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This Week's Stories

Facebook Runs Full Page Newspaper Ads Against Fake News In France Ahead Of The Election

April 14, 2017

In just nine days, France is going to vote for their next president — there's going to be a second round face-off in three weeks too. And it looks like Facebook wants to avoid another fake news scandal as the company is preemptively running full page ads in major French newspapers.

The ad gives ten tips to spot fake news on the internet. You'll find it today in the paper edition of Le Monde, Les Échos, Libération, Le Parisien, 20 Minutes and potentially other newspapers. Facebook tells you to check the URL, the date, the photos, the facts in the article and more. It's similar to the tips that started to appear at the top of the news feed in the Facebook app. You can check it out at the end of the article.

Facebook also shared an update on its efforts to fight fake news on its security blog yesterday. 30,000 Facebook accounts have been banned because they shared "spam, misinformation, or other deceptive content." Facebook now tries to identify and block suspicious activity, including fake likes.

Shortly after the election of U.S. President Donald Trump, Facebook admitted that it was partly responsible for the spread of misinformation. Articles saying that Hilary Clinton sold weapons to ISIS (which she did not) became more popular than articles covering the last days of the campaign.

The words "fake news" have a new meaning today now that Trump keeps accusing negative coverage of being fake news even though the facts in those articles are correct. That's why Facebook now tends to say "false news" instead of "fake news."

These efforts are interesting for a few of reasons. First, Mark Zuckerberg said multiple times that his company wasn't responsible for the spread of fake news. And yet, Facebook also announced that it would address fake news back in December with clear changes to the platform. Today is a continuation of those efforts.

Second, it's a bit sad that Facebook itself has to teach everyone how to spot fake news. I'm sure most people could read an article and say that it looks fake. But the issue is that too many people still blindly share a headline on Facebook without reading the actual articles.

Finally, I'm not sure a coordinated advertising campaign in major newspapers is really effective. Most people don't read newspapers anymore, at least not the paper version. I'd even say that people who spend time reading newspapers are probably better informed than an average person and could spot fake news more easily.

So I don't think this advertising campaign is about informing people about fake news. Facebook wants to show that it is tackling the issue of fake news ahead of the election. I'm sure journalists working for all those publications are going to notice those ads and subconsciously think that Facebook isn't turning a blind eye this time.

This way, if a controversial candidate like Marine Le Pen gets enough votes to access the second round of the election, journalists won't think about accusing Facebook. It's a well-designed PR campaign to protect Facebook's image.

techcrunch.com

Verizon May Challenge AT&T's $1.6B Bid For Straight Path: Report

April 14, 2017

"AT&T earlier this week announced plans to acquire Straight Path Communications in an all-stock deal aimed at bulking up the carrier's portfolio of millimeter-wave spectrum….Straight Path said in a regulatory filing that a third party was mulling a deal, though it didn't disclose the name of that company."

Verizon may challenge AT&T's aggressive bid for Straight Path Communications.

AT&T earlier this week announced plans to acquire Straight Path Communications in an all-stock deal aimed at bulking up the carrier's portfolio of millimeter-wave spectrum. Straight Path shareholders are set to receive $1.25 billion, or $95.63 per share, to be paid in AT&T stock, in a deal that would mark a premium of more than 200% over the previous value of Straight Path's shares.

But Reuters reported this week that Verizon is considering topping AT&T's offer. Straight Path said in a regulatory filing that a third party was mulling a deal, though it didn't disclose the name of that company.

A Bloomberg report echoed Reuters' story, saying that Straight Path and Evercore, an adviser, had received a letter from the unidentified company.

Straight Path earlier this year reached a $100 million settlement with the FCC, ending an investigation into the company's failure to deploy wireless services as required under FCC spectrum licensing rules.

Straight Path agreed to pay two civil penalties and surrender about 20% of its 5G licenses to the FCC. For the $100 million civil penalty, Straight Path will pay $15 million upfront with $85 million suspended unless Straight Path sells all its remaining licenses or surrenders them to the FCC within 12 months. Also, 20% of any sale proceeds must be paid to the Treasury as an additional civil penalty.

