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As wildfire rages in Los Angeles, city tells wealthy to warn staff of dangers



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Trump adviser testifies about alarm over call with Ukraine leader



Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, director for European Affairs at the National Security Council, arrives to testify as part of the U.S. House of Representatives impeachment inquiry into U.S. President Trump led by the House Intelligence, House Foreign Affairs and House Oversight and Reform Committees on Capitol Hill in Washington, U.S., October 29, 2019. REUTERS/Siphiwe Sibeko

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - A top adviser to President Donald Trump on Ukraine testified on Tuesday that he was so alarmed after hearing Trump ask Ukraine's president to investigate a political rival, Democrat Joe Biden, that he reported the matter to a White House lawyer out of concern for U.S. national security.

Army Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Vindman, director of European affairs on the National Security Council, arrived at the U.S. Capitol clad in his military dress uniform as he became the first current White House official to testify in the House of Representatives impeachment inquiry against Trump.

Vindman, a Ukraine-born American citizen and decorated Iraq War combat veteran, also became the first person to testify who listened in on the July 25 call at the heart of the Ukraine scandal. Even before his arrival, some allies of the Republican president, including Fox News host Laura Ingraham, sought to attack Vindman's integrity and questioned his loyalty to the United States.

Factbox: The Trump impeachment inquiry - What we've learned so far

Ukrainian officials will not testify in U.S. impeachment inquiry: foreign minister

Biden defended Vindman as a hero, calling attacks on the Army officer's character and loyalty "despicable."

"He's a hell of a patriot," the former U.S. vice president told MSNBC.

During the call, Trump asked Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to investigate Biden, a leading contender for the

2020 Democratic presidential nomination to face Trump, and his son Hunter Biden, who had served on the board of Ukrainian gas company Burisma. Trump also asked Zelenskyy to investigate a debunked conspiracy theory that Ukraine, not Russia, interfered in the 2016 U.S. election.

"I was concerned by the call," Vindman said in his opening statement to the three House committees conducting the Democratic-led impeachment inquiry. "I did not think it was proper to demand that a foreign government investigate a U.S. citizen, and I was worried about the implications for the U.S. government's support of Ukraine."

Vindman's testimony was some of the most damaging to date in the impeachment inquiry that threatens Trump's presidency even as he seeks re-election next year.

Vindman also called into question the truthfulness of earlier testimony by another administration official, U.S. Ambassador to the European Union Gordon Sondland. Trump had withheld \$391 million in U.S. security aid to Ukraine approved by Congress to fight Russia-backed separatists in the eastern part of the country. Zelenskyy agreed to Trump's requests. The aid was later provided. Vindman, who appeared after receiving a subpoena from lawmakers, recounted listening in on the call.

Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, director for European Affairs at the National Security Council, arrives to testify as part of the U.S. House of Representatives impeach-

ment inquiry into U.S. President Trump led by the House Intelligence, House Foreign Affairs and House Oversight and Reform Committees on Capitol Hill in Washington, U.S., October 29, 2019. REUTERS/Siphiwe Sibeko

"I realized that if Ukraine pursued an investigation into the Bidens and Burisma, it would likely be interpreted as a partisan play which would undoubtedly result in Ukraine losing the bipartisan support it has thus far maintained. This would all undermine U.S. national security," he said in his testimony.

After the call, Vindman added, he reported his concerns to the National Security Counsel's lead counsel. The call also prompted a complaint from an intelligence community whistleblower, whose identity has not been revealed, that triggered the impeachment inquiry. In his statement, Vindman denied being the whistleblower or knowing the identity of the individual.

A PIVOTAL MEETING

At a July 10 meeting in Washington with visiting Ukrainian officials, Vindman said Sondland, a former Trump political donor, told the Ukrainian officials they needed to "deliver specific investigations in order to secure a meeting with the president." At that point, Vindman said, then-National Security Adviser John Bolton cut the meeting short. According to Vindman's prepared remarks, Sondland told other U.S. officials in a debriefing after the meeting that it was important that the Ukrainian investigations center on the 2016 election, the Bidens and Burisma.

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As wildfire rages in Los Angeles, city tells wealthy to warn staff of dangers

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - A wildfire raged through some of Los Angeles' upscale neighborhoods on Tuesday, prompting city officials to chide wealthy evacuees to remember to tell their housekeepers and gardeners not to enter the danger zone.

An air tanker is seen through high voltage transmission lines in Geyserville, California, U.S. October 28, 2019. REUTERS/Stephen Lam

Firefighters were battling to try to save thousands of imperiled homes as thousands of residents fled the area.

Los Angeles officials reminded wealthy evacuees to alert their service employees of the danger in light of news reports that several turned up for work at some of the 10,000 homes and businesses under smoky skies in the mandatory evacuation zone.

