


General election 2019: unregulated digital political advertisements are damaging our democracy

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*Despite widespread concern about how social media can be exploited by political campaigns, the UK is embarking on a general election campaign without any regulation in place about digital advertisements. **Bethany Shiner** explains what the problem is, the difficulties with regulation and self-regulation, and how voters should beware of the political messages they see online.*



Mark Zuckerberg. Picture: [Anthony Quintano](#) / [\(CC BY 2.0\)](#) licence

Now that there is going to another general election, on 12 December, the question of how digital political advertisements should be regulated becomes pressing once again. Since the 2016 UK-EU referendum and the 2017 general election, how political parties and campaign groups communicate with the electorate online has received a lot of scrutiny but little clarity. Even Facebook, pre-empting the inevitable use of its platform for campaigning, has requested [guidance](#) from the UK government on what constitutes a political advertisement.

What's the issue: micro-targeting voters

Methods to shape, or distort, political communication online include the use of bots and trolls to spread disinformation. Micro-targeting, the practice of sending selected individuals online tailored and highly optimised content using opaque methods of personal data profiling, has been singled out as being particularly damaging to democratic discourse. This practice is not unlawful in itself but it is problematic because the extent to

which political campaigners target individuals leads to a divergence in the overall message of the political party and can be used to target small pockets of ‘undecided’ voters in marginal constituencies to swing election outcomes. These individuals are often targeted on the basis of personal data misuse. The effect of this can be corrosive as it veers towards a form of communication which is keen to say what campaigners think the individual wants to hear, is harder to hold to account, enables parties to pitch inconsistent campaign promises or policy positions to different sets of voters and opens up the possibility of foreign influence. The real effect of these new forms of communication are unknown, although my sense is that they do not change how someone votes but can influence whether someone votes. Further research on this must be completed to inform legislative agendas.

Facebook and Twitter’s differing approaches to self-regulation

Why Facebook needs to know how the government defines a political advertisement is unclear, since Facebook has reaffirmed its policy not to ban political advertisements or monitor their content. Whatever the reason, this question reminds us how difficult legislators have found addressing the problem of online political communication – even though it has been agreed that the practices witnessed during the Brexit campaign and recent elections threaten ‘the very fabric of our democracy’ by deceitfully trying to influence peoples’ vote.

One may be forgiven for thinking that the problem has been dealt with following Twitter’s announcement that it will ban all paid-for political advertisements. Yet, this move appears to be for PR purposes as the site hosts very few paid-for political advertisements. Instead, Twitter’s real issue is bot accounts that spread disinformation and political content, creating artificial streams of (fake) news which the ban does not address.

Twitter’s position contrasts with Facebook’s, which continues to allow paid-for political content, albeit on the condition that certain requirements are met, including account-holder verification of identity and place of residence. This is meant to eliminate the risk of foreign actors purchasing advertisements to influence another nation’s elections, but could be subverted by simply having someone within the target country willing to collude. This verification process has already been undermined, with political advertisements appearing on Facebook without the required information about who is responsible for them, suggesting the verification process is inadequate.

Facebook has also tried to pacify legislators and users following the Cambridge Analytica scandal by creating an Ad Library that stores all paid-for advertisements on social issues, elections and politics, along with details of who paid for them and who they were targeted towards. The Ad Library does increase transparency but is no antidote to the overall effect of tailored advertisements or the deceptive use of personal data involved in the use of micro-targeted advertisements. Facebook has recently announced that it is further tackling political dark ads by taking down content that does not comply with the new verification requirements through a mix of human and algorithmic review. Its Vice-President also suggested that a special UK operations centre may be set up to manage pre-

election content, which means it will ensure all advertisements comply to the verification rules. However, the content of adverts will still go unmonitored, which is the right decision – why would we want Facebook, rather than an independent authority, to be the guardian of the publication of political communication, even when it contains misleading or false information?

Facebook's own employees have warned about its position on political advertisements, suggesting in a letter to CEO Mark Zuckerberg numerous solutions to counter the degenerate effect of inflammatory, divisive and false material spread on Facebook. Their suggestions included limiting micro-targeted advertisements, fact-checking content and observing pre-election silence periods. There are other technological innovations that could be deployed, such as building mechanisms that create a moment for the user to pause before sharing something, so that content does not go viral on impulse alone, or Facebook could create a specific section on users' walls for paid-for political material so that it is not blended into a stream of uncritically watched cat videos. The element of passive consumption could be removed or reduced for political content so users can converse about material in a separate space, which might help reduce the echo chamber effect.

Regulatory reform is needed

Even if these ideas were to be implemented by Facebook, self-regulation is not a viable long-term solution because the methods of digital political communication are too important for self-serving and compromising corporate policies. It is imprudent to forget that service providers like Facebook will never put election integrity before its own profits, and these two objectives are bound to be in conflict despite what Facebook says.

Because the question of how to regulate digital political content is so difficult, nothing has been agreed to date other than to require imprints on digital content just as they are required on print material (though even this has not been enacted for the upcoming election). This is far from sufficient. A ban on micro-targeted political advertisements may be justified – it would certainly be a simpler way to regulate. Direct digital communication with the electorate from local councillors or MPs can continue by email but the splatter-gun approach that micro-targeting encourages would be avoided. Other options might be feasible at a national level and internationally. Indeed, a UN high-level inquiry recently reported on digital cooperation which was mindful of political cyber-attacks.

What can voters do?

Despite the warnings, political advertisements will be used in this election in much the same way as the last, since not a single law has been passed in response to the Cambridge Analytica and Facebook scandal. What can voters do in these circumstances? Be wise to the use of micro-targeting, scrutinise the content of online material or investigate why you are seeing particular advertisements (click the 'why am I seeing this ad?' button on Facebook). Also, be alert to the fact that when clicking on political advertisements that

take you to another webpage that requests your email address and other personal details, you may be allowing your personal data and online behaviour to be consumed and analysed. Finally, as the Data Protection Act 2018 is in force you can exercise your rights under the Act including the right to object to direct marketing or to lodge a complaint with the Information Commissioner's Office. This is as good as it gets until additional regulations are introduced to provide some clarity and consistency.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.

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