Post-settlement, Straight Path holds an average of 620 MHz in the top 30 U.S. markets and covers the entire nation with 39 GHz spectrum, and it has retained all its 28 GHz spectrum licenses. Straight Path had long been expected to sell its licenses to a wireless or cable network operator.

The potential bidding war underscores the ever-increasing value of millimeter-wave spectrum as mobile network operators plot their strategies in advance of the launch of 5G offerings. Although higher-band airwaves have historically proved difficult to use to provide wireless services, they do promise to allow carriers to provide much higher speeds and far greater capacity, albeit in smaller coverage areas.

Indeed, high-band airwaves appear to be much more highly prized than low-band spectrum, particularly among the nation's two largest carriers. AT&T committed to spend only $910 million in the FCC's incentive auction of 600 MHz spectrum, for instance, and Verizon opted to spend nothing despite qualifying for the event.

AT&T has moved aggressively to shore up its spectrum assets in recent months, and will get access to additional low-band spectrum after winning the right to build the first U.S. network dedicated to first responders. Verizon added a significant chunk of millimeter-wave spectrum last year through a transaction with XO Communications. And now both operators may have Straight Path in their sights.

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Products & Services

New York City's Free WiFi Kiosks Speed Up Access To Social Services

April 14, 2017

When New York City launched its LinkNYC gigabit free Wi-Fi program last year, it was a win for internet accessibility. With over 800 devices currently spread across New York City, the kiosks provide municipal broadband for anyone in Wi-Fi range, as well as charging outlets, free phone calls, maps and directions, 911 access and a built-in tablet anyone can use. While the city unfortunately had to disable the web browsers due to some users' awkward browsing habits, LinkNYC kiosks are getting a new feature that will help users without internet access quickly find social programs and safety net services.

As Citylab reports, the kiosks are adding an app from Austin-based Aunt Bertha -- the so-called "Yelp for Social Services." Aunt Bertha maintains a database of resources like emergency housing, soup kitchens, food pantries, transportation assistance, or childcare and healthcare providers. It covers everything from government programs and large nonprofits to neighborhood services, then makes all their information searchable by zip code in one place, rather than spread out over each group's website. According to Citylab, the LinkNYC app will also highlight nearby services based on the kiosk's location.

LinkNYC is a consortium that includes Alphabet-owned Sidewalk Labs and the kiosks have come under scrutiny for data privacy concerns in the past, but the group expects to have 7,500 total across the city by 2025.

engadget.com

Amazon Wants Alexa Everywhere, Opens Microphone Tech Behind Echo To Third-Party Devices

April 13, 2017

"Amazon is now in a race to garner as much traction as possible with Alexa as quickly as it can. And to do so, it's making the software that powers the voice-recognition and speech-processing in the Echo available to third parties to use — for free."

Amazon is opening up the microphone technology behind its Amazon Echo speakers to third-party hardware companies, as it looks to expedite the uptake of its Alexa digital assistant while also improving its quality.

Amazon launched the Echo in the U.S. in 2015, and the product line has been generally well received, with Amazon going on to introduce two cheaper versions, the Amazon Tap and the Echo Dot. The Echo was expanded beyond the U.S. and into Europe six months back.

With the likes of Google entering the smart speaker fray with Home, and Samsung keen to push its new Bixby digital assistant into connected devices, it seems that Amazon is now in a race to garner as much traction as possible with Alexa as quickly as it can. And to do so, it's making the software that powers the voice-recognition and speech-processing in the Echo available to third parties to use — for free.

With the Amazon Alexa 7-Mic Far-Field Development Kit, OEMs (original equipment manufacturers) can build their own far-field voice-activated products — as long as they use Alexa. The development kit basically enables hardware makers to launch new products that can detect a person's voice on the other side of a room, and in situations when there may be noise interference. It also allows them to use wake-word recognition in their devices, for example, "Hey Alexa, do that thing you said you'd do."

