



November 22, 2019

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The dominant U.S. tech platforms for digital political advertising are taking steps to limit the level of detail that political campaigns or other groups can use to target voters, reversing a yearlong trend of offering ever-more precise tools that in some cases facilitated the spread of misinformation.

Facebook Inc. is discussing increasing the minimum number of people who can be targeted in political ads on its platform from 100 to a few thousand, according to people familiar with the matter. The potential move is part of an effort to make it less easy for advertisers to microtarget, which has been criticized as enabling political actors to single out groups for misleading or false ads that aren't seen by the broader public.

Alphabet Inc.'s Google said on Wednesday that advertisers would no longer be able to [target political messages](#) based on users' interests inferred from their browsing or search histories. And last month, Twitter Inc. said it would [stop accepting](#) most political ads. With the 2020 election approaching and billions of dollars expected to be spent on digital political advertising, a lack of uniform rules for the ads is leading to confusion over exactly what is allowed on the platforms, how intensely new rules will be enforced and whether advertising strategies and budgets will need to change further.

The campaign of Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden, a front-runner whose campaign has spoken out about ads with unsubstantiated claims about him, declined to comment on Facebook's potential moves. Bill Russo, a spokesman for the former vice president, said the new policies from Twitter and Google are a step in the right direction but not enough. "Social media companies still have more work to do in order to ensure that their platforms are not rife with disinformation that corrodes the American people's faith in their institutions and even their democracy," Mr. Russo said.

U.S. Rep. Susan

Wild

Pennlive

Trump to hold rally
Dec. 10 at Hershey's
Giant Center

Washington Post

It looks like
Republicans are
trying to impeach
the media — not
Trump

Google's decision was criticized by Brad Parscale, who is heading President Trump's reelection effort. "Political elites & Big Tech want to rig elections," he wrote in a tweet Wednesday, adding that it would hurt Mr. Trump, a Republican, as well as leading Democratic candidates. The Trump campaign's Twitter account also said Wednesday:

"@facebook wants to take important tools away from us for 2020." Watchdogs including lawmakers and advocacy groups have called for greater oversight of political advertising following revelations that **Russian entities purchased digital ads** designed to influence the 2016 presidential election.

Facebook has sought feedback from large Republican and Democratic political ad buyers about boosting the minimum number of people who are targeted in political ads as well as other ideas, one of the people familiar with the matter said. The discussions picked up around the time Facebook Chief Executive Mark Zuckerberg testified on Capitol Hill about a month ago about the company's plans for a new cryptocurrency. "As we've said, we are looking at different ways we might refine our approach to political ads," a Facebook spokesman said Wednesday night and reiterated Thursday. It is unclear if or when Facebook would roll out any changes.

Ad buyers have said narrowly targeted ads are often used to reach specific audiences ranging from racial or ethnic groups to lawmakers' and their staff. They are also suited for local elections or ballot measures. Questions about any potential changes were expected to be front and center at a Facebook event for political ad buyers scheduled Thursday evening in Washington, ad buyers said. The event is focused on sharing how Facebook is preparing for the 2020 election, according to a copy of the invitation reviewed by The Wall Street Journal.

Danielle Butterfield, who leads paid media for Priorities USA, a progressive super PAC, said the tech firms' announced changes have affected Priorities USA's strategy, though the team has worked to diversify its methods for targeting people. "Changing the rules midgame is not ideal," said Ms. Butterfield, who worked in digital operations for the recent Hillary Clinton and Obama presidential campaigns. Priorities USA has said it intends to spend around \$100 million in the 2020 election.

Google and Facebook capture the bulk of digital political advertising. Total spending on digital political ads in the U.S. is expected to reach \$2.9 billion in 2020, up from \$1.4 billion in 2016, according to Borrell Associates Inc., a consulting firm. A spokesman for Democratic presidential candidate Andrew Yang, who is active on social media, said Mr. Yang supports actions by the tech platforms to prevent the spread of misinformation. The spokesman, S.Y. Lee, said that while social media is useful for fundraising, it isn't the only means for drawing supporters.

Facebook in September decided to **no longer fact-check ads** from political campaigns, kicking off questions and concerns from political ad buyers. The move prompted the presidential campaign of Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D., Mass.) to run an ad on Facebook with a false claim that Mr. Zuckerberg endorsed President Trump's re-election to highlight complaints about the social-media giant's handling of

misinformation. The ad's text quickly acknowledged the endorsement claim was false and criticized Facebook's policy.

Last week, Twitter [detailed its policy](#)—first announced in October—of banning political ads and imposing restrictions on geographic and keyword targeting for advertising tied to political causes. It will go into effect world-wide on Friday. On Wednesday, Google said it would stop allowing highly targeted political ads on Google Search, Google's video platform YouTube and third-party sites across the web purchased through Google's ad-buying software. Political ads can only be targeted based on users' age, gender, and location at the postal-code level. Google said in a blog post it will roll out the ban world-wide on Jan. 6, with launches planned earlier in Europe.

Google has historically accepted political ads, and in October carried a controversial ad by the Trump campaign that included an unsubstantiated claim about Mr. Biden's role in the ouster of a Ukrainian prosecutor when he was vice president. The Biden campaign complained to Google as well as Facebook, which also ran the ad and declined to take it down. Mr. Biden's campaign has been in touch with Facebook, Google and Twitter about its concerns over their political ad policies, according to letters reviewed by the Journal and a person familiar with the matter.

During a politics and tech conference in Washington earlier this week, Eric Wilson, a Republican political strategist, said he had to change much of his presentation given the tech platforms' announced or expected political ad-policy changes. He said campaigns may still try to use other types of targeting, even with limitations on Twitter and Google platforms, to reach certain audiences. "Twitter created a lot of gray area," he told attendees Wednesday. "That's going to be difficult for them to enforce." Twitter officials have said the company will likely make mistakes and will need to evolve its policy. — *Wall Street Journal*

Amnesty International said Thursday that the amount of information controlled by Google and Facebook, along with other tech companies, was a threat to privacy rights around the world.

[A report](#) published by the human rights watchdog described the two companies as dominant over much of the Western world's online habits, which amount to much of Americans' daily lives. "Google and Facebook dominate our modern lives — amassing unparalleled power over the digital world by harvesting and monetizing the personal data of billions of people. Their insidious control of our digital lives undermines the very essence of privacy and is one of the defining human rights challenges of our era," Kumi Naidoo, Amnesty International's secretary general, said in a press release. "To protect our core human values in the digital age — dignity, autonomy, privacy — there needs to be a radical overhaul of the way Big Tech operates, and to move to an internet that has human rights at its core," he said.

The report described massive data breaches that have affected major tech companies — such as Facebook's admission surrounding the Cambridge Analytica scandal, in which tens of millions of user accounts were affected — as an innate part of the normal functions of such companies. "The abuse of privacy that is core to Facebook and Google's surveillance-based business model is starkly demonstrated by the companies' long history of privacy scandals," the report

reads. "Despite the companies' assurances over their commitment to privacy, it is difficult not to see these numerous privacy infringements as part of the normal functioning of their business, rather than aberrations," it continues.

Google and Facebook have faced criticism along with other tech companies for the scope of control they exercise over the U.S. tech market, and concerns over the data privacy of individuals who use the companies' services. It was reported Wednesday night that Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg was invited to a previously undisclosed meeting with President Trump at the White House earlier this year as his company faces scrutiny from Congress. – *The Hill*



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