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Verizon Launches Tech News Blog... That Bans Any Articles About Net Neutrality Or Government Surveillance

from the *well-that's-just-great* dept

Patrick O'Neill, over at The Daily Dot, has a scoop about Verizon getting directly into our game: tech blogging. It's launched a brand new tech news website, called SugarString, which apparently is supposed to compete with other tech news sites. Now, I know that some are immediately skeptical just based on the fact that Verizon is launching a news site -- but I don't find that alone particularly troubling. In fact, I think many companies should be producing good, relevant content, because good content is good advertising. Hell, a decade ago, I was very involved with a great news site that Nokia put together called TheFeature, which involved a really spectacular group of writers covering news and commentary about the coming mobile world (sadly, TheFeature was basically wiped off the internet, though the archives can still be found). But, at least there, we had free reign to write about anything we thought was interesting at all. There was no pressure or influence from Nokia at all -- at least none that I ever felt. And, honestly, I think more companies should be engaging with people with good content.

But, of course, this is Verizon, so its good intent is undermined by something silly. And, in this case, the something silly is that anyone writing for SugarString has to agree *not to write about net neutrality or government surveillance*, two of the biggest, most important tech topics these days.

From our standpoint, I guess that takes away "competition" (though, amusingly, it does appear like at least one story on the site is a warmed over version of something that we wrote a week ago, but made more clickbaity with a "list") on two of the main stories we cover, but it really does raise questions about why anyone would ever trust the site in the first place, when, from the very outset, Verizon has made it clear that its editorial control will be focused on staying away from any stories that Verizon doesn't like.

O'Neill found out about the site, and the restrictions, when he was recruited from The Daily Dot to see if he wanted to write for the site, via its editor Cole Stryker. Stryker seems like an odd choice as the editor, as the author of an entire book about anonymity and privacy online, who we interviewed a few years ago. You'd think that among his areas of focus would be things like government surveillance. And, amusingly, many of the stories on the site do dance around that topic, without getting anywhere near how Verizon might be involved:

Virtually every story currently on the front page of SugarString—articles about GPS being used by law enforcement, anonymity hardware enabling digital activists, and artists on the Deep Web—would typically include information on American surveillance of the Internet and net neutrality to give the reader the context to make sure she's fully informed.

But none of articles do that. At best, they dance around the issue and talk about how other countries aside from the U.S. conduct surveillance. That self-censorship puts blinders on the reader, never giving her all the information she should have—information that, not coincidentally, tends to make Verizon and other powerful interests look very, very bad.

There's plenty of talk lately about the importance of trust in journalism today (even if it's tricky to measure). I think it's absolutely possible for a big company to create great editorial content that builds up trust (we did with TheFeature those many years ago). But part of that is not denying reality or putting stupid, trust-destroying restrictions on the effort. Verizon appears to have failed that simple test, and with that, it takes away a big part of the trust that any such site would need.

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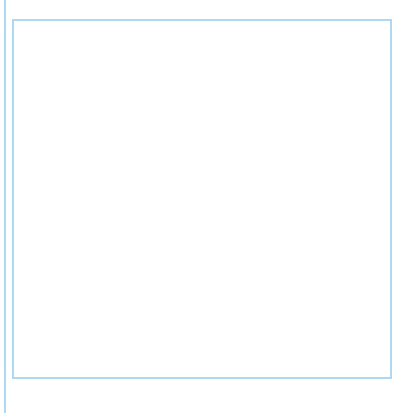
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Reader Comments (rss)


“

Sugarcoated would have been a better name , let the propaganda begin.

—Anonymous Coward

”

(Flattened / Threaded)

1.  Ninja (profile), Oct 29th, 2014 @ 4:53am

Well, to be honest Verizon providing a platform to people talking about net neutrality and Govt surveillance would be like the MAFIAA doing the same on copyright abuses, the Kardashians on anything of use or (Godwin!) Hitler supporting a platform discussing about Jewish Human Rights.

Unless of course the articles were against such things.

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2.  Violynne (profile), Oct 29th, 2014 @ 5:14am

#VerizonGate

And it all started because Dark Helmet allegedly slept with Barbara Streisand to get his gig at Techdirt.

>:]

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3.  David, Oct 29th, 2014 @ 6:40am


Antitrust regulations?

Isn't it an antitrust violation if a market-dominating player uses his muscle to kill other markets?