It's worth noting here that Alexa can already be integrated into third-party devices, but by offering this new development kit, Amazon is helping OEMs build products that can recognize voices as well as the Echo can. It's about ensuring a certain level of quality wherever Alexa rears her virtual head.

"Since the introduction of Amazon Echo and Echo Dot, device makers have been asking us to provide the technology and tools to enable a far-field Alexa experience for their products," said Priya Abani, director at Amazon Alexa, in a press release. "With this new reference solution, developers can design products with the same unique 7-mic circular array, beamforming technology, and voice processing software that have made Amazon Echo so popular with customers."

Though the kit is free to use, only select manufacturers will be permitted access. It's clear that Amazon wants to keep a tight leash on its use, but interested OEMs can apply for access here.

venturebeat.com

More People Use Instagram Stories Than Snapchat Itself
April 13, 2017

"Instagram has announced that over 200 million people are using Stories every day to share quick moments from their lives -- almost 50 million more than Snapchat as a whole sees in an average day."

The common belief is that Snapchat rules all when it comes to evaporating photo essays. But the numbers don't quite back it up. Instagram has announced that over 200 million people are using Stories every day to share quick moments from their lives -- almost 50 million more than Snapchat as a whole sees in an average day. Snapchat's 158 million count is from its IPO filing in February, but, the app's entire user-base cresting 200 million in two months seems pretty unlikely. Of course, 200 million is still only a third of Instagram's user-base, but those aren't bad numbers either considering the feature launched last August.

More than bragging about numbers, Instagram says that it's adding even more stickers. That includes selfie stickers (so you can quickly put your face anywhere) and a quartet of new Geostickers. Chicago, London, Madrid and Tokyo have their own, and they'll be rolling out in the next few days. Oh, and if you wanted quick access to your most-used stickers the photo-minded social network, that's en route as well.

So yeah, Instagram might be new to the ephemeral scene, but it's already making some pretty big headway. What was that adage about imitation being the sincerest form of flattery? Maybe people prefer Instagram's version because the Facebook-owned app doesn't roll out offensive filters on the regular. Just a thought.

engadget.com

Emerging Technology

A Future Apple Watch Could Be Essential For Diabetics
April 13, 2017

Apple is quietly developing a sensor that can monitor a person's blood sugar levels continuously and non-invasively. If successful, the technology will be integrated into a future version of the Apple Watch to help people with diabetes manage their condition. At least, that's the scuttlebutt being slung around by CNBC, which claims the project was set up by Steve Jobs before his death.

According to the report, Apple has quietly hired an anonymous-looking office building well away from its HQ for engineers to work in secret. It's believed that the company has been so successful it is already running trials of the sensors at "clinical sites" in San Francisco's Bay Area. In fact, progress has been so encouraging that Apple has already hired consultants to help it navigate the torturous process of getting FDA approval.

There are a number of practical issues to overcome, including the fact that using optical sensors to read blood glucose is hard. The world is littered with the bodies of companies that have tried -- and failed -- to use noninvasive monitoring for this particular issue. HealBe's GoBe, for instance, promised to count your calorie intake without penetrating the skin, and we know how well that went.

Right now, the only effective way to continuously monitor someone's blood glucose level is by inserting a sensor below the skin. Continuous glucose monitors often use an internal sensor that connects with an external transmitter that's held, for instance, on the stomach, tricep or thigh. Even new wearables like KTrack use tiny needles that burrow into the skin in order to work.

According to statistics from the World Health Organization, there were 422 million people living with diabetes in 2014. That's up from 108 million in 1980, a staggering increase for a disease that is a major cause of blindness, kidney failure, stroke and heart attacks. In addition, the better part of four million deaths per year can be directly attributed to diabetes-related conditions.

If Apple can, somehow, innovate where so many others have not, then it will make the number of people who have reason to purchase a Watch increase exponentially.

engadget.com

E-Case Is Smart Luggage That You Can Track Via Real-Time GPS
April 13, 2017

"The E-Case sells for as low as $250, and it comes in three sizes and five colors…E-Case has global positioning system (GPS) tracking, which allows you to see its exact position in real time on your smartphone app."

