Elon Musk’s antisemitic post draws rebuke from White House; IBM pulls X ads

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Outcry over antisemitic content on X (formerly Twitter) continues as the White House condemns a post from X owner Elon Musk and IBM halts advertising on the platform after a Media Matters report showed one of its ads was placed next to pro-Hitler content.

“IBM has zero tolerance for hate speech and discrimination, and we have immediately suspended all advertising on X while we investigate this entirely unacceptable situation,” an IBM spokesperson said in a statement provided to Ars.

Media Matters’ report came a day after X owner Elon Musk sparked outrage by endorsing an X post that referenced an antisemitic conspiracy theory that “hordes of minorities” are flooding Western countries and claimed that Jews have been “pushing hatred” against White people. Since Musk responded to that post—saying, “you have said the actual truth”—it has been viewed more than 1 million times. The exchange drew so much controversy that a White House spokesperson, Andrew Bates, released a statement condemning Musk’s post.

“It is unacceptable to repeat the hideous lie behind the most fatal act of Antisemitism in American history at any time, let alone one month after the deadliest day for the Jewish people

since the Holocaust," Bates' statement said, referring to Hamas' surprise attack on Israel on October 7.

According to Media Matters, IBM wasn't the only brand with ads appearing next to "content that touts Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party." The watchdog group also documented similarly problematic placements of ads from Apple, Bravo (NBCUniversal), Oracle, and Xfinity (Comcast).

Officially, an X executive told Ars that the company has made investments to strengthen safety controls allegedly beyond what other platforms allow and has been unable to verify that any of these brands' ads appeared next to the pro-Nazi content, as Media Matters alleged. X is currently trying to figure out what account Media Matters used on which date to take the screenshots embedded in its report.

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Further, X's executive said that 99 percent of measured ad placements in 2023 have been next to safe content. As for the account with pro-Hitler content seemingly appearing next to IBM's ad, the exec said that the account would not have been monetizable and noted that the post itself had been labeled "sensitive media" and received relatively low impressions.

"While we understand it's not an ideal placement for any ad, the post itself had about 8,000 impressions," the X executive told FT.

On X, Musk shared different reactions to these reports, seemingly taking a swipe at IBM by responding to an X user calling out IBM for "saving face" due to its documented history dealing directly with Holocaust organizers in the 1930s. The X user suggested that IBM's history was worse for the brand than its ads appearing next to antisemitic content on X, to which Musk responded, "precisely."

An IBM spokesperson told Ars that "IBM has never been silent on this issue."

“As with other foreign-owned companies that did business in Germany at that time, IBM’s German operations came under the control of Nazi authorities prior to and during World War II,” IBM’s spokesperson said. “Most documents were destroyed or lost during the war. Whatever archives IBM had from this period were donated to universities in New York and Germany several years ago for scholarly review. IBM and its employees around the world maintain that the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime are abhorrent and condemn any actions which aided their unspeakable acts.”

Musk called Media Matters “evil”

Musk also called Media Matters “an evil organization.”

He was responding to a post from XDaily seemingly suggesting that Media Matters was hunting down antisemitic content to scare off advertisers.

XDaily noted that ads were being placed next to antisemitic content in examples pulled by Media Matters because “X’s automated Ad Adjacency tools aren’t able to determine if the content in images is antisemitic.” It’s likely, XDaily said, that “X’s recent decision to help users monetize on Ads that run on users profiles is also the culprit” while suggesting that Media Matters was exploiting this by “just scrolling down on user profiles of antisemitic accounts until they see an ad.”

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X’s executive also suggested to Ars that Media Matters’ monitoring for hate speech on the site would make it more likely that the watchdog group would catch these types of ad placements. According to the executive, brands and users should be able to control settings to avoid seeing such content or presumably avoid placing their ads next to such content.

“Ads follow the people on X, in this case the Media Matters researcher that was going to actively look for this content—that’s how user targeting works,” the X exec said. “As it relates to the platform itself, control settings are in place there for every user and every brand.”

Angelo Carusone, president of Media Matters for America, told Ars that “there’s a whole bunch of conspiracies” proliferating on X that Media Matters doctored images of ads next to antisemitic posts. Carusone said there is a “big concern” if X is giving “a little bit of a wink and a nod and some oxygen to conspiracy theories that somehow these images are fabricated,” because “it’s not true.”

Carusone confirmed that Media Matters used a clean account to gather data used in its report over two days from Nov. 14 to Nov. 16. Carusone told Ars that a new Media Matters report put out today shows that X’s ad targeting is currently still placing ads next to antisemitic posts using white nationalist hashtags.

“Fundamentally all this research shows is that the system that they’re supposed to have in place” to prevent ads being served on antisemitic content “that they’ve been telling advertisers exist,” either “doesn’t exist at all,” or if “it does exist, it’s not working,” Carusone told Ars.

X criticizing Media Matters’ methodology for surfacing problematic ad placements, Carusone said, is a “cop out.”

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