In this case, Verizon is clearly trying to corner the market on satire. How is a satirist supposed to exaggerate *that* kind of move? "Next thing you know, they'll ..." blank. Nothing remotely realistic to put in there. And then Verizon puts in something totally ridiculous, makes it a *reality* and you just have to run after them.

They are moving the goalposts of satire right through everybody's front yard and house walls.

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4.  Stubing, Oct 29th, 2014 @ 6:40am

If you haven't already, now would be a good time to cover Verizon's inserting of inexorable perma-cookies into smartphone traffic.

<http://www.pcworld.com/article/2839816/secretive-unblockable-verizon-perma-cookies-kick-up-p-rivacy-concerns.html>

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5.  John Fenderson (profile), Oct 29th, 2014 @ 6:58am

Baffling

I think it's absolutely possible for a big company to create great editorial content that builds up trust (we did with TheFeature those many years ago).

I agree, and I find it frankly baffling that so many companies can't seem to pull it off.

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-
6.  **Anonymous Coward**, Oct 29th, 2014 @ 7:04am

really? i cant imagine why!!

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-
7.  **John Fenderson** ([profile](#)), Oct 29th, 2014 @ 7:05am

Re:

AT&T does this too. If you want to see if your particular carrier is doing this, point your browser to <http://lessonslearned.org/sniff>


The remedy: don't use the cell network to browser unless you are going through a VPN or you are using HTTPS. There is no other solution.

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-
8.  **Anonymous Coward**, Oct 29th, 2014 @ 7:06am

Sugarcoated would have been a better name , let the propaganda begin.

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9.  **Rich Kulawiec**, Oct 29th, 2014 @ 7:08am


Call it what it is

"There's plenty of talk lately about the importance of trust in journalism today [...]"

But we're not talking about journalism here. This is propaganda, bought and paid for by Verizon. The people employed aren't journalists, they're shills and stenographers, obediently writing whatever PR, bullshit and lies their corporate masters command.

Calling this "journalism" is like calling a toilet stain "art".


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-
10.  **MetalSamurai**, Oct 29th, 2014 @ 7:21am

Actually...

Actually it's about ethics in tech journalism.

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-
11.  **Pixelation**, Oct 29th, 2014 @ 7:21am

At least they'll be able to discuss Verizon's tracking habits...


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-
12.  **Anonymous Coward**, Oct 29th, 2014 @ 7:22am

Re:

Verizon wants to double dip they accept payments from customers then make money on that customers data sounds like an antitrust issue . and a lot like comcasts double dipping model.


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-
13.  **Anonymous Coward**, Oct 29th, 2014 @ 7:41am

"He who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the news controls the past."

I think I read something like that once.

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-
14.  **Anonymous Coward**, Oct 29th, 2014 @ 7:46am

Re: Re:

"don't use the cell network to browser unless you are going through a VPN or you are using HTTPS"

Is Verizon trustworthy when it comes to SSL certificates?


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-
15.  **Anonymous Coward**, Oct 29th, 2014 @ 7:52am

It's unfortunate - from a corporate view - that tech readers aren't stupider.

This "SugarString" blog will be known as a Verizon shill, just as CNET will always be known as a CBS front, after that CES debacle.


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16.  **Just Another Anonymous Troll**, Oct 29th, 2014 @ 7:58am

Re: Call it what it is

In all fairness, you probably could take a toilet stain and sell it to some gullible art collector.

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17.  **Anonymous Coward**, Oct 29th, 2014 @ 8:13am

My biggest complaint would be that this is just another twig on the pile of Verizon wanting to be gatekeepers of the internet. AOL had tried this and failed, but with the current market of limited choices in providers, I would say it's just more fuel on the fire for greater regulation.

At least they haven't gone the full route with the desktop browser yet, but I wouldn't put it past them to try at a later date.

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-
18.  **Anonymous Coward**, Oct 29th, 2014 @ 8:27am

I see two possibilities here. Either Stryker took the job with the intention of doing a good job and keeping it, or he took the job to intentionally burn the reputation of this venture.

If it's the later, he's doing a good job. He basically went out of his way to ensure that the impartiality of the site would be reported elsewhere and that credibility would be harmed right out of the gate. If this is his intention, I assume he will leave the post shortly.