Losing luggage is a drag. So E-Case has created a piece of smart luggage that will tell your smartphone app where it is.

The E-Case company just beat its modest Kickstarter crowdfunding goal, raising $21,338 from 52 backers, with 38 days to go. The Los Angeles company was only trying to raise $15,000 in the campaign.

The E-Case sells for as low as $250, and it comes in three sizes and five colors. Other smart luggage products have hit the market, but often they only tell you if your bag is missing. But E-Case has global positioning system (GPS) tracking, which allows you to see its exact position in real time on your smartphone app.

"Most so-called 'smart' luggage on the market come in carry-on size only, but what good is tracking a bag that almost never leaves your sight?" said Lawrence Dong, founder of E-Case, in a statement.

E-Case comes in a 20-inch carry-on size as well as 24- and 29-inch check-in sizes. It also comes with an advanced digital lock with Bluetooth locking and fingerprint authentication for additional security. You can also unlock it remotely via text message if necessary.

"These days, it's all too easy for anyone to obtain a TSA lock master key," said Dong. "We've built a superior locking system to give you the most control, even if your bag is halfway around the world. The app lets you store up to 16 fingerprints for friends, family, or anyone else who needs access to your bag."

When it comes to weighing your bag, E-Case takes all of the heavy lifting and guesswork out of the process. Typical smart luggage uses a handle-based scale that makes you physically lift the bag to weigh it, but E-Case's digital scale is built into the bottom. It's convenient and accurate weighing without all the heavy lifting, so you can avoid overweight bag fees. If the suitcase moves out of the range of your smartphone's distance sensor, it sends an alert to your phone the moment it slips out of your vicinity.

E-Case also optimizes battery life using automatic dynamic positioning frequency, which enables you to automatically set the bag to sleep mode at your desired frequency to save power. E-Case uses algorithms to analyze vibration and light intensity and suspend GSM signals during flying, in order to comply with safety requirements — which no other bag on the market can do.

E-Case sells for $249 for the 20-inch carry-on, $279 for the 24-inch check-in, and $329 for the 29-inch check-in. Rivals include Bluesmart, Fugu Luggage, and Planet Traveler.

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Mergers and Acquisitions

SpotHero Acquires Parking Panda
April 13, 2017

"Parking Panda may be the business being acquired, but it was no slouch on its own. It had partnered with major-league sports teams and their venues, as well as theaters, convention centers and other event spaces."

SpotHero is an app that allows you, a driver in search of a space, to reserve and prepay for a spot in a parking garage before you even leave the house. Parking Panda came at the problem from the other direction by focusing on B2B services and event parking. Now, SpotHero has acquired Parking Panda to expand the parking spaces that can be reserved to nearly 5,000 in North America.

Parking Panda may be the business being acquired, but it was no slouch on its own. It had partnered with major-league sports teams and their venues, as well as theaters, convention centers and other event spaces. Parking Panda made moves into Canada in 2016, so the acquisition gives Chicago-based SpotHero an entry into that market as well, bringing the current total of cities using the SpotHero service to 47 in 2017.

The top of the parking company's food chain will remain unchanged. SpotHero CEO and co-founder Mark Lawrence will continue to be CEO, and Parking Panda CEO and founder Adam Zilberbaum will come along to SpotHero, as will COO James Bain.

In the past five years, SpotHero has raised more than $20 million. The company expects to park 20 million cars in 2017 alone, thanks to this acquisition. And in addition to expanding to new cities, the company is laying the foundation to enable shared driverless autonomous cars to park themselves while the fleet owner or current user pays via app.

techcrunch.com

Stripe Acquires Indie Hackers In Bid To Strengthen Relationship With Entrepreneurs
April 11, 2017

Stripe has acquired the knowledge-sharing service for entrepreneurs known as Indie Hackers. While financial terms of the deal were not disclosed, Indie Hackers will remain operational as an independent subsidiary. Stripe hopes that this transaction will enable it to strengthen its relationship with startup community and further increase "the GDP of the internet."

