

Technology

Making platforms safe

Facebook unveils new 'controls' for children

NEW YORK, Oct 11, (AP) — Facebook, in the aftermath of damning testimony that its platforms harm children, will be introducing several features including prompting teens to take a break using its photo sharing app Instagram, and “nudging” teens if they are repeatedly looking at the same content that’s not conducive to their well-being.

The Menlo Park, California-based Facebook is also planning to introduce new controls for adults of teens on an optional basis so that parents or guardians can supervise what their teens are doing online. These initiatives come after Facebook announced late last month that it was pausing work on its Instagram for Kids project. But critics say the plan lacks details and they are skeptical that the new features would be effective.

The new controls were outlined on Sunday by **Nick Clegg**, Facebook’s vice president for global affairs, who made the rounds on various Sunday news shows including CNN’s “State of the Union” and ABC’s “This Week with George Stephanopoulos” where he was grilled about Facebook’s use of algorithms as well as its role in spreading harmful misinformation ahead of the Jan. 6 Capitol riots.

“We are constantly iterating in order to improve our products,” Clegg told Dana Bash on “State of the Union” Sunday. “We cannot, with a wave of the wand, make everyone’s life perfect. What we can do is improve our products, so that our products are as safe and as enjoyable to use.”

Clegg said that Facebook has invested \$13 billion over the past few years in making sure to keep the platform safe and that the company has 40,000 people working on these issues. And while Clegg said that Facebook has done its best to keep harmful content out of its platforms, he says he was open for more regulation and oversight.



Clegg

Transparency

“We need greater transparency,” he told CNN’s Bash. He noted that the systems that Facebook has in place should be held to account, if necessary, by regulation so that “people can match what our systems say they’re supposed to do from what actually happens.”

The flurry of interviews came after whistleblower Frances Haugen, a former data scientist with Facebook, went before Congress last week to accuse the social media platform of failing to make changes to Instagram after internal research showed apparent harm to some teens and of being dishonest in its public fight against hate and misinformation. Haugen’s accusations were supported by tens of thousands of pages of internal research documents she secretly copied before leaving her job in the company’s civic integrity unit.

Josh Golin, executive director of Fairplay, a watchdog for the children and media marketing industry, said that he doesn’t think introducing controls to help parents supervise teens would be effective since many teens set up secret accounts any way. He was also dubious about how effective nudging teens to take a break or move away from harmful content would be. He noted Facebook needs to show exactly how they would implement it and offer research that shows these tools are effective.

“There is tremendous reason to be skeptical,” he said. He added that regulators need to restrict what Facebook does with its algorithms.

He said he also believes that Facebook should cancel its Instagram project for kids.

When Clegg was grilled by both Bash and Stephanopoulos in separate interviews about the use of algorithms in amplifying misinformation ahead of Jan. 6 riots, he responded that if Facebook removed the algorithms people would see more, not less hate speech, and more, not less, misinformation.

Clegg told both hosts that the algorithms serve as “giant spam filters.”

Democratic Sen. Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, who chairs the Senate Commerce Subcommittee on Competition Policy, Antitrust, and Consumer Rights, told Bash in a separate interview Sunday that it’s time to update children’s privacy laws and offer more transparency in the use of algorithms.

“I appreciate that he is willing to talk about things, but I believe the time for conversation is done,” said Klobuchar, referring to Clegg’s plan. “The time for action is now.”

Also:

LONDON: Google is cracking down on digital ads promoting false climate change claims or being used to make money from such content, hoping to limit revenue for climate change deniers and stop the spread of misinformation on its platforms.

The company said Thursday in a blog post that the new policy will also apply to YouTube, which last week announced a sweeping crackdown of vaccine misinformation.

“We’ve heard directly from a growing number of our advertising and publisher partners who have expressed concerns about ads that run alongside or promote inaccurate claims about climate change,” Google said. “Advertisers simply don’t want their ads to appear next to this content.”

Publishers and creators on YouTube “don’t want ads promoting these claims to appear on their pages or videos,” according to Google.

The restrictions “will prohibit ads for, and monetization of, content that contradicts well-established scientific consensus around the existence and causes of climate change,” the blog post said.

Along with addressing publishers’ frustrations, the changes are also apparently intended to counter online influencers who monetize, or make money from, YouTube videos promoting climate change denial theories by putting ads on them.

Limits will be placed on content calling climate change a hoax or denying that greenhouse gas emissions and human activity have contributed to the earth’s long-term warming, the company said.

Experts questioned whether the changes would be effective.

“How will they determine what is misinformation (i.e. lies) or simply incomplete or misleading information?” **Lisa Schipper**, environmental social science research fellow at the University of Oxford’s Environmental Change Institute.

She cited as an example images of clean energy by fossil fuel companies. “In some ways, these types of adverts that suggest a different kind of truth might be even more damaging because they look innocuous, while they simultaneously serve to greenwash the company,” Schipper said.