"I want to encourage people to be reaching out to anybody who may be showing up at their home and urge them to stay away," Councilmember Mike Bonin told a news conference on Tuesday morning.

The brush fire that broke out early on Monday near the Getty Center art museum on the city's West Side grew about 40 acres (16 hectares) overnight to 658 acres (266 hectares), Mayor Eric Garcetti told a news conference.

"That's a good sign, actually, that it didn't grow by more," he said. Eight homes have been destroyed so far.

Across the state, hundreds of thousands of people were left in the dark as power companies cut

off electricity to try to prevent more fires from being sparked by snapped cabling in the brushland.

Los Angeles Lakers basketball great LeBron James, "Terminator" actor and former California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, as well other celebrities, said on Twitter they had been forced to evacuate their homes.

Weather forecasters say there could be worse to come, with the National Weather Service (NWS) predicting gusting winds in the mountains around Los Angeles, where planes have been dousing the fire from the air.

The Santa Ana winds in the south could hit their worst levels of the season and last into late Thursday, according to Marc Chenard of the NWS Weather Prediction Center.

Until at least Wednesday, in the bone-dry wine country about 70 miles (113 km) north of San Francisco, winds will hit up to 65 mph (101 kph) in the mountain areas and 35 mph (56 kph) in the valleys and coast around where the Kincade Fire, the state's biggest, is burning, he said.

POWER CUTS

Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E) said early on Tuesday that almost 600,000 more electric customers would have their power shut off, starting early in the day, as a fire prevention measure ahead of the wind storms.



An air tanker is seen through high voltage transmission lines in Geyserville, California, U.S. October 28, 2019. REUTERS/Stephen Lam

This is on top of the 970,000 PG&E customers already shut off, although about half of those were restored by Monday night, the company announced.

After four days of sharp declines, PG&E shares rebounded, up 17% at \$4.49 on the New York Stock Exchange on Monday.

As of early Tuesday, the Kincade fire had scorched more than 75,000 acres (30,351 hectares), destroyed 123 homes and other structures and was 15 percent contained as it burned across parts of Sonoma County's wine country, state fire officials said.

California Governor Gavin Newsom said he was confident that firefighters had secured enough perimeters around the Kincade fire that it no longer posed an imminent threat to two communities north of Santa Rosa, although he conceded the fight was not over.

The cause of the Kincade fire in Sonoma County, where 190,000 people were ordered to evacuate, remains under investigation.

Advertisement for Southern News Group featuring a woman holding a smartphone, QR codes, and text in Chinese: '美南廣播電視台 看電視聽廣播', '全面進入數據互聯時代', '美國華人傳媒史上重大突破'.

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Editor's Choice



A demonstrator wears a mask to protect himself from tear gas during a protest over corruption, lack of jobs, and poor services, in Baghdad, Iraq October 29, 2019. REUTERS/Wissm al-Okili TPX IMAGES OF THE DAY



Supporters of Lebanese Shi'ite groups Hezbollah and Amal scuffle with protesters at a roadblock on a main road in Beirut, during ongoing anti-government protest



Riot police officers are seen among tear gas during a protest in Cochabamba, Bolivia, October 28, 2019. REUTERS/Danilo Balderrama NO RESALES. NO ARCHIVES TPX IMAGES OF THE DAY



Demonstrators carry an injured man during a protest over corruption, lack of jobs, and poor services, in Baghdad



FILE PHOTO: A cosmetic display of French cosmetics group L'Oréal is seen at a duty free shop at the Nice International Airport, in Nice, France, October 10, 2018. REUTERS/Eric Gaillard/File Photo



U.S. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) talks to reporters after the weekly Senate policy lunches at the U.S. Capitol in Washington



Supporters of Bolivia's President Evo Morales take a break during a protest in La Paz, Bolivia, October 29, 2019. REUTERS/Kai Pfaffenbach



People descend into Westminster tube station at rush hour as MPs debate on the early parliamentary election in London, Britain, October 29, 2019. REUTERS/Kevin Coombs

Type With Your Mind

Facebook: "We've Achieved A First In Brain-Computer Research"



Facebook Reality Labs built this early wearable brain-computer interface device. (Photo/ Facebook)

Overview

Facebook makes progress on its ambitions to create a wearable to decode speech directly from your brain.

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

Two years ago, Facebook announced plans to create a non-invasive wearable system that could type 100 words per minute by decoding phrases and words that a user just thinks.

The company has now published an update on its ambitions to build augmented-reality (AR) glasses that would allow people to communicate without using a smartphone.

Facebook thinks a machine that decodes words in the brain's speech center could offer the speed of voice and the privacy of text.

"The promise of AR lies in its ability to seamlessly connect people to the world that surrounds them – and to each other," Facebook researchers said in a blog.

