Smartphone voting stirs interest — and security fears

WASHINGTON: West Virginia's disabled residents and overseas military personnel will be able to vote by smartphone in the US presidential election this year, the latest development in a push to make balloting more accessible despite persistent security fears.

Rising interest in electronic voting has heightened concerns among security experts who fear these systems are vulnerable to hacking and manipulation that could undermine confidence in election results. Overseas service members from West Virginia first voted by smartphone in 2018 with the blockchain-powered mobile application Voatz, which is now being tested in some elections in Colorado, Utah, Oregon and Washington state.

West Virginia recently expanded the program to people with physical disabilities. A report released Thursday by Massachusetts Institute of Technology researchers uncovered Voatz "vulnerabilities" which could allow votes to be altered and potentially allow an attacker to recover a user's secret ballot.

Voatz called the study "flawed" and said its app has been updated 27 times from the version used by researchers. MIT researchers Michael Specter, James Koppel and Daniel Weitzner on Friday stood by their findings, saying they used recent versions of the app.

The researchers said that amid the uncertainty, election officials should "abandon the app for immediate use." Backers of mobile voting argue it is more efficient, and can improve accessibility for deployed troops, the elderly and other people who can't get to polling stations.

Former presidential candidate Andrew Yang endorsed the idea, saying, "Americans should

be able to vote via their mobile device, with verification done via blockchain." Critics however call for caution in light of an array of cybersecurity worries and a fiasco in Iowa over a mobile app that was used for vote tabulation, but could have been adapted for individual ballots.

While internet voting has been implemented in parts of the world, notably in Estonia, security is still a key concern, and that goes double for smartphone voting, say researchers. "Internet voting can't be secured by any known technology," said Andrew Appel, a Princeton University computer science professor and member of a National Academy of Sciences panel which produced a 2018 report, "Securing the Vote," that recommends against internet voting. A key hurdle for online voting, including with smartphones, is ensuring ballots are secret while at the same time verifying the voter's identity and securing the ballot against tampering.

Appel noted that while many people are used to handling sensitive transactions like banking on a smartphone, the security risks of voting are unique. The 2018 report, Appel noted, recommends the use of "human-readable" paper ballots which can be audited. Voatz claims its use of blockchain and other technologies can deliver both accessibility and security.

"Voatz leverages the latest security features of smartphones and facial recognition technology to verify and validate the identity of the voter, biometrics to secure that voter's identity, cryptography to automatically produce a paper ballot for tabulation at the jurisdiction, and blockchain for rigorous post-election audits to

ensure voter intent is reflected in the overall count without revealing voter identity," a Voatz spokesperson said in an email to AFP. The Voatz app requires users to scan a driver's license or other identity card and authenticate with a fingerprint reader and a selfie that is matched against it using facial recognition software.

But some analysts say the security using blockchain, which is a shared ledger used for cryptocurrencies that cannot be modified without all parties on the chain being notified, does not address the problems of electronic voting.

"Blockchain solves a problem for elections that pretty much doesn't exist, which is securing votes already cast," said Matt Blaze, a Georgetown University professor specializing in cryptography who has studied election systems. "It doesn't address the problem of how to know these are the votes people have cast."

Appel said if a ballot is altered by a hacker before it is tabulated, "the hacked ballot would go into the blockchain." Still, internet voting appears to moving forward in the US and elsewhere. At least four US states allow some voters to return ballots using a web-based portal and 19 allow email or fax, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Barbara Simons, board chair of the nonprofit election watchdog Verified Voting Foundation, said some firms are selling new technology by promising increased voter participation. "This is an incredible myth — there is little to no evidence showing internet voting is going to increase voter participation," Simons told a conference at Georgetown University.

Outside the US, at least a dozen countries

have experimented with some form of online voting, according to Verified Voting. Estonia's system in place since 2005 is seen by some as a model to follow. But France dropped its system for overseas voting online in 2017 over se-

curity concerns. Appel said one problem in evaluating online voting is that it may be impossible to detect a hack. For a fully electronic system, he said, "there is no practical way to know if the vote is recorded in an accurate

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Apple cancels production boost for iPhone XR: Nikkei

NEW YORK: Apple Inc has told its smartphone assemblers Foxconn and Pegatron to halt plans for additional production lines dedicated to the iPhone XR which launched last month, the Nikkei reported. Apple had also asked Wistron, a smaller iPhone assembler, to stand by for rush orders, but the company will receive no orders for the iPhone XR this season, the report said, citing supply chain sources. "For the Foxconn side, it first prepared nearly 60 assembly lines for Apple´s XR model, but recently uses only around 45 production lines as its top customer said it does not need to manufacture that many by now," the Nikkei quoted a source as saying. Apple did not immediately respond to Reuters´ request for comment. —**Reuters**

Twitter launches 'Safe DM' filter to prevent unwanted photos

LONDON: Twitter has launched a plugin called 'Safe DM' for its users to prevent them from receiving unsolicited pictures. The micro-blogging website introduced the new filter. According to BBC, the 'Safe DM' filter can block and delete unwanted pictures sent via direct message. According to the developers, the new filter works 99 per cent. If the user wants to use the new filter, he/she needs to add a plugin to their Twitter handle and allow it to access the direct messages. However, the 'Safe DM' filter does not read the text message, according to the developers. —**Agencies**


Is one of the brightest stars in the night sky losing shine?

