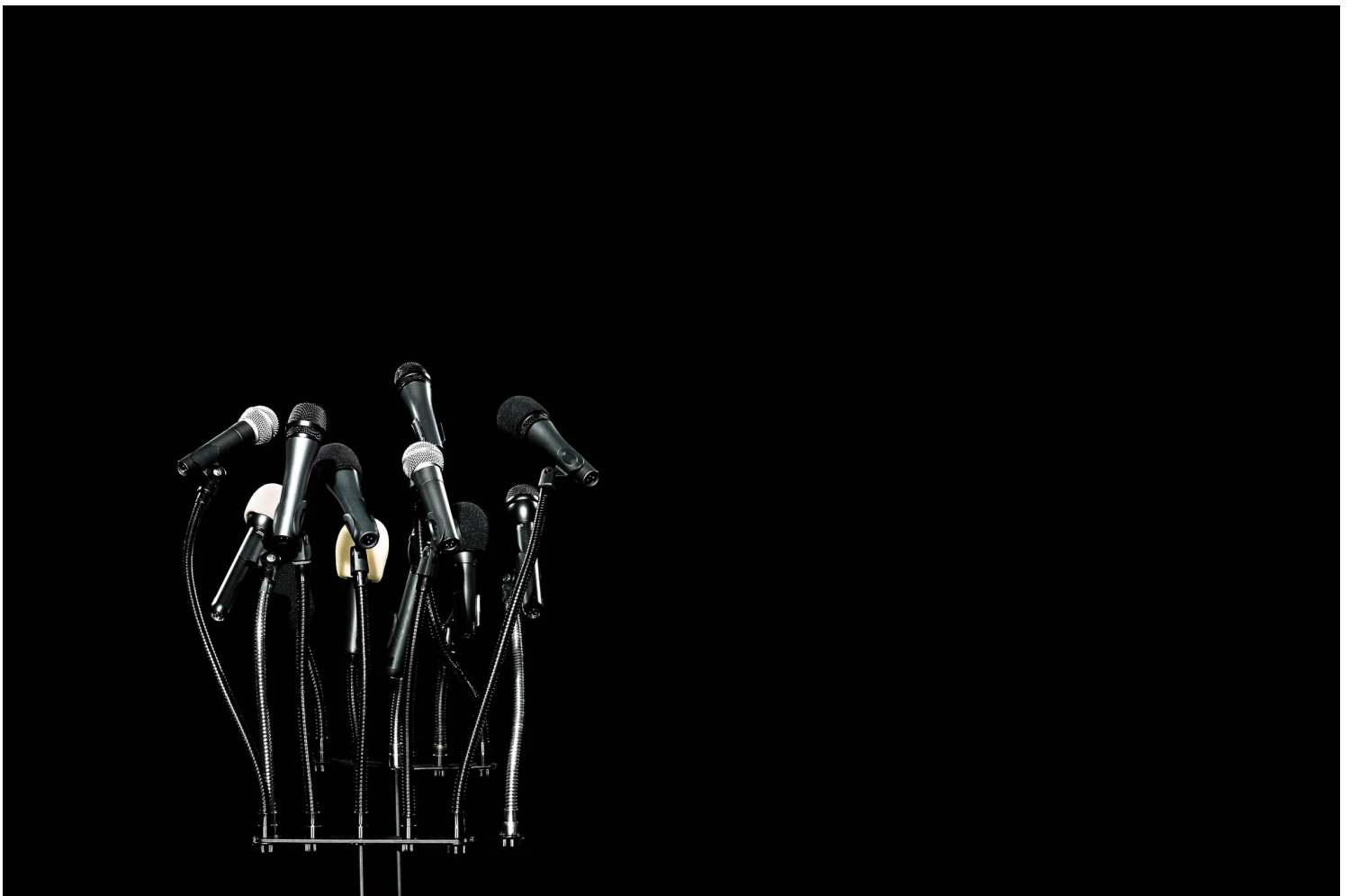


Banning Micro-Targeted Political Ads Won't End the Practice

Google has put a stop to narrowcasted political advertising. Facebook seems ready to do the same. So what?



PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

A FEW WEEKS ago, we were talking about whether companies like Facebook and Twitter should ban all paid political advertising from their platforms. Now the debate has narrowed to

a secondary question: Where political ads are allowed, should their micro-targeting be prohibited? Google is the first to make this restriction formal policy: The company announced on Wednesday that it will “stop allowing highly targeted political ads on its platform” and limit the steering of such messages only to large interest categories. On Thursday, news broke that Facebook, too, may soon prevent “campaigns from targeting only very small groups of people.” These policy changes are designed to curb the negative consequences of the disinformation problem and legitimate political advertising—but they may end up doing little good.