Google will use both automated tools and human reviewers to enforce the policy when it takes effect in November for publishers and YouTube creators and in December for advertisers.

Advertisements will still be allowed on content that’s about other related topics like public debates on climate policy.

However, such debates can be just as polarized, warned **Steve Smith**, executive director of Oxford’s Net Zero climate neutrality research program and CO2RE research hub on greenhouse gas removal.

“Misinformation is at play in online discussions around low-carbon energy, travel and food, just as much as it is over climate science,” Smith said.

Google is one of the two dominant players in the global digital ad industry, earning \$147 billion in ad revenue last year. Facebook, the other big player, prohibits ads used to spread misinformation though it doesn’t list specific topics including climate change denial.

Earlier this week, Google rolled out new features aimed at helping users reduce their carbon footprints, including a search function that shows which flights have lower emissions.



A volcano continues to spew out lava on the Canary island of La Palma, Spain in the early hours of Sunday, Oct 10. A new river of lava has belched out from the La Palma volcano, spreading more destruction on the Atlantic Ocean island where molten rock streams have already engulfed over 1,000 buildings. (AP)

Coronavirus

New promising drug could prove groundbreaking

Merck asks FDA to OK anti-COVID pill

WASHINGTON, Oct 11, (AP) — Drugmaker Merck asked US regulators Monday to authorize its pill against COVID-19 in what would add an entirely new and easy-to-use weapon to the world’s arsenal against the pandemic.

If cleared by the Food and Drug Administration — a decision that could come in a matter of weeks — it would be the first pill shown to treat COVID-19. All other FDA-backed treatments against the disease require an IV or injection.

An antiviral pill that people could take at home to reduce their symptoms and speed recovery could prove groundbreaking, easing the crushing caseload on US hospitals and helping to curb outbreaks in poorer countries with weak health care systems. It would also bolster the two-pronged approach to the pandemic: treatment, by way of medication, and prevention, primarily through vaccinations.

The FDA will scrutinize company data on the safety and effectiveness of the drug, molnupiravir, before rendering a decision.

Merck and its partner Ridgeback Biotherapeutic said they specifically asked the agency to grant emergency use for adults with mild-to-moderate COVID-19 who are at risk for severe disease or hospitalization. That is roughly the way COVID-19 infusion drugs are used.

“The value here is that it’s a pill so you don’t have to deal with the infusion centers and all the factors around that,” said Dr. Nicholas Kartsonis, a senior vice president with Merck’s infectious disease unit. “I think it’s a very powerful tool to add to the toolbox.”

The company reported earlier this month that the pill cut hospitalizations and deaths by half among patients with early symptoms of COVID-19. The results were so strong that independent medical experts monitoring the trial recommended stopping it early.

Side effects were similar between patients who got the drug and those in a testing group who received a dummy pill. But Merck has not publicly detailed the types of problems reported, which will be a key part of the FDA’s review.

US officials continue to push vaccinations as the best way to protect against COVID-19. But with some

68 million eligible Americans still unwilling to get the shots, effective drugs will be critical to controlling future waves of infection.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, health experts have stressed the need for a convenient pill. The goal is for something similar to Tamiflu, the 20-year-old flu medication that shortens the illness by a day or two and blunts the severity of symptoms like fever, cough and stuffy nose.

Three FDA-authorized antibody drugs have proved highly effective at reducing COVID-19 deaths, but they are expensive, hard to produce and require specialty equipment and health professionals to deliver.

Treatment

Assuming FDA authorization, the US government has agreed to buy enough of the pills to treat 1.7 million people, at a price of roughly \$700 for each course of treatment. That’s less than half the price of the antibody drugs purchased by the US government — over \$2,000 per infusion — but still more expensive than many antiviral pills for other conditions.

Merck’s Kartsonis said in an interview that the \$700 figure does not represent the final price for the medication.

“We set that price before we had any data, so that’s just one contract,” Kartsonis said. “Obviously we’re going to be responsible about this and make this drug as accessible to as many people around the world as we can.”

Kenilworth, New Jersey-based Merck has said it is in purchase talks with governments around the world and will use a sliding price scale based on each country’s economic means. Also, the company has signed licensing deals with several Indian generic drugmakers to produce low-cost versions of the drug for lower-income countries.

Several other companies, including Pfizer and Roche, are studying similar drugs and are expected to report results in the coming weeks and months. AstraZeneca is also seeking FDA authorization for a long-acting antibody drug intended to provide months of protection for patients who have immune-system disorders and do not adequately respond to

vaccination.

Eventually some experts predict various COVID-19 therapies will be prescribed in combination to better protect against the worst effects of the virus.

Meanwhile, the government’s top infectious diseases expert says families can feel safe trick-or-treating outdoors this year for Halloween as COVID-19 cases in the US decline, especially for those who are vaccinated.

Dr. Anthony Fauci told CNN’s “State of the Union” Sunday that it’s an important time of year for children, so “go out there” and “enjoy it.”