PARIS: Astronomers have managed to take pictures of Betelgeuse showing that the star, one of the brightest in the Milky Way, has been losing luminosity over recent months, the European Southern Observatory (ESO) said. The mysterious dimming of one of the most visible stars in the Orion constellation has astronomers scratching their heads, with some saying Betelgeuse could be about to explode while others point to passing conditions.

"The stunning new images of the star's surface show not only the fading red supergiant but also how its apparent shape is changing," the ESO said after astronomers used the observatory´s very large telescope (VLT) to find out more. A team led by Miguel Montarges, astronomer at KU Leuven university in Belgium, has been observing the star with ESO´s VLT since December, aiming to un-

derstand why it´s becoming fainter. Betelgeuse began dimming towards the end of last year and is now at about 36 percent of its normal brightness, "a change noticeable even to the naked eye", ESO said. Experts investigating the dimming they say is "unprecedented" still do not believe that Betelgeuse is about to explode, as some astronomy enthusiasts have been speculating. "Betelgeuse will one day go supernova, but astronomers don´t think this is happening now," ESO said.

Instead researchers think that either the surface of the star is cooling because of exceptional stellar activity, or that there was "dust ejection towards us". Betelgeuse's irregular surface is made up of giant convective cells that move, shrink and swell, ESO said. "The star also pulsates, like a beating heart, periodically changing in brightness," it said. —**Reuters**

Jan 2019   Dec 2019
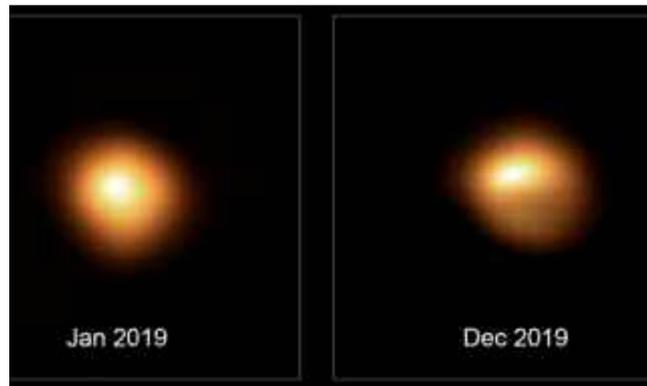
Google considering dealing to pay news media for content creation

SAN FRANCISCO: Google is in discussions on deals to pay media organizations for content, a move aimed at blunting criticism that it unfairly profits from copyrighted news, according to people familiar with the talks.

Negotiations between the internet giant and news outlets were said to be in the early stages, with most of the publishers located in France and other parts of Europe. Paying for news would diverge from the Alphabet-owned internet titan's practice of freely mining the internet for material it displays in search results. A licensing deal would likely be welcomed by news organizations that contend Google derives profits from ads alongside their news articles, including "snippets" in search results.

Contacted by AFP Friday, Google indicated it is seeking new ways to help publishers. "We want to help people find quality journalism -- it´s important to informed democracy and helps support a sustainable news industry," Google vice

president of news Richard Gingras said in a statement.

"We care deeply about this and are talking with partners and looking at more ways to expand our ongoing work with publishers, building on programs like our Google News Initiative." The Wall Street Journal reported earlier Friday Google was considering deals for a "premium" news product.

The California tech giant has remained steadfast about not paying for news article links displayed in search results and is not changing that position, people familiar with the matter told AFP.

It has argued that it drives traffic to news websites and thereby helps those publishers get ad revenues. Google's News Initiative works with publishers to encourage reader-

ship and paid subscriptions to their offerings.

Facebook, which has been hit with similar criticism, last year launched a dedicated "news tab" with professionally-produced content -- a move by the social network to promote journalism and shed its reputation as a platform for misinformation. Facebook was expected to pay some of the news organizations, reportedly millions of dollars in some cases.