For Mark Zuckerberg in particular, one bombshell has chased the last. Last month, he proclaimed at Georgetown University that his company would take a general stance against censorship in the political context—including over any content, false or true, disseminated by politicians as advertisements over his platforms. That laissez-faire approach to content moderation was met with absolute vilification by many technology experts and critics alike. A few days later, Twitter chief Jack Dorsey made an equally strong announcement, stating that his company was shuttering all political advertising over the platform, effective later this month—essentially, the diametrical opposite of Facebook’s stated position. On November 4, Zuckerberg acceded to meet over dinner with civil rights advocates who had serious concerns about the potential for uncensored political advertising to undermine the interests of marginalized American communities.

WIRED OPINION

ABOUT

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The following morning, it came out that Zuckerberg was at least mulling over a revised approach: allow political advertising disseminated by politicians, but disable their capacity to engage in “micro-targeting,” the practice by which advertisers can splice user audiences on Facebook and subject each one to different advertising treatments. This is precisely the technique that President Donald Trump’s campaign director, Brad Parscale, took to the

extreme when he managed Trump's 2016 digital strategy. After Google announced just such a policy this week, Zuckerberg is under ever more pressure. Should he do something now, or wait and see if the public outcry and pressure on Facebook tides over?

Even if Facebook does follow in Google's footsteps, the shift in policy would not be close to enough to protect next year's US presidential elections from the sort of coordinated disinformation operations that struck our nation three years ago.

Why? The prevailing business model at companies like Facebook and Google simply won't allow it. These digital platforms are premised on the uninhibited collection of personal data from users, the operation of compelling platforms that arbitrarily shut out competitive threats, and the development of AI that curates our social feeds. It is no longer a secret that Facebook and Google have a keen interest in maximizing user engagement on their platforms. This, in turn, contributes to the companies' larger goals by unlocking more ad space that can be sold off to marketers, which lets Facebook and Google collect even more engagement data on their users, and subject them to even more content that will keep them scrolling through social feeds, search engine results pages, and digital maps. In order to achieve such maximal engagement, Facebook and Google must show us relevant content and advertising—including political ads.

Now consider the new rules (either proposed or implemented) against micro-targeting. Zuckerberg's potential anti-targeting commitment would limit "the ability of candidates to target narrow groups of users." This means that Parscale would no longer be able to pick and choose the classes of the American population that he wants to shower with his political messaging. But even under its new proposal, Facebook would maintain the right to direct such ads to whomever it pleases. This is critical, because it remains in Facebook's commercial interests to do just that—that is, to use AI to determine the content and nature of a given political ad, and then to analyze which pockets of the American population would engage the most with that content. Facebook can even use its opaque suite of machine-learning mechanisms to fuel that quest. The company would analyze our data to infer the kinds of political content to which we would be most likely to react, and then it would route political advertising in a way that optimizes systemwide engagement. Indeed, if Facebook did *not* do just this—if it did not disseminate political ads in a sophisticated, algorithmic manner—then

political advertisers would lose faith in the platform. They might even turn to other internet advertising exchanges and more traditional forms of media.

In other words, we can extrapolate that whether or not Facebook and Google disallow campaigns from targeting specific populations, they will still try to do the same thing themselves—and they will do it for “free” for the campaigns, because they have every incentive to do so. Unless these companies can take more of a stand and rid all political ads of disinformation, they should not only disable paid micro-targeting but also cease using their own proprietary, AI-driven ad-targeting. Otherwise, what’s the point?

With regard to Facebook, one fact remains: The company and its chief executive, Mark Zuckerberg, have not been shy about their apparently hawkish stance on the matter of free speech. There is a great deal of commercial convenience for Zuckerberg in taking this position. It allows his platform to accept all political ads, which in turn serves several of the company’s goals. It generates hundreds of millions in revenue—revenue that Facebook’s shareholders will definitely not wish to forfeit, especially given the digital political advertising market is expected to reach close to \$3 billion in 2020, more than double what it was in 2016. It also allows the company to maintain reasonably good relations with political conservatives in America, such that it does not invite the same kind of ire Twitter has attracted from Parscale and others.

Most importantly, though, Zuckerberg’s blind commitment to free speech would allow Facebook to be the principal host of our political discourse in perpetuity. Zuckerberg wants the platform to be the universal connector, the place where we converge to share ideas about all things social, economic, and political. Banning political ads from the platform would substantially diminish the related conversation; those involved in politics would have less incentive to start up pages and profiles on the platform over which users could engage.

Through time the American government has placed the interests of democracy over the markets through effective regulation. Robust privacy, competition, and transparency norms will all be critical regulatory frameworks if America is going to push back on the exploitative business model at the heart of the consumer internet in the years ahead. Regrettably, such reforms are unlikely to emerge anytime soon.

Perhaps, then, it is time for Facebook and Google to look past the matter of commerce and do what is right—in the interests of containing the terror of their capitalistic overgrowth, and preserving our democracy. Whether under the status quo or a new anti-targeting approach, we would be headed straight for another election nightmare riddled with disinformation. This cannot persist.

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