He added that people wanting to enjoy Halloween on Oct. 31 should consider getting the shots for that “extra degree of protection” if they are not yet vaccinated.

COVID-19 vaccines so far have been approved for people 12 years and older. The Food and Drug Administration plans a meeting in late October to consider Pfizer’s request for emergency use authorization of its vaccine for children ages 5 to 11.

Nationwide, there are about 95,000 new COVID-19 cases a day. Fauci called the downward trend “good news” but cautioned against declaring a premature victory since cases have bounced back in the past.

He said he’d like to see cases drop to less than 10,000 a day before dropping COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, such as shedding masks indoors in public places.

Also:

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka: Sri Lankan authorities have decided to inoculate schoolchildren for COVID-19 starting next week.

According to the Health Ministry, inoculations will begin on Oct. 21 and initially, the vaccine will be given to students in the age group of 18 and 19 years. They will be given only the Pfizer vaccine.

The ministry says everyone over 20 years old has been given a first dose while 82% have received both doses.

Sri Lanka lifted a six-week lockdown on Oct. 1 after COVID-19 cases and deaths showed a rapid decline. The government still maintains strict restrictions. Public gatherings are banned and trains halted.



This undated image provided by Merck & Co. shows their new antiviral medication. The drugmaker has said its experimental pill for people sick with COVID-19 reduced hospitalizations and deaths. (AP)



Pérez



Obrador

Discovery

‘Tougher climate action’: Dressed as endangered fish or tigers or wearing toy polar bears on their heads, demonstrators marched through Brussels on Sunday to push world leaders to take bolder action to fight climate change at the UN climate summit in Glasgow starting this month.

Thousands of people and 80 organizations took part in the protest, aiming for the biggest such event in the European Union’s capital since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, which stopped the climate movement’s weekly marches in its tracks.

Cyclists, families with children and white-haired demonstrators filled city streets, chanting slogans demanding climate justice and waving banners in English, French and Dutch. One carried a stuffed polar bear on her head, and others were dressed as animals endangered by human-caused climate change.

“After you’ve seen all the disasters we have seen this summer, it’s really crucial that we move now. Because everybody knows what the problem is,” said Xavier De Wannemaeker, a protester with Extinction Rebellion.

Scientists say there’s little doubt that fuel emissions are contributing to extreme weather events like the droughts, fires, floods that have hit regions around the world this summer.

Demonstrator Lucien Dewanaga asked, “What do we do when we destroy the planet? We have nothing else. Human beings have to live in this world. And there is only one world.” (AP)

‘Lithium reserved for state’: Mexico’s president said that no lithium mining permits will be issued for anyone if legislators don’t approve a bill declaring it a “strategic mineral” and reserving any future exploration and mining for the government.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador took an all-or-nothing stance when asked about the bill’s uphill fight. López Obrador said he won’t back down in his fight to make lithium, used in electric vehicle and other batteries, “the property of the nation.”

López Obrador sent the bill to Congress last week, but his party doesn’t have the votes to pass it. He accused any legislator voting against it of “treason.”

“If there is an act of treason and they don’t approve making lithium property of the nation, we will deny any request for a lithium mining concession anyway,” the president said.

There are several complicating factors to López Obrador’s stance. His administration also said last week that the eight concessions for mining lithium that have already been granted in Mexico would be respected, as long as they are well on the way to producing the metal.



A Sri Lankan university student receives his coronavirus vaccine at the Sri Jayawardenapura university in Colombo, Sri Lanka, Monday, Oct. 11. (AP)

national. (AP)

Volcanic eruption going strong: Three weeks since its eruption upended the lives of thousands, the volcano on Spain’s La Palma island is still spewing out endless streams of

lava with no signs of ceasing.

Authorities on Sunday monitored a new stream of molten rock that has added to the destruction of over 1,100 buildings. Anything in the path of the lava — homes, farms, swimming pools and industrial buildings in the largely agricultural area — has been consumed.

The collapse Saturday of part of the volcanic cone sent a flood of bright red lava pouring down from the Cumbre Vieja ridge that initially cracked open on Sept. 19. The fast-flowing stream carried away huge chunks of lava that had already hardened. An industrial park was soon engulfed.

“We cannot say that we expect the eruption that began 21 days ago to end anytime soon,” said **Julio Pérez**, the regional minister for security on the Canary Islands.

La Palma is part of Spain’s Canary Islands, an Atlantic Ocean archipelago off northwest Africa whose economy depends on the cultivation of the Canary plantain and tourism.

The new rivers of lava have not forced the evacuation of any more residents since they are all so staying within the exclusion zone that authorities have created. Some 6,000 residents were promptly evacuated after the initial eruption.

Government experts estimated that the largest of the lava flows measures 1.5 km (.9 miles) at its widest point, while the delta of new land being formed where lava is flowing into the Atlantic has reached a surface of 34 hectares (84 acres).