
Article:
Dommett, K. orcid.org/0000-0003-0624-6610 (2019) The rise of online political advertising. Political Insight, 10 (4). pp. 12-15. ISSN 2041-9058

https://doi.org/10.1177/2041905819891366

The rise of online political advertising

Advertising is an established part of politics. From the iconic 'demon eyes' poster plastered on billboards in the aim of discrediting New Labour, to the US 'daisy spot' advert depicting an atomic explosion, the use of adverts to inform and persuade is common place. However, advertising in politics has come to take a new form, with the rise of digital media enabling more sophisticated uses of this tool. As the promise of a general election looms large, it is important to understand the increasing use of this technique.

Digital advertising is distinctive from offline advertising in different ways. First, the internet provides new forums on which advertising can appear. Whether on social media feeds, pre-rolls before YouTube videos or banners on the side of a webpage, advertising can now be fielded in a range of different spaces. Second, digital advertising is often underpinned by a wealth of new data sources that allow advertisers to identify target audiences with more precision. It is therefore possible not to present one message to all voters (as on a billboard), but to target different messages to different voters (with individuals not seeing the adverts that others see). Third, digital technology makes it possible to trace consumer behaviours and monitor advert engagement and success. This provides new forms of instantaneous feedback to clients and allows the rapid adaption of advertising content. These capacities have been embraced by political actors eager to secure electoral success and support, resulting in an increase in online political advertising around the world.

How widely is digital advertising used in elections?

The scale of political advertising online is difficult to assess. With regulatory regimes failing to swiftly adapt to the digital realm, most existing data sources on electoral activity offer little insight into spending on advertising online. Yet despite this, some data can be found within official sources, or can be garnered from campaigns themselves. In the US, for example, it is predicted that the 2020 mid-term election will see $6 billion spent on advertising, with 20% of that – or $1.2 billion - spent on online advertising (EMarketer, 2019). This spend equates to investment in adverts on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Google and Instagram – platforms that have become a familiar part of election campaigns (Bosetta, 2019). In the UK, although spending is more modest, digital advertising is also prevalent – with the Electoral Commission showing over £4.3 million to be spent on digital advertising. Although these figures are far from complete (Dommett and Power, 2018), they show significant investment in advertising on Facebook, with £3.16 million spent by parties on this platform alone. Online political advertising has therefore become widely established as an important component of political campaigns, and yet just five years ago – in 2014 – UK political parties spent only £30,000 advertising this way.

Why do political campaigners use online advertising?

The rush to online political advertising is in many ways unsurprising. In their efforts to connect with voters and secure political support, parties and other campaigning organisations face a range of challenges. Citizens now exist in a more crowded media environment in which it is hard for parties to cut through. Whilst once the 6

o'clock news provided a large captive audience, today there are few means of communication that are able to reach a mass audience. The internet therefore provides an opportunity to engage different kinds of citizen 'where they are', with advertising on different platforms able to be targeted to first time voters, middle aged parents or elderly citizens in the locations where they spend their time. Online advertising can therefore provide an unmediated channel through which campaigners can reach out to their target audience.

In addition, online advertising helps address the declining capacity of parties and other democratic institutions to wage large ground campaigns. Although parties vary in their activist based (and there have been some signs of membership resurgence), for the most part political organisations now lack a mass and, importantly, active membership. This means that they don't possess an extensive ground army able to speak to voters on the street and communicate messages. Political advertising online therefore provides a new way of reaching out to and connecting with voters. Moreover, it is a mechanism that can be deployed more swiftly and with greater reliability than activist labour. Whilst in the offline world it can take weeks to design, print and distribute an election leaflet, online advertising content can be conceived and delivered within a matter of minutes. It is therefore easier than ever for party strategists or local activists alike to communicate their message, and electoral strategists such as Dominic Cummings have been particularly attracted to this technique.

