecstatic crowds at rallies. “Abiy seems to have relied on his charismatic rule,” said Dereje Feyissa, a professor at Addis Ababa University. “The question is whether this is sustainable. Euphoria is subsiding.”

Other observers say Abiy’s rapid changes are a deliberate attempt to wrong-foot opponents from the previous administration, which was dominated by Tigrayans, a small but powerful ethnic group. Abiy, 43, is from the Oromo group, the nation’s largest, which spearheaded the protests that forced his predecessor to resign. Since taking office in April 2018, Abiy’s government has arrested or fired many senior officials - mainly Tigrayans - for corruption or rights abuses. “In the first six or seven months, he undercut the institutions ... The institutions were either not working or working against his agenda,” said Jawar Mohammed, an Oromo activist and informal adviser to the prime minister. “I don’t think he could have travelled this far without doing that.”

Foreign policy

One of Abiy’s biggest victories was the peace deal, signed in July last year, which ended a nearly 20-year military stalemate with Eritrea following their 1998-2000 border war. Asle Sveen, a historian who has written several books about the Nobel Peace Prize, told Reuters the deal made Abiy exactly the kind of candidate Alfred Nobel had envisaged for the prize. “The peace deal has ended a long conflict with Eritrea, and he is very popular for having done this, and he is doing democratic reforms internally,” Sveen said.

But some benefits of the peace were short-lived. Land borders opened in July but closed in December with no official explanation. Will Davison, an Ethiopia analyst at Crisis Group, said that might be because Eritrea’s president had hoped Abiy would crack down harder on the old Tigray-dominated administration, which had fought



Abiy Ahmed

the war and refused to accept international arbitration over their disputed border. Nebiat, the foreign ministry spokesman, said Eritrea and Ethiopia had restored diplomatic relations, air links and phone connections. “Other engagements are well underway to further institutionalize relations,” he said.

Personal initiatives

Abiy’s diplomatic forays - like his surprise trip - tend to be bold personal initiatives, analysts and diplomats said. The foreign ministry has been “completely sidelined,” said the senior ministry official, adding that “our interests abroad may be jeopardized”. He said Abiy had engaged with Eritrea, Somalia and wealthy Gulf states on major policy issues without building consensus within his government.

Nebiat disputed that. “There is always a well coordinated foreign policy and diplomacy implementation within the Ethiopian government,” he said. “Any other claims are simply baseless.” Some nations are pleased by Abiy’s personal touch. After Sudanese police killed more than 100 protesters in June, Abiy flew to Khartoum to convince Sudan’s new military rulers and the opposition to restart talks, and persuaded Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to back his mediation. The talks led to a power-sharing accord in August. “Abiy played a key role,” said Amjad Farid, a senior representative of the civilian group that led talks with the military. — Reuters

Rescued from sex slavery, red tape traps Bangladeshi girls in India

SOUTH 24 PARGANAS: Priya was 15 when a relative in Bangladesh tricked her with the promise of a dream job as a singer, dragged her, and trafficked her across the border into the sex trade in India. After several failed attempts to escape the brothel in the eastern state of West Bengal where she was trapped for six years, Priya was rescued along with other girls from Bangladesh and India in a raid by police and anti-trafficking campaigners. Heading home and pursuing her musical ambitions beckoned, or so she thought. But three years after her rescue, the prospects of making it back to her family appeared ever more distant.

For Priya, now 24, was one of about 180 Bangladeshi sex trafficking survivors stuck in shelters in West Bengal - with many having waited years for official clearance to go home due to complex and lengthy bureaucracy across the two countries. “How long can I wait?”, said Priya, using her ‘brother name’ to hide her identity for fear of being shamed in Bangladesh. “Maybe I won’t go now even if they ask me to,” she said last month at a shelter, sitting in a room adorned with paper roses.

Victims wishing to return home must first gain approval from police, social workers, judges, border forces and bureaucrats at both state and federal level, a process that involves about 15 steps, analysis by the Thomson Reuters Foundation has revealed. While the two nations are working towards faster returns, the long waits facing dozens of survivors could stymie their efforts to start life afresh back home and leave them vulnerable to being trafficked again, according to activists.

“Living in a shelter ... can be traumatic,” said Tariqul Islam of Justice and Care, a charity that reintegrates victims in Bangladesh. “When they return after two years or more, it becomes hard for them to adjust to the changes and recover.” “Traffickers often keep track of their victims even after they return home. When they notice that the girl does not have a job, or is finding it hard to adjust, they target her again.”

Faster returns afoot

Thousands of Bangladeshis are trafficked to India each year - many of whom are sold into prostitution or domestic servitude - anti-slavery activists say, although official data is lacking. In the last eight years, Bangladesh has brought home about 1,750 trafficking survivors from India, predominantly women and girls in West Bengal and the western state of Maharashtra. However anti-slavery charities that help victims in India say most are kept in shelters for years - first awaiting the conclusion of court proceedings, then the repatriation process.

Justice is often slow and convictions are rare. One in four trafficking cases in India leads to conviction, while in Bangladesh, only 30 convictions have been secured under a 2012 law, with more than 4,000 cases still awaiting trial. India and Bangladesh signed a partnership in 2015 to speed up repatriations, but how a victim is treated - whether it is their experience with the judiciary or the wait to go home - varies from one Indian state to another, according to activists. —Reuters

Pollution app back in Vietnam after online abuse ‘campaign’

HANOI: A leading pollution-monitoring app returned to Apple and Google Play stores in Vietnam yesterday, days after it was removed having been bombarded with negative comments online. The Swiss-based company AirVisual said this week it was the target of a “coordinated campaign” of abuse after publishing data showing several days of “unhealthy” pollution levels in Hanoi.

The data prompted a blitz of negative comments on AirVisual’s app and Facebook pages from Vietnamese users accusing the company of publishing misleading data to sell its products. Online abuse is rampant in Vietnam, where state-aligned netizens frequently attack activists and sites deemed anti-government. The app and AirVisual’s Facebook page were taken down, but the company said yesterday the service was back up in the country after its pages were flooded with positive messages from Vietnamese users instead.

The support showed the “strength and resolve of the community in Vietnam to raise awareness about the environment and tackle the air pollution problem”, the company said in a statement. “Efforts to suppress open and free air pollution data, rather than address the emission sources... have created the problem,” it added. “Great app! Thank you for your contribution to the world community for awareness of air pollution issues,” said Tam Dam on AirVisual’s Vietnam Facebook page.

Like much of Southeast Asia, Vietnam’s major cities have been plagued with smog in recent years linked to the rapid rise of coal-heavy industries, agricultural burn-



HANOI: A vendor waits for customers along a pavement in Hanoi. —AFP

ing and vehicle emissions. Last week the capital city’s air quality index reached above 150 - the threshold for “unhealthy” for several days in a row, prompting the government to warn vulnerable groups to stay inside. AirVisual is one of the most widely relied on pollution monitors in the country, and also sells purifiers, monitors and face masks.

Vietnamese social media had gone into overdrive over

the weekend after an influential teacher took to Facebook questioning AirVisual’s data in a post that quickly went viral. He accused the company of publishing pollution data in order to sell its equipment, sparking thousands of negative reviews and comments on AirVisual’s Vietnam pages. The teacher, Vu Khac Ngoc, later apologized on his Facebook page and said he hoped the app would soon return. —AFP