

Leading Anti-Terror Technologist Says Suspend Facebook Live Following Mosque Shootings

NPR All Things Considered All Things Considered 08:00 PM EST

March 22, 2019 Friday

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Length: 585 words

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Guests: Hany Farid, Mark Zuckerberg

Body

AILSA CHANG: A leading expert in anti-terror technology is calling on Facebook to cease to suspend live video in the wake of the New Zealand massacre. He says the company's failure to pull down footage of the tragedy is absolutely inexcusable. The suspect had streamed the shooting live on Facebook, and from there, it was shared hundreds of thousands of times, even after New Zealand police alerted the company. Here's NPR's Aarti Shahani.

AARTI SHAHANI: After Facebook removed the video, users attempted to upload it again in various forums about 1.5 million times. Of those attempts, 300,000 slipped through the cracks. That's a 1 in 5 failure rate.

HANY FARID: The repeated uploading is an absolute failure, and it is inexcusable because we have the technology to stop it.

AARTI SHAHANI: Hany Farid, a leading architect of that technology.

HANY FARID: And if your technology isn't working, well, then you haven't innovated enough. You can't claim this is a hard problem. It's the same video. It's the same video. How can this be this hard of a problem? I simply don't buy that argument.

AARTI SHAHANI: Farid, an incoming professor at the University of California at Berkeley, worked with Microsoft 10 years ago to create Photo DNA, a tool that tech giants rely on to fingerprint digital content. The algorithms have evolved, so a photo video or audio clip can be fingerprinted and automatically blocked even when it's been modified.

Facebook says they used automated technology, but the video was recut and rerecorded into formats that made it harder to match copies. Farid says this excuse rings hollow. It's a common problem, and tech giants have had a decade to solve it.

HANY FARID: Haven't figured out that problem yet, I think, says a lot about your priorities at these companies. It's simply not your priority.

AARTI SHAHANI: The U.S. Congress and European regulators have relied on Farid to fact-check the tech giants. He says political leaders should launch an inquiry and insist on honest answers in this recent Facebook failure, which he compares to another public safety debacle - Boeing.

HANY FARID: There was a global outcry. We grounded planes. We stopped until we got answers to secure that.

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AARTI SHAHANI: With investors, Facebook leaders talked up their ability to solve the hardest technical problems like getting livestream videos to work for millions of people on smartphones. At the same time, that's a really hard problem. CEO Mark Zuckerberg in November 2016.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

MARK ZUCKERBERG: So there aren't that many companies that can do this at the scale that we're talking about, and this has been a big advantage for us.

AARTI SHAHANI: When it comes to security - building the guardrails - company leaders are much quieter. Facebook declined to say how many views the massacre footage got in total from the 30,000 re-uploads. The company also declined to respond to Farid's comments, which NPR shared in an email. Aarti Shahani, NPR News, Berkeley.

AILSA CHANG: And we should say Facebook is one of NPR's financial sponsors.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Transcript

Subject: INTERNET SOCIAL NETWORKING (90%); FINGERPRINTING (87%); TERRORISM (68%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (67%); COUNTERTERRORISM (53%); US CONGRESS (50%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (50%)

Company: FACEBOOK INC (90%); MICROSOFT CORP (54%); BOEING CO (51%)

Ticker: FB (NASDAQ) (90%); MSFT (NASDAQ) (54%); BOE (LSE) (51%); BA (NYSE) (51%)

Industry: INTERNET SOCIAL NETWORKING (90%); MEDIA CONTENT (68%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (50%)

Geographic: SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA, CA, USA (67%); CALIFORNIA, USA (75%); UNITED STATES (70%)

Load-Date: April 5, 2019