The move by Google comes amid pressure to comply with a European copyright directive on content in search results. Google said last year it would not pay European media outlets for using their articles, pictures and videos in its searches in France, the first country to ratify the copyright directive, raising the prospect of legal action against the internet titan. The tech giant said it would only display content in its search engine results and on Google News from media groups who had given their permission for it to be used for free. —**AFP**

Developer runs new Windows on Apple Macbook, leaving tech world stunned
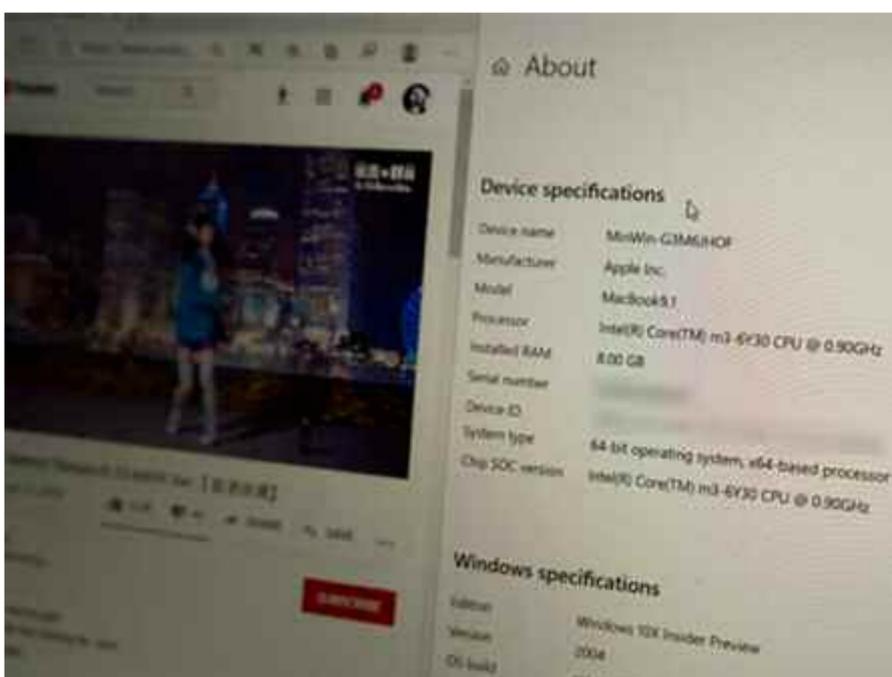
NEW YORK: A developer has left many tech geeks stunned after managing to successfully run the Windows 10x on an Apple Macbook, Techradar reported.

According to the publication, Twitter user @imbushao was able to manage to run Microsoft's incoming version of the operating software "well" on the Apple laptop.

The developer installed the Windows 10X Emulator that the tech giant released for developers to test out their applications, and begin optimising them for the new operating software ahead of its release. The Verge, on the other hand, said Microsoft released its first emulator for Windows 10x on Tuesday for developers to get a sneak peek at the new operating system variant for dual-screen devices.

Microsoft has customised the Windows 10x so it can exclusively work on for foldable and dual-screen hardware.

The publication noted that the major noticeable change is in the Start menu. It no longer includes the animated Live Tiles found on Windows 10 and 8, as well as the Windows Phone but now has a more simplified look.

"The Windows 10x Start Menu includes apps you can pin in place and a list of recent documents. It looks a lot more like a task launcher than what exists in Windows 10 at the moment," The Verge reported. "You can search for apps, documents, or even web content, and this also supports basic voice input," it added. "Cortana is nowhere to be found, though, not even in the settings section of Windows 10x." The publication also reported that the Windows 10x also allows users to choose from a dark and light mode. It noted that another major UX change with the new OS is the ability to multitask with apps. In the current version of Windows 10 apps open by default on a single screen. A user can then drag the apps across the two displays "to have them fully stretch and span across dual-screen devices". The publication noted that on the news OS a modern File Explorer will now be able to guide users towards libraries ending the use of the tradi-

tional File Explorer. The new tool will also support external devices for file transfers. In its final judgement, The Verge said Windows 10x still felt a more refined and modern version of Windows 10. —**Agencies**

Apple may release Airpods Pro Lite

NEW YORK: Apple may soon unveil a lite version of its much-hyped Airpods Pro following its successful launch a few years ago, according to a report by technology website BGR, which added that the in-ear headphones were the most expensive version the tech giant has launched over the years. However, the website quoted the publication Digitimes saying that Apple was working with its Taiwanese partners to make several new devices, including a cheaper version of the Airpods pro called AirPods Pro Lite. "Apple, maintaining partnerships with supply chains in both Taiwan and China, may have its Taiwanese partners handle more production of new-generation iPad, Apple Watch, AirPod Pro Lite, and iMac devices to be released later, as the epidemic has raised risks of raw materials supply shortages and shipments disruptions arising from uncertain resumption of normal operations at components suppliers and assembly plants in China," sources told Digitimes. However, the publication did not clarify what would make the pro lite different from the current pro version in the market. —**AFP**