Broadcasting Authority publishes research report on political social media advertising

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On 17 September 2019, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) published a research report on political social media advertisements. The ElectCheck 2019 research report was commissioned by the BAI and undertaken by the Institute for Future Media and Journalism (FuJo) at Dublin City University. The research examined the political advertising activity on Facebook, Twitter and Google during the European elections in May 2019, in the context of the platforms' commitments in the self-regulatory Code of Practice on Disinformation to address the spread of online disinformation and fake news. The research forms part of a wider EU project established in April 2019 by the European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services (ERGA), designed to assist the European Commission in monitoring the implementation of the commitments made by Google, Facebook and Twitter in the Code.

The ElectCheck 2019 research report examined more than 1 500 political advertisements included in ad libraries and datasets provided by Facebook, Twitter and Google using a set of questions identified by EGRA to assess the extent to which each platform disclosed relevant information about political advertising, including: (i) whether the advert was paid for; (ii) who paid for it; (iii) if it carried a disclaimer stating that it was a political or issues-based advert; (iv) information on micro-targeting options; and (v) the amount spent on the advert.

The report identified several specific issues, including a lack of clarity regarding who had paid for advertisements and how much was spent on them. Overall, the report found that "while some information relative to the research questions could be found from the supplied datasets," it was not possible to achieve a clear, fully comprehensive picture of the nature and scale of political advertising on Facebook, Twitter and Google, "due to inconsistencies in the datasets." In relation to the disclosure of payer information, for instance, the report noted that, "both Facebook and Google made this clear in the majority of cases while Twitter required the researcher to click through various links to subsections of the advert details pages in order to obtain this information." The report observed that in the majority of cases examined, "both Facebook and Twitter provided a disclaimer on the immediate image of the advert that advised it was related to social issues or politics, Google, however, although hosting the adverts on a webpage entitled 'political adverts in the European Union' did not provide any individual disclaimers

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on the immediate images of the adverts." Overall, the report found "only Facebook labelled any adverts as issue-based", namely those concerned with campaigning issues, such as immigration and the environment, rather than election candidates or parties. The report further identified that while micro-targeting information was available in all cases, it was limited to geography, gender and age.

According to the BAI's chief executive Michael O'Keefe, "positively, this report indicates that Facebook, Google and Twitter proactively engaged with commitments under the Code in relation to the transparency of political advertising during the 2019 European Elections in Ireland," however, "it is equally clear that the overall objectives underpinning these commitments were not achieved in Ireland" and as the report indicates, the "inconsistency across the three companies results in a systematic lack of transparency and comprehensive understanding of political and issue-based advertising online".

BAI, 'Elect Check 2019: a report on political advertising online during the 2019 European elections'' 17th September 2019

http://www.bai.ie/en/download/134399/

BAI, 'New report on political social media ads identifies inconsistencies in datasets and definitions'

https://www.bai.ie/en/new-report-on-political-social-media-ads-identifies-inconsistencies-in-datasets-and-definitions/

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