"Rather than looking down at a phone screen or breaking out a laptop, we can maintain eye contact and retrieve useful information and context without ever missing a beat. It's a tantalizing vision, but one that will require an enterprising spirit, hefty amounts of determination,

and an open mind."



The company believes it is a viable technology, assuming major advances can be made in the field of brain-computer interface (BCI) research, which today necessitates invasive techniques using implanted electrodes in the brain.

Facebook Reality Labs' is investigating the potential for BCI and funded researchers at the University of California, San Francisco, who've detailed in Nature Communications a BCI that can detect when a person hears or says something and then decodes the phrase.

In this experiment, participants listened to questions and responded aloud with answers while the researchers used a

system to decode the utterances from the brain in real time.

"After training, participants performed a task in which, during each trial, they listened to a question and responded aloud with an answer of their choice. Using only neural signals, we detect when participants are listening or speaking and predict the identity of each detected utterance using phone-level Viterbi decoding," the researchers explain.

The participants were volunteers with normal speech who were undergoing brain surgery to treat epilepsy. They were asked questions like "How is your room currently?" For this question they had five valid answers to choose from, including "Bright", "Dark", "Hot", "Cold", and "Fine".



Facebook notes that the main advancement in this paper is that the researchers were able to "decode a small set of full, spoken words and phrases from brain activity in real time – a first in the field of BCI research."

The researchers are aiming to decode speech at a rate of 100 words per minute with a 1,000-word vocabulary and a word error rate of less than 17%.

"Facebook says it's still a "long way" from achieving the same results with non-invasive technology, but it believes the work underway will help it develop decoding algorithms and figure out the specifications for a non-invasive wearable.

One non-invasive technique it's exploring with researchers in another project is using near-infrared light to detect changes in neurons in the brain.

"Like other cells in your body, neurons consume oxygen when they're active. So if we can detect shifts in oxygen levels within the brain, we can indirectly measure brain activity," Facebook said.

The company doesn't think this tech-

nique will allow it to decode thought phrases, but sees potential for recognizing key words like 'home', 'select', and 'delete'. (Courtesy <https://www.zdnet.com>)

Related

Brain-computer interfaces are developing faster than the policy debate around them

It's time to talk about what's possible — and what shouldn't be



Two years after the company announced its mind-reading initiative, Facebook has an update to share. The company sponsored an experiment conducted by researchers at the University of California San Francisco in which they built an interface for decoding spoken dialogue from brain signals. The results were published today in Nature Communication.

The work itself is fascinating, as you might expect from the subject matter. Brain-computer interfaces aren't new, but the existing ones aren't particularly efficient — particularly the ones that don't involve drilling into your skull. Facebook's approach relies on high-density electrocorticography, aka ECoG, which implants sensors on the brain and uses them to record brain activity.



And its most recent research apparently showed promise, Adi Robertson reports: *If participants heard someone ask "Which musical instrument do you like listening to," for example, they'd respond with one of several options like "violin" or "drums" while their brain*

activity was recorded. The system would guess when they were asking a question and when they were answering it, then guess the content of both speech events. The predictions were shaped by prior context — so once the system determined which question subjects were hearing, it would narrow the set of likely answers. The system could produce results with 61 to 76 percent accuracy, compared with the 7 to 20 percent accuracy expected by chance.

"Here we show the value of decoding both sides of a conversation — both the questions someone hears and what they say in response," said lead author and UCSF neurosurgery professor Edward Chang, in a statement. But Chang noted that this system only recognizes a very limited set of words so far; participants were only asked nine questions with 24 total answer options. The study's subjects — who were being prepped for epilepsy surgery — used highly invasive implants. And they were speaking answers aloud, not simply thinking them.



If successful, the work will have important clinical applications — it could help patients to communicate who have lost the ability to speak, for example. Facebook hopes the technology has a broader use — enabling what former Facebook crazy-project chief Regina Dugan once called a "brain click." Allow people to click through dialog boxes with their minds, she told us in 2017, and you create lots of interesting new possibilities for augmented and virtual reality. That goal remains very far away. But that seems like a good time to ask whether any of this work should, you know, be done in the first place. (Courtesy theverge.com)



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Amazon Warning To Customers: Some Supplements Could Be Fake

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor



Procter & Gamble brand.



"We are aware that some counterfeit Align product was sold on Amazon via third parties," Mollie Wheeler, a spokes-person for Procter & Gamble, said in an email.

"Amazon has confirmed they have stopped third party sales of the Align products in question and Amazon is only selling Align product received directly from P&G manufacturing facilities."

In a statement, an Amazon spokes-person highlighted several initiatives the company has devised to detect counterfeiters, like Brand Registry and Project Zero. Brands typically need to elect to participate in these programs, and the spokesperson declined to clarify whether Procter & Gamble or Align were already enrolled.