Started by Courtland Allen last year, Indie Hackers is a community where "successful founders could share their valuable stories and insights, and where aspiring entrepreneurs could go for inspiration and advice." In less than a year, the site had amassed revenue of $6,000 per month, but Allen discovered that his time was being diverted toward trying to fill ad inventory instead of producing content, the original intent of the site.

A Stripe spokesperson told VentureBeat that the company initially approached Indie Hackers as an admirer of what Allen's team had done. Sensing an opportunity, the payment processing service felt that it could help Indie Hackers out by alleviating the financial burden and allowing Allen to concentrate on ways to help out entrepreneurs.

In a Hacker News thread, Stripe chief executive Patrick Collison offered more details about his company's investment, writing: "Our goal in acquiring Indie Hackers is to simply ensure that the site becomes as successful as possible. The Stripe upside we're hoping for is that more companies get started and that they're more successful. We already see a very large fraction of new internet companies choose Stripe; we're mainly hoping that Indie Hackers can help us grow the overall number rather than to grow our fraction. (Our product has to do the latter part.)"

This seems to be the modus operandi of Stripe, which is all about providing tools and resources to entrepreneurs to build global businesses, such as its Atlas service. Purchasing Indie Hackers isn't the first time the company has brought in outside services to benefit its customers — it acquired app prototyping startup Tonic in 2016.

"I've always admired Stripe's ambitious mission to make it easier for entrepreneurs to build and grow their online businesses. The more we talked, the more obvious it became that my joining Stripe would be a huge win for everyone involved, especially the Indie Hackers community," Allen wrote in a blog post.

He said that under the Stripe banner, he'll be 100 percent focused on improving Indie Hackers in a manner similar to how Hacker News thrives under Y Combinator. "Over time, Stripe can help grow the Indie Hackers community and spread the stories and insights from experienced entrepreneurs even more widely," Allen explained.

Allen has been given the title of Indie Hacker at Stripe and will be joined by his brother Channing. In the short term, the team plans on improving Indie Hacker's community forum and developing more original content. New sponsorships have also been terminated and ads will no longer be run on the site "for the foreseeable future."

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Industry Reports

AT&T's In-House System Blocks 1 Billionth Robocall
April 13, 2017

AT&T said it has blocked its billionth robocall using a new program that detects unwanted calls through network data analysis. And unlike some other companies, it created its own system to do it.

The nation's second-largest mobile network operator said its fraud management team partnered with its big-data scientists on the effort, which examines more than 1.5 billion calls each day to detect "patterns that indicate robocallers" such as multiple, short-duration calls to numbers on the National Do Not Call List. A preliminary list of suspected robocallers is created, then further research is done to avoid suspending legitimate automated calls such as those conducted by school districts and other organizations.

The service complements AT&T Call Protect, which launched late last year as both wireless and wireline operators face increased pressure from federal regulators to help their customers avoid spam calls, robocalls and other unwanted come-ons. Potential legislation includes the proposed ROBOCOP Act, which would require telecoms to offer free, optional robocall-blocking technology to their customers. Outgoing FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler backed the act in July, sending letters to the

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CEOs of AT&T, Verizon and other major carriers calling on them to offer call-blocking services to customers at no charge.

The FCC voted last month to move forward with new rules designed to prevent spammers from placing unwanted robocalls. Among other elements, the proposed rules would also allow carriers to continue to block calls upon the request of the subscriber to an originating number, like IRS lines not used for outbound calls.

Other service providers and handset manufacturers have made similar moves to protect their customers from robocalls, but those strategies often involve leveraging third-party solutions. T-Mobile's new Scam ID and Scam Block, for instance, use PrivacyStar's database of scammer numbers to identify unwanted calls, and Hiya scored a deal last year to preload its robocall-blocking app on Samsung's Galaxy Note 7.

Hiya also powers AT&T Call Protect.

Rather than requiring users to download an app to block incoming calls, AT&T's new offering prevents unwanted calls from being made in the first place.

"Our data science team took on a challenge to analyze and address the problem," said Jenifer Robertson, AT&T's senior vice president for technology strategy, in a press release this morning.

