
Twitter Announces New Ad Policy Amid Foreign Influence Claim

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Amid accusations of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, lawmakers grilled the social media website for not cracking down on “fake news.”

Twitter has announced that it will “dramatically increase transparency” for political ads sponsored on the social media website amid controversy surrounding Russian interference in the 2016 United States presidential election, coined “Russiagate.”

U.S. Senators have pressured the social media giant to increase transparency following other social media sites such as Facebook, which announced in September that it would overhaul its ad system, according to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, in response to criticism from the U.S. Senate.

The New York Times wrote, “\$100,000 worth of divisive [Facebook] ads on hot-button issues [were] purchased by a shadowy Russian company linked to the Kremlin.”

Nearly \$2.5 billion was spent during the 2016 presidential election by both candidates combined, according to figures reported by the Washington Post, meaning that these ads amounted to 0.0000396% of the total reported cash spent during the election.

U.S. Senator Mark Warner, a Virginia Democrat who sits on the Intelligence Committee, sat down with Twitter executives to discuss “fake news” articles that circulated on Twitter, which allegedly influenced the U.S. electorate. Media reports have suggested that fake Twitter accounts operated by Russians influenced the 2016 election by spreading disinformation.

A ThinkProgress report stated that the “fake social media operations appear the most pervasive foreign propaganda efforts in recent history – even if their efficacy remains unclear.” ThinkProgress is a wing of the Center for American Progress Action Fund, a think tank founded by John Podesta, whose private email leaks that stirred

controversy in the U.S. were later blamed on “Russian hackers.”

Warner stated after the meeting that Twitter’s response to controversy has been “frankly inadequate on almost every level.”

The Senator continued that Twitter did not understand “how serious this issue is, the threat it poses to democratic institutions and again begs many more questions than they offered”.

Bruce Falck, the general manager of revenue product at Twitter, announced that Twitter would launch “an industry-leading transparency center” and that Twitter would provide more information regarding all current and future Twitter ads. Information will include which organizations are funding electioneering ads, targeted demographics, amount spent by an advertiser, and the wording and images used in advertisements by an advertiser.

“To make it clear when you are seeing or engaging with an electioneering ad, we will now require that electioneering advertisers identify their campaigns as such,” Falck stated.

Twitter will now designate political ads that appear on user’s timeline by making it clear that the account promoting the ad is a political account, though no design has been confirmed as of yet.

The social media company will also roll out a system that will allow users to see which ads they have been targeted for. Users will then be able to provide feedback on ads.

Accompanying these overhauls is a new ad policy that will restrict eligibility for advertisers. However, these policies will not apply to issue advocacy ads and will only apply to candidate-specific ads, although Twitter has stated that they will look into the matter.

“There is currently no clear industry definition for issue-based ads but we will work with our peer companies, other industry leaders, policymakers, and ad partners to clearly define them quickly and integrate them into the new approach mentioned above,” Falck said.

Warner remarked on Twitter that Twitter’s new announcement is “a good first step” and that “political ads need more transparency & disclosure.”

This echoed a comment that Warner made to CBS News in which he said that the U.S. public has a right to know whether social media ads are “generated by interests from Americans or generated by interests from, [or] by activities of foreign powers.”

Senator Warner, alongside Senators Amy Klobuchar and John McCain, introduced the bill H.R.4077, or the “Honest Ads Act,” to the Senate floor. The act states:

“The purpose of this Act is to enhance the integrity of American democracy and national security by improving disclosure requirements for online political advertisements in order to uphold the United States Supreme Court’s well-established standard that the electorate bears the right to be fully informed.”

Twitter’s new policy is set to be implemented in the U.S. first before being implemented internationally.