"We investigate every claim of potential counterfeit thoroughly, and often in partnership with brands, and in the rare instance where a bad actor gets through, we take swift action, including removing the item for sale, permanently banning bad actors, pursuing legal action, and working with law enforcement when appropriate," the statement reads.

"We have taken these actions against the bad actors in question and proactively notified and refunded customers." Neither Amazon nor Procter & Gamble would say who first detected the fake pills. Amazon also didn't respond to a question about whether it would test the counterfeit probiotics, leaving Bressler and other customers to wonder if they may have ingested something dangerous. The FDA has found that supplements

sometimes contain prescription pharmaceuticals like steroids or antidepressants, which can be harmful if a person takes them without being aware of it.



CVS recently announced plans to independently test every nutritional supplement it carries in its stores. That Amazon isn't doing the same might sound careless, but the reality is that the company has already taken far more action than it's obligated to under the law.

Even if the counterfeit Align pills Amazon sold turned out to be harmful, Bressler and other buyers would likely have little legal recourse against the company. When consumers have tried to sue online marketplaces like Amazon and eBay for selling dangerous goods in the past, courts have ruled they aren't responsible for products offered by third-party vendors—they serve merely as intermediaries between consumers and sellers.

In many of these cases, the companies have defended themselves using Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act. Passed in 1996, it shields them from nearly all liability for what sellers or users post on their sites. In one 2014 case, for example, a judge found that because of Section 230, eBay isn't liable even when it sells items that have been recalled. "Marketplaces aren't responsible for passing along recalls, even if they know the recalls have been issued, and even if they would have the capacity to share them," says Eric Goldman, a professor at Santa Clara University School of Law who has written extensively about intermediary liability. (Items that have been recalled, however, are prohibited under eBay's Terms of Service.)

Retailers, on the other hand, can be held

directly responsible for selling things like questionable dietary supplements. Three years ago, the Department of Justice ordered GNC to pay a \$2 million fine for selling products with harmful hidden ingredients, and the chain agreed to better police the goods on its shelves moving forward.

Amazon is both a retailer and a third-party marketplace. It buys some products directly from manufacturers and sells them at a markup, and it allows independent merchants to offer their goods directly to consumers, the latter of which accounts for 58 percent of gross merchandise sales on the platform. But the line between those two parts of its business are not always clear. Amazon exerts a significant amount of control over sellers, including dictating how their goods appear in search results. It also often warehouses and ships their products for them. And unlike on eBay, Etsy, or other online marketplaces, a single Amazon product listing can feature goods from dozens of independent sellers, making it difficult for consumers to understand from whom they're purchasing a product. "Amazon has obviously kept pushing the needle further and further toward taking responsibility for marketplace goods," says Goldman.

The US 3rd Circuit Court of Appeals ruled earlier this month that these kinds of differences do, in fact, make Amazon liable for harmful products sold by third-party sellers in some circumstances. The judges noted that because third-party vendors can only communicate with consumers directly through Amazon, they can "conceal themselves from the customer, leaving customers injured by defective products with no direct recourse." The case involved a woman who purchased a dog collar from a third-party vendor on Amazon in 2014. Several weeks later, while she was walking her dog, it snapped, leaving the woman permanently blind in one eye. Goldman notes that the ruling is based on Pennsylvania law and doesn't yet set a precedent for the rest of the country. Amazon is also asking the court to re-

view it again. Making Amazon legally liable for everything on its site wouldn't be a silver bullet. The immunity granted under Section 230 is what, in part, made it possible for online marketplaces to thrive in the first place. If platforms became totally liable, that would make it incredibly difficult for, say, Etsy to allow independent artists to sell their work on its site. Amazon has banned some products it has deemed to be dangerous, such as hoverboards, but there are an endless number of other categories in which seemingly benign products may pose risks.

And in situations where Amazon can't be held legally responsible, it can be almost impossible to track down the entities who are. The third-party vendor who sold the knockoff Align pills, or the company that manufactured them, may very likely be difficult to find, especially if they're overseas. In the dog collar case, The Furry Gang, the third-party vendor that sold the defective collar, completely disappeared.



The US government is taking more notice of the growing problem of counterfeits and how online shopping in many ways has allowed knockoffs to flourish. On Thursday, lawmakers in the House of Representatives held a hearing on counterfeits, where people from a variety of industries spoke about the threat to their businesses. "As one of the largest and most influential ecommerce companies in the world, Amazon has an important role to play in ensuring that counterfeit goods stay out of consumers' hands," said Robert C. Barchiesi of the International AntiCounterfeiting Coalition in written testimony. "And we look forward to their continued cooperation toward that end." (Courtesy <https://www.wired.com>)



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