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Misinformation, Social Media, and the Price of Political Persuasion: Examining Twitter's Decision to Ban Purchased Political Advertisements

Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are increasingly used to promote a specific cause or political candidate, influence voting patterns, and target individuals based on their political beliefs (Conger, 2019). Social media's impact on politics can be seen through paid political advertising, where organizations and campaigns pay to spread their messages across multiple networks. In the course of using finely crafted messages, campaigns sometimes take part in techniques such as the selling or buying of users' data for targeted advertising (Halpern, 2019).
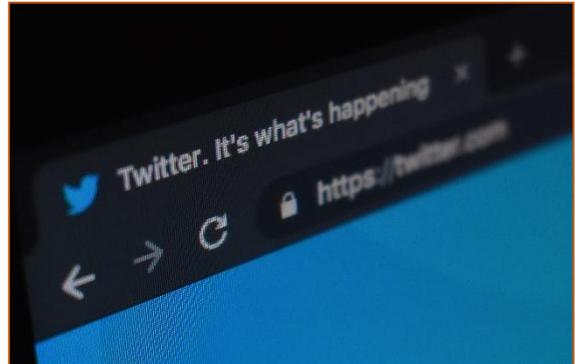
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These "micro" targeted ads are often the location of fake news or misinformation. Twitter and Facebook both revealed that Russian operatives used their platforms in attempts to influence the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. In 2017, Facebook turned over thousands of Russian-bought ads to the U.S. Congress. The ads showed that "operatives worked off evolving lists of racial, religious, political and economic themes. They used these to create pages, write posts and craft ads that would appear in users' news feeds — with the apparent goal of appealing to one audience and alienating another" (Entous et al., 2017). All of this was enabled by the targeting power and data collection practices of social media platforms that financially depend on selling advertising to paying individuals and companies.

In response to the growing concerns associated with the misuse of online political ads, Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey announced that his social media platform would ban all political advertisements from its platform starting in November 2019 (Conger, 2019). The platform's move is an effort to curtail paid political speech without affecting political discourse in general. "The reach of political messages should be earned, not bought," Dorsey wrote in a series of Tweets. Dorsey laid out the challenges he thinks paid political advertisements present to civic discourse: over-dependence on technological optimization, the spread of misinformation, and the promotion of manipulated media such as "deep fake" videos (Cogner, 2019). Another worrisome example are the "bots" or automated social media accounts that were created during the 2016 presidential election to help inflate social media traffic around specific presidential campaigns and influence "the democratic process behind the scenes" (Guilbeault, 2019). These programs magnified the reach of misinformation that seemed to run rampant over social media during the 20016 election.

Twitter's restriction on political advertising is not absolute, however. Candidates or users would still be able to post videos of campaign ads, just as long as they do not pay Twitter specifically to promote the ad and enhance its audience. For example, 2020 presidential

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candidate Joe Biden released a viral campaign ad in December 2019 critiquing President Donald Trump's reputation with foreign leaders (Chiu, 2019). Because the Biden campaign posted the video to Biden's account and did not pay for Twitter to promote the ad as one of the site's promoted revenue products, the campaign video was permitted and could be shared by other users. The platform announced it will still allow some paid issue-based or cause-based ads that pertain to subjects such as the economy, the environment, and other social causes. However, "candidates, elected officials and political parties will be banned from buying any ads at all, including ones about issues or causes" (Wagner, 2019).

Twitter's decision to ban all paid political advertising is not celebrated by all parties. Some worry that social media platforms may go too far in the search for accuracy and an uncertain ideal of truth in political discourse in their spaces. Facebook's reaction to paid advertising is the diametric opposite to Twitter's approach: "In Zuckerberg's view, Facebook, though a private company, is the public square where such ideas can be debated," said Sue Halpern, who covers politics and technology for *The New Yorker* (Halpern, 2018). Facebook has indicated that it will continue to allow politicians to post or purchase ads, even if they contain content that some may judge as false or misleading information. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerburg's argument is that as a tool for freedom of expression, one of Facebook's objectives shouldn't be to censor political ads or be an arbiter of truth. Instead of getting rid of political ads, the platform said it will focus on combating micro-targeting, where "campaigns tap Facebook's vast caches of data to reach specific audiences with pinpoint accuracy, going after voters in certain neighborhoods, jobs and age ranges, or even serving up ads only to fans of certain television shows or sports teams" (Scola, 2019). Google, owner of the video sharing platform YouTube, also made commitments to reduce targeted political ads, pledging that political advertisers "will only be able to target ads based on a user's age, gender, and postcode." However, the tech company's policy for removing ads is still murky: "In the policy update, Google focused on misleading ads related to voter suppression and election integrity, not claims targeting candidates" (O'Sullivan & Fung, 2019). But some maintain that truth in political advertising is a worthy and attainable ideal. Criticizing Facebook's stance, U.S. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez voiced her support for paid advertising bans, saying "If a company cannot or does not wish to run basic fact-checking on paid political advertising, then they should not run paid political ads at all" (Conger, 2019).

Since Twitter and other social media platforms are companies and not government entities, they are not strictly governed by the First Amendment's protections of speech and expression (Hudson, 2018). The debate over curtailing paid political advertising on social media brings up a related normative issue: how much free expression or speech should anyone—including social media platforms—foster or encourage in a democratic community, even if the messages are judged as untrue or skewed by many, or if they are connected to monetary interests? The challenge remains: who will decide what constitutes unacceptably false and misleading ads, whose monetary influence or interests are unallowable, and what constitutes allowable and effective partisan attempts at persuasion?

Discussion Questions:

1. Should paid political advertisements be banned from social media? Should all political ads, paid or freely posted, be forbidden? Why or why not?
2. What could be possible alternatives to Twitter and others banning paid political advertisements?
3. Do you believe a focus on microtargeting is superior to banning paid political advertisements?
4. What is ethically worrisome about microtargeting? Do you think these concerns would also extend to sophisticated campaigns run by traditional advertising agencies, or even public health campaigns targeting specific behaviors?
5. Might there be ethically-worthy values to microtargeting political or commercial messages?
6. Is curtailing certain kinds of political speech on social media good or bad for democracy? Explain your answer, and any distinctions you wish to draw.

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