The practicalities of online political advertising

In part the rise in online advertising is connected with the ease of creating and distributing content. Through platforms such as Facebook Ad Manger and Google AdWords users can log on, design and distribute advertising with little expertise. Provided with a list of audiences they may want to target, prompted to set a budget and to utilise A/B message testing, the interfaces of these tools are easy to use and monitor. The barriers to entry are also low – any individual with a Facebook account, for example, can register to use the Ad Manager, making it a widely accessible tool. It is therefore not just elite strategists and experts who can deploy online advertising, activists on the ground can also design and deploy their own advertising content. Online advertising can therefore be mobilised with little, if any central control – a capacity that, whilst empowering activists, may cause issues for parties if messaging becomes contradictory.

The effect of online political advertising

Whilst online advertising has fast become a mainstay of electoral politics it is notable, that there is little evidence that the technique works. Whilst political parties and campaigning organisations have invested heavily in staff and advertising content (at an elite and local level), the evidence that this technique works is mainly anecdotal.

In the UK, the mythology of digital advertising emerged in the aftermath of the 2015 General Election when the Conservative Party credited its use of targeted messaging online as a key component of its success. Subsequently, Labour invested heavily in digital, using Facebook as a key election resource in 2017. Then, in 2018, the

Cambridge Analytica scandal further elevated the profile of targeted advertising tools, with significant coverage given to the way advertising was used to influence voters. This series of events has quickly created a culture in which political actors believe that they cannot afford to eschew digital – with even the UK Government now using Facebook advertisements to promote the Brexit deadline. Despite this consensus, there is, however, only limited evidence to support the case for such investment. As Baldwin-Philipi (2017) has argued, there is now a well-established 'myth' around data driven campaigning, and a belief that tools such as online advertising have the capacity to deliver election winning effects. The evidence that advertising has the power to persuade or manipulate voters – a point suggested by the recent Netflix documentary about the Cambridge Analytica scandal – is, however, lacking. Instead, research suggests that it is exceedingly difficult to get someone to change their mind.

It may be that rather than persuading, political advertising has other outcomes. Elections are often as much about mobilising supporters as persuading opponents, and it is possible that advertising could be used to this effect. This possibility is supported by developments in the 2017 General Election. In this case, Labour used targeted advertising on Facebook to spread content to supporters who, in turn, organically shared material amongst their friends. Advertising online may therefore act as a catalyst for mobilising individuals to vote or spread campaign content and deliver intended outcomes that way. Alternatively, it may be that online advertising provides an effective way of sharing information. In a crowded information landscape, targeted messages online may provide a new means of communication that is more likely to be noticed than other forms. However, as yet we have little evidence of the effects of political advertising on persuasion, mobilisation or information – meaning that more than a degree of caution should be taken when making claims about the capacities of this technique.

The unintended effects of online political advertising

What we do know about political advertising online is that it can have unintended effects. Whilst platforms such as Facebook can enable highly targeted messaging to specific communities online, research has shown that deploying such messages may not always be effective. Whilst it is easy to assume that the vast amounts of data gathered on the internet provide a reliable picture of individuals' interests and desires, a quick look at Facebook's inferences about your own interests swiftly shows that this data is often incorrect. This means that the data used to targeted messages is not always accurate, and that messages can be 'mistargeted'. Research by Hersh and Schaffner (2013) has explored public perceptions of targeted messaging and has shown that whilst there are small advantages to be gained from accurate targeting, there is a backlash effect when people are mistargeted. For electoral campaigners seeking to boost their appeal, it therefore appears that the rewards to be gained from micro-targeting are fairly minimal, but the risks are high, making this a high-risk strategy.

