

Online neighbors forum alters rules to stop racial profiling

May 12 2016, by By Olga R. Rodriguez



A Nextdoor sign is shown in a window at an office in San Francisco, Wednesday, May 11, 2016. Nextdoor, a popular San Francisco-based website meant for neighborhood groups across the country to share recommendations on dog-sitters or pass along used baby clothes, said it is stepping up efforts to block people from using the tool for racial profiling. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu)

A social media network created to connect neighbors in online communities said it is changing how members can report suspicious activity after a group complained the website was being used for racial

profiling.

Some residents in racially diverse Oakland say people were posting warnings about minorities, flagging black men walking by too slowly, for example, on San Francisco-based Nextdoor.com, which is intended as a place to share recommendations on plumbers or pass along information on used furniture.

In an effort to remedy that, the company will no longer allow immediate postings on its crime and safety section, company chief executive Nirav Tolia said. It will require people reporting a crime or warning about a suspicious person to fill out several forms before their post is published.

"If you make it really easy to post anything, people don't have to think," Tolia said. "But if you insert these decision points, it forces them to think about what they are doing."

The forms will ask users to detail criminal behavior before they describe a suspect and force them to describe the person from head to toe and not just by race. The site also now scans for mentions of race that may be offensive. If a racial profiling post somehow gets through anyway, anyone can flag it for removal.

The 5-year-old site, which sees 3 million messages in its crime and safety section each day, has been testing the new rules in the San Francisco Bay Area and several East Coast cities since April and plans to take them nationwide by summer.

The changes come after Oakland-based Neighbors for Racial Justice complained to city officials last October that the site was being used to post the racially inspired warnings.



Nextdoor CEO Nirav Tolia poses for photos at his office in San Francisco, Wednesday, May 11, 2016. Nextdoor, a popular San Francisco-based website meant for neighborhood groups across the country to share recommendations on dog-sitters or pass along used baby clothes, said it is stepping up efforts to block people from using the tool for racial profiling. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu)

It's not clear how widespread the problem is on Nextdoor, but a handful of publications across the nation have written about racial profiling complaints from users, with most focusing on the problems first reported in Oakland and Nextdoor's actions to address the issue.

Shikira Porter, an Oakland resident and Neighbors for Racial Justice member, said she saw posts for her neighborhood referring to African-Americans.

"Sometimes there would be posts about a black man walking by too

slowly, and they would take his picture and post it on Nextdoor," Porter said.

She wrote asking for the users who made such postings to clarify what crime had been committed. Her group later met with Nextdoor officials but eventually took the complaints to Councilwoman Annie Campbell Washington.

A council committee led by Campbell Washington has met with Nextdoor representatives to address the issue since last year.

"The work that Nextdoor has done is truly groundbreaking, and they were willing to meet with myself and members of the community and really dig deep to take on the issue of racial profiling and make real change in the way their users are posting," Campbell Washington said.

Porter, who helped create the changes, said she hopes having to fill out the forms will force neighbors to really examine those they deem suspicious.

"Maybe if they watch a little longer, they'll see that people are just being in the world, just like them," Porter said.

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