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Is it time to ban political advertising on Facebook?

‘Free speech’ is not a licence for politicians to lie — and for such lies to be amplified by ‘social media’

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Last week, Facebook gave the go-ahead to Donald Trump to base his whole re-election campaign on massive, micro-targeted, straight-out lies.

Here’s the problem with that. Serious politicians can argue about polices to combat inequality and the climate crises all they want. But if liars are allowed to steal elections in democratic countries, why does all that even matter?

The background is that the US president, under mounting pressure from the impeachment inquiry in Congress, needed to change the conversation. Trump’s campaign therefore published on Facebook an advertisement, claiming that his political opponent Joe Biden had used the threat of withholding USD 1bn to Ukraine to quash an investigation of a company of which his son is a board member.

This claim has been debunked several times and in no ambiguous terms by news organisations. Or, to speak in straighter terms, it is a lie.

That politicians use smears and aggressive opposition research in election campaigns is nothing new. But the combination of habitual and careless lying in politics and the possibilities of personalised and micro-targeted campaigns on a network with two billion users is unique, and uniquely dangerous.

Standards not applied

Since the last US election, when Russia used Facebook to try to influence the outcome, the platform has spent a lot of money on trying to restore public confidence, through collaboration with fact-checking

organisations. But it's hard to see the point of any of that when those standards do not apply to the central players.

The new Facebook policy is that it will not fact-check 'direct speech' by politicians. 'Our approach is grounded in Facebook's fundamental belief in free expression, respect for the democratic process, and the belief that, in mature democracies with a free press, political speech is already arguably the most scrutinized speech there is,' Katie Harbath, its public policy director for global elections — and former digital strategist for Republican political committees and the 2008 presidential campaign of Trump's personal lawyer, Rudolph Giuliani — wrote to Biden campaign officials, according to the Washington Post.

Let me interpret this for you: to 'respect the democratic process' in the world of Facebook means leading politicians should be allowed to cook up whatever lies they can come up with about their opponents while Facebook, unashamedly, makes a lot of money out of falsehoods it knows could sway an election.

'Existential threat'

Add to this the fact that the company boss, Mark Zuckerberg, privately told staff in July that the presidential candidate now leading the Democratic field, Elizabeth Warren, was an 'existential threat' to Facebook, due to her anti-monopoly policy proposals. She has called for the break-up of Big Tech, arguing that the leading companies in the sector have been allowed to grow so much they are threatening innovation, fair competition and democracy.

When Zuckerberg's comments and the new Facebook advertising position became known, Warren called him out on Twitter, demanding accountability and accusing the corporation of 'taking deliberate steps to help one candidate intentionally misleading the American people wile painting the candidacy of others (specifically: mine) as an "existential threat"'. She also trolled the company by publishing an ad with falsehoods about Facebook, to prove her point.

The last election cycles in the US and Europe showed how vulnerable our societies are to propaganda, lies and manipulation.

On a more fundamental level, Facebook's advertising model already favours aggressive lying and fearmongering. As Charlie Warzel recently wrote in the New York Times, its business practices skew the arena decisively towards political movements for whom lying is a central tenet. Provocative content gets more reach, which means more effective campaign

ads; more effective campaign ads mean more money to Facebook — and that feeds back into politics:

‘A natural Facebook candidate both dominates the news cycle and stokes emotions—which, in turn, increases that person’s ability to raise money. Once campaigns realize that divisive rhetoric pays, the incentive to up the ante with hyperpartisan ads and misinformation grows.’

To sum up: Warren is right that allowing for lies is not a ‘neutral’ move by Facebook. It plays into the hands of politicians who feed on rage.

The Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes wrote on Twitter: ‘I have a feeling that many people in tech will see Warren’s thread implying FB empowers Trump over Warren as unfair. But Mark, by deciding to allow outright lies in political ads to travel on Facebook, is embracing the philosophy behind Trumpism and thereby tipping the scales.’

Perversion and misuse

Everybody who cares about decency and truth-based politics should worry about what that means, and how the perversion and misuse of the term ‘free speech’ is now threatening to kill free and fair elections — or, as we used to call them, democracy.

Nick Clegg, formerly a serious UK politician, now a PR executive for Facebook, used a bizarre and faulty metaphor to defend the decision. ‘Our job is to make sure the court is ready — the surface is flat, the lines painted, the net at the correct height,’ Clegg said. ‘But we don’t pick up a racket and start playing. How the players play the game is up to them, not us.’

Really? Your job is to make sure that the game played actually is ‘tennis’ — that both players use a racket and one doesn’t come armed with a machine gun.

Maximising profits

Facebook has unwittingly proven once again its complete inability to regulate itself for the public good. This should surprise no one. Facebook is a private company and its incentive will always be, first and foremost, to maximise profits for its shareholders.

Democratic processes — the rules of the game — need to be protected by

more robust systems than the goodwill of tech entrepreneurs. Open societies need rules and laws which protect free and fair elections and our basic rights as citizens. Online networks come with many advantages for their users. But the fundamental lack of transparency, the potential for microtargeting and manipulation, is a bad fit with political advertising.

The last election cycles in the US and Europe showed how vulnerable our societies are to propaganda, lies and manipulation. Maybe it's time to simply ban political advertising on 'social media'.

That would lead to fairer elections. It could even be a boon for battered trust and reputations in Silicon Valley.

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