The regulation of online political advertising

Given the rise of online political advertising it is particularly striking that, at present, there is little regulation of this area. In the UK (and in most countries around the

world, the regulatory landscape is woefully unequipped to oversee political adverts. In the UK, a range of bodies could claim responsibility for online political adverts, with the Electoral Commission, Advertising Standards Authority, Information Commissioner's Office and OfCom each having aspects of their current remit overlap with this topic. And yet, at present, none of these bodies has the power to regulate this industry. Political campaigners and companies alike are therefore not subject to the transparency arrangements in place for offline activities, and there is little information about what is happening online. It is therefore largely opaque who is placing adverts online, what form these adverts take or where the money for advertising comes from. Confronted with this lack of information, some efforts have been made to provide more insight. Charitable start-ups such as Who Targets Me have created tools by which users can gather insights into the adverts they are being targeted with, and other initiatives have emerged to crowd source a database of the adverts users are seeing online. However, these efforts provide only partial insight into the online advertising landscape.

Industry response

Interestingly, over the last year some companies have begun to open up and provide more information about political advertising. Facebook for example, has created an advertising archive where it is possible to search for political adverts. They have also provided more information about advertisements in newsfeeds and on pages, making it easier for users to find out more information about 'why I am seeing this ad'. And yet, these efforts have been shown to have many flaws. A recent report by Mozilla (2019) has exposed significant problems with the Facebook ad archive. Looking beyond Facebook, it is also apparent that different companies have made very different responses to the perceived lack of transparency. Different types of advertising archive have therefore been created, and different information is available about the source of adverts. This has created a highly uneven landscape that is difficult for researchers and citizens to navigate. Industry responses to online political advertising are therefore active, but have many deficiencies.

Government plans for regulation

Looking at recent developments in Parliament, it appears that there is significant pressure on the Government to respond to the rise of online political campaigning. Inquiry after inquiry in Parliament has called for more regulation and political advertising is a common focus. Regulators in this area – and notably the Electoral Commission and ICO – have called for increases in their existing powers to allow them to regulate this area. And yet, at present, the Government's response has been somewhat limited. Although making a commitment to implement digital imprints, and proposing the idea of a new online regulator, there has been limited action to implement proposed changes. Moreover, there is a lack of detail about the specific changes requires to regulate online political advertising. This lack is significant as the challenges of identifying, scrutinising and responding to advertising content online are immense. Even just determining what constitutes a political advert is already an issue that has been the subject of much debate, let alone determining how to respond to problematic advertising content in a fast paced and often opaque information environment.

This suggests that any attempt to pursue regulatory reform is likely to confront a range of issues that make it difficult to formulate an easy response. This should not, however, deter regulators – it is vital to understand and think more about the impact of political advertising online. It is also important to think about the democratic norms and ideals that regulators want to uphold. Online advertising has provided a range of new capacities, but it is not clear whether democracies should embrace the capacity to micro-target campaigns and develop individualised rather than common political discourse. Rather than seeking to simply apply existing offline regulation to the online world, it is vital for policy makers to think more deeply about the nature of change happening online and whether these changes are acceptable. At present, however, it is industry that is taking the lead, but it is important to ask whether we really want to allow companies to dictate what is democratically acceptable.

References

Baldwin-Philippi, K. (2017) 'The Myths of Data Driven Campaigning', Political Communication, 34(4): 627-633.

Bossetta, M. (2018). "The Digital Architectures of Social Media: Comparing Political Campaigning on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat in the 2016 U.S. Election." Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly.95(2): 471-496.

Dommett, K. and Power, S. (2019) 'The Political Economy of Facebook Advertising: Election Spending, Regulation and Targeting Online', Political Quarterly, 90(2): 257-265.

EMarketer. (2019) , 'Political Ad Spend to Reach $6 Billion for 2020 Election' https://www.emarketer.com/content/political-ad-spend-to-reach-6-billion-for-2020-election, accessed 21. 8.2019.

Hersh, E. and Schaffner, B. (2013), 'Targeted Campaign Appeals and the Value of Ambiguity', The Journal of Politics, 75(2): 520-534.

Mozilla. (2019) 'Facebook's Ad Archive API is Inadequate', https://blog.mozilla.org/blog/2019/04/29/facebooks-ad-archive-api-is-inadequate/, accessed 20.8.2019.