If he intends to keep his job and try to get a good news site going, I expect that very shortly there will be a story about spying or neutrality front-and-center on the site. It will put the news to rest, then they can return to banning those topics once this episode has fallen into the memory hole.

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-
19.  **John Fenderson** ([profile](#)), Oct 29th, 2014 @ 8:33am

Re: Re: Re:

You don't really have to trust Verizon for that. To perform a MITM attack in this type of use case requires one of two things -- either someone installs a fake root cert on the endpoint device or the someone subverts the site you're connecting to. Verizon isn't really in a position to do the latter on a widespread basis, and you can check for the former.

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-
20.  **Anonymous Coward**, Oct 29th, 2014 @ 8:52am

Re: Re: Re: Re:

You forgot about BEAST, POODLE, CRIME, et al.

So for the really paranoid test the site you want to stay secret: [Qualys SSL Test](#)




Though I agree, Verizon wouldn't do this but I wouldn't put it past the legal system.

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21.  **Anonymous Coward**, Oct 29th, 2014 @ 8:57am


Picture a world where net neutrality is dead. **This is the kind of shit that would be free.**

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-
22.  RD, Oct 29th, 2014 @ 8:58am
Tailor Made!
Ah, so Verizon just set up bob's and antidirt's new online home then...
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-
23.  John Fenderson (profile), Oct 29th, 2014 @ 8:59am
Re: Re: Re: Re: Re:
Yes, that's why I confined my comment to this particular use case. There are other legitimate concerns about HTTPS.
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-
24.  Anonymous Coward, Oct 29th, 2014 @ 9:04am
Re: Tailor Made!
Not at all, commenting in agreement with any post goes against their nature, so they will not feel at home where they agree with the site.
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-
25.  Anonymous Coward, Oct 29th, 2014 @ 9:29am
Re:
Dont forget their sister site ...GrainOfSalt.
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-
26.  sorrykb (profile), Oct 29th, 2014 @ 9:29am
Interrelated
Bad enough that they'd ban articles about net neutrality and surveillance, but there would also be unintended consequences. For example, these days you'd have a hard time writing in depth about security without mentioning government surveillance/intrusion. So, they wouldn't be able to write about security either... on a tech blog. Then again, maybe that's not an unintended consequence.
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27.  Anonymous Coward, Oct 29th, 2014 @ 9:56am
Re: Antitrust regulations?
Depends on who you pay off...
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-
28.  Anonymous Coward, Oct 29th, 2014 @ 10:09am
Re:
Was coming here to post just this. Thanks.
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-
29.  Nigel, Oct 29th, 2014 @ 10:32am
Geez you would think at this point they would understand that not being allowed to comment over there renders the place entirely useless.

Not that it isn't entirely useless in the first place.
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-
30.  Anonymous Coward, Oct 29th, 2014 @ 12:17pm
The Invasion of corporate news
I think someone posted this in response to another article, but it bears repeating.

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/937b06c2-3ebd-11e4-ade4-00144feabdc0.html>
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31.  Anonymous Coward, Oct 29th, 2014 @ 12:58pm

The stated objectives of SugarString sound remarkably similar to the drama around technology forums on reddit earlier this year.


A moderator of the default /r/technology subreddit is revealed to be suppressing government surveillance and network neutrality stories, and is removed.

Ensuing drama is fanned and in the aftermath new technology subreddits /r/tech and /r/futurology are promoted suppressing 'political' stories.

By swinging the political term around with negative connotation, fluffy technology stories get retained while skirting anything about government surveillance or network neutrality.

With the new Verizon site thrown in, the theory that there is some intent behind how this has shaken out gains a bit of traction.

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32.  bgmcb (profile), Oct 29th, 2014 @ 8:28pm

SugarString is missing a tag line

I have a suggestion:

How I learned to stop worrying and love the surveillance state.

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33.  Stubing, Oct 30th, 2014 @ 3:44am

Re: Re:

Inexorable, for sure. A question remaining, however, is why hasn't Mike & TechDirt covered this story? It's only common sense that more coverage is better. Yet, it's seems that the SugarString scenario also applies here: TechDirt will not cover certain items, even OBVIOUS items, when those items affect TechDirt. It has become obvious that Masnick is utilizing, and counts upon these perma-cookies being in place. Of course, the has the chance here to prove us wrong.

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“

"He who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the news controls the past."

I think I read something like that once.

—Anonymous Coward

”

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