

Uber hires team to help fix privacy issues

November 20 2014, by Glenn Chapman



A man shows the Uber app on a smartphone on October 10, 2014

Uber on Thursday scrambled to allay fears that executives at the hot car-sharing startup are gunning for journalists and spying on riders.

Uber announced it has hired a team led by privacy specialist Harriet Pearson at the global law firm Hogan Lovells to evaluate and improve the way the company safeguards information.

The move aims to counter concerns that Uber may be spying on riders, and perhaps monitoring journalists heading to meet with sources or business people traveling to confidential meetings.

"Our business depends on the trust of the millions of riders and drivers who use Uber," the startup said in a blog post.

"The trip history of our riders is important information and we understand that we must treat it carefully and with respect, protecting it from unauthorized access."

The team "will conduct an in-depth review and assessment of our existing data privacy program and recommend any needed enhancements," Uber said.

The controversy widened when a BuzzFeed report indicated that executives at Uber had taken liberties with access to a "God View" that showed where riders and their drivers were located at any given time.

Uber had already been in the spotlight following comments about the news media from a key executive.

Digging up dirt

Uber chief Travis Kalanick on Tuesday took to Twitter to condemn the executive's suggestion to dig up dirt on reporters who write critically of the car-sharing service.

Kalanick tried to undo damage to its public image—and to its relationship with the media—from comments made days earlier at an elite Manhattan dinner party by the startup's executive vice president of business, Emil Michael.

At a gathering held in the spirit of improving Uber's tenuous relations with the press, Michael lamented that the company was picked on in the media and was quoted as proposing the creation of a team of researchers to investigate the lives of reporters.

The idea, in essence, was to give the press a taste of its own medicine.

"Emil's comments at the recent dinner party were terrible and do not represent the company," Kalanick said on Twitter.

"His remarks showed a lack of leadership, a lack of humanity, and a departure from our values and ideals."

During the dinner, Michael outlined a vision of spending \$1 million to hire opposition researchers and journalists to investigate the families and affairs of reporters as payback for critical coverage, according to BuzzFeed.

As anger about Michael's comments spread, he took to Twitter to apologize and said that neither he nor Uber would ever actually resort to the kind of tactic he suggested.

US Senator Al Franken, chairman of the subcommittee on privacy, technology and the law, fired off a letter to Kalanick on Wednesday with a slew of questions he wanted answered regarding Michael's comments and the use of God View at Uber.

The San Francisco-based firm, which lets customers order and pay for taxis or private vehicles via smartphones, has been unofficially valued in the range of \$25 billion to \$30 billion based on funding rounds.

Its smartphone app connects users with local drivers and the company charges a commission for each ride.

Founded in 2009, Uber is now present in more than 200 cities and in 45 countries.

The company's rapid expansion has caused tensions with traditional taxi drivers, especially in Europe.

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