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Mobile Game Revenue Grew 53% To $11.9 Billion In Q1 2017
April 13, 2017

Worldwide mobile game revenue from iOS and Google Play stores grew 53 percent to $11.9 billion, according to a report today from measurement firm Sensor Tower Store Intelligence. But Google Play revenues are growing at a much faster rate than Apple's, at 83 percent versus 35 percent.

Apple app store revenue grew 35 percent to $6.6 billion from $4.9 billion in the first quarter, compared to the same period a year earlier. Google Play revenue grew 83 percent in Q1 to $5.3 billion from $2.9 billion a year earlier, according to Ruika Lin, mobile insights analyst at Sensor Tower.

Mobile game installs on both stores were at 8.8 billion in Q1, up 15 percent from 7.6 billion in the first quarter of 2017.

During the first quarter, Kiloo's Subway Surfers was the world's most downloaded mobile game. Mixi's Monster Strike continued to dominate the revenue chart as Q1's top earner. And Tencent's King of Glory gained momentum in Q1 and ranked within the top 10 for downloads and revenue, despite being absent from both lists in the fourth quarter of 2016.

But last year's viral launches Pokémon Go and Super Mario Run both showed signs of decline in Q1 in terms of downloads and revenue rankings.

A year ago, mobile game revenue was $7.8 billion in the first quarter of 2016. Mobile games continued to be the dominant category for all apps worldwide in terms of monetization, accounting for close to 80 percent of the gross revenue generated by Apple's App Store and more than 91 percent of Google Play revenue in the first quarter.

Kiloo's Subway Surfers topped the overall downloads chart in the first quarter. Nintendo's Super Mario Run's momentum decreased in the new year. Despite the slowdown, Nintendo's first mobile

game still remained competitive as the runner-up on the App Store, the only platform it was available on for the majority of Q1. It was only recently released on Google Play.

Tencent's King of Glory became the world's most downloaded mobile game on the App Store last quarter, and landed a spot in the top 10 overall ranking thanks to an increased number of new installs during Q1, mainly from China. King of Glory was the only top 10 game last quarter that was absent from the list in Q4 2016. In fact, it was only ranked No. 31 for overall downloads that quarter.

On the revenue side, Monster Strike retained its first place position across the overall and per-store rankings last quarter. As the top earning game for all of 2016, Mixi's popular title continued to monetize extremely well in Japan and dominate revenue in the worldwide mobile gaming market overall.

The runner-up on the overall revenue chart was Type-Moon's Fate/Grand Order, another popular mobile game from Japan. It got most of its money from Japanese players. Although it was one of the top 10 across all three rankings in Q4 2016, Fate/Grand Order increased its position last quarter, taking second place on Google Play and a spot in the top five on the App Store.

Similar to its downloads story, Tencent's King of Glory climbed up to No. 7 in Q1 from No. 11 in Q4 last year, thanks to increasing player spend from China. Last quarter it nearly swapped positions with NetEase's Onmyouji—another popular title from China—which ranked No. 9 in Q4 2016 but dropped to No. 11 three months later.

Supercell's huge hit Clash Royale surpassed $1 billion in lifetime gross revenue in February 2017, placing it among the top five across all three of our rankings for last quarter. Niantic's Pokémon Go continued to lose revenue momentum in the new year. (Niantic said the location-based game has 65 million monthly active users).

Although it still ranked within the top 10 overall, Pokémon Go dropped from No. 4 in Q4 2016 to No. 8 last quarter. Its in-game events during Q1 (Valentine's event and Gen 2 update) couldn't prop up the game's popularity compared to last year. On the App Store, Pokémon Go dropped out of the top 10 altogether in Q1 even though it was there in the preceding two quarters.

Another much-anticipated launch in Q1—Nintendo's second mobile game, Fire Emblem Heroes— made it to the top 10 for revenue on Google Play, ranking No. 10. at $2.9 million on its first day of worldwide release. More than 75 percent of its overall revenue in Q1 came from Japan.

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