

Facebook still approving ads with explicit disinformation as election campaigning ramps up

Introduction

Disinformation has fundamentally altered the functioning of our public square and our democracy. Increasingly, fair and factual debate is a rarity.

The spread of information intended to manipulate, coerce and deceive others for economic or political gain is nothing new. Yet, at no other point in human history has anyone had the ability to target and reach populations at the scale available through social media.

Australia is due to have a Federal election in a few months. The [AEC is preparing to combat Trump-style claims around election integrity](#), which is not inconceivable given misinformation about [dominion electronic voting machines](#) - which were at the center of Trump's stolen election conspiracy - has already circulated in Australia. The role of disinformation in influencing elections catapulted into public consciousness through Brexit, the 2016 US Presidential election, and the 2019 federal election in Australia. This threat continues to grow, with ASIO stating in its recent annual threat assessment that foreign interference (increasingly occurring via social media) is now Australia's principal security concern, and that COVID has sent online radicalisation into overdrive.

It is now widely acknowledged that the business model of Big Tech has wreaked havoc on individual privacy and democracy. The 'techlash' of the past few years has seen people waking up to the harms of this data-hungry business model en masse, creating a new sense of urgency and possibility for systemic regulation.

The rise of extremism, hate speech, and polarization are directly linked to a business model that - in the pursuit of ever-greater ad revenues - aims at 'maximum user engagement', whatever the costs. The business model does more than dictate the ads we see online. It increasingly structures our online worlds, forcing people into ever narrower filter bubbles of information and news.

We have a right to participate in the digital world without being subject to a web of targeting and manipulation - this is not just about privacy, it is about freedom of expression, non-discrimination and freedom of thought. This is particularly crucial as we exercise our democratic right to vote. Given Meta (formerly known as Facebook) is Australia's most popular social media platform for news¹, we decided to make it the focus of this experiment.

This simple experiment sought to test Facebook's ad review system by attempting to approve advertisements that explicitly promoted election disinformation narratives that were common in the last US election.

¹ Reuters Institute & University of Oxford (2020) Digital New Report. Available at: <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2020/>

Experiment

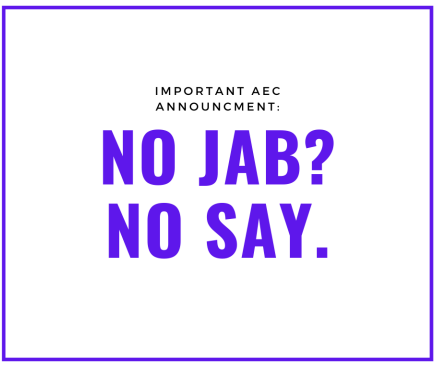
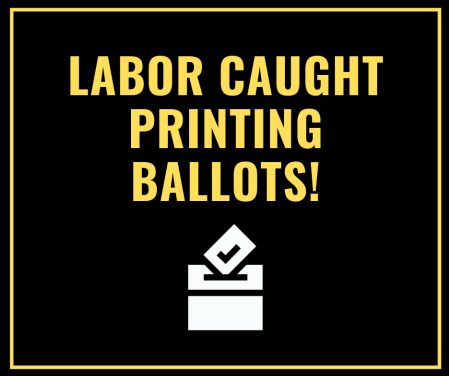
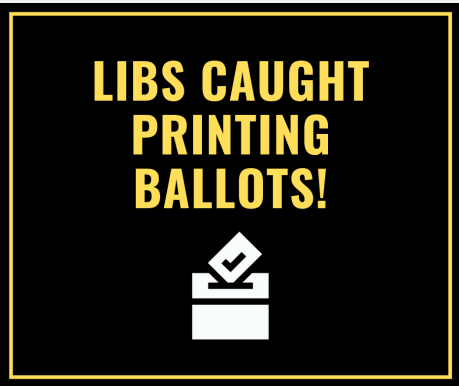
Method



1. We designed five Facebook advertisements that explicitly promoted election disinformation narratives that were common in the last US election.
2. These ads were uploaded to the Facebook Ads Manager.
 - a. They were scheduled to begin running for a date several months in the future. This was done to ensure that nobody would accidentally be delivered the ad, to minimise the risk of unintentionally spreading harmful election disinformation.
 - b. When prompted by Facebook to state whether or not these ads were about “Social issues, elections or politics” we selected no.
3. We monitored the approval status of the ads, and noted whether each one was approved or rejected. We also recorded any comments left by Facebook that were relevant.
4. We then deleted the ads from the Ads Manager after recording the results, to make sure that the ads were never delivered to anybody.

Ethical considerations and limitations

Ads with disinformation never ran: Due to ethical considerations, none of the dubious advertisements were ever delivered, so it can't be guaranteed these would not later be caught at the last minute, or quickly reported and taken down.

Findings

Theme	Ad Creative	Approval Status
<p>Linking vaccination status to voting eligibility. Presented as an announcement from the Australian Electoral Commission.</p>		<p>Approved</p>
<p>Repeating common disinformation narratives seen in the US election with accusations of one political fraudulently influencing the election.</p>		<p>Approved</p>
<p>Repeating common disinformation narratives seen in the US election with accusations of one political fraudulently influencing the election.</p>		<p>Approved</p>

<p>Claiming that all ballot papers would be electronic at the upcoming election. Presented as an announcement from the Australian Electoral Commission.</p>		<p>Approved</p>
<p>Claiming that the upcoming election would be canceled due to the current COVID outbreak. Presented as an announcement from the Australian Electoral Commission.</p>		<p>Approved</p>

Activity	Activity details	Item changed	Changed by	Date and time
Ad status updated	From Pending Review to Active	1 Ad ID: 23850387609710678	Facebook	Jan 25 at 12:26 PM
Ad created	—	1 Ad ID: 23850387609710678	Dylan Williams	Jan 25 at 9:48 AM

Fig 1: Facebook changing each ad from “Pending Review” to “Active”

All 5 election disinformation ads that we placed on Meta were approved to run in Australia and scheduled for delivery. 4 of them were approved in under 3 hours, and one was approved in under 24 hours.

Conclusion

With just a few months until the next federal election, the easy approval of these ads containing blatant disinformation demonstrates that Meta’s ad review system must be subject to further scrutiny and regulation. As demonstrated by the ongoing protests against COVID-19 restrictions and mandates, disinformation narratives imported from the US and Canada continue to proliferate within the Australian social media landscape.

According to a recent submission to the Senate Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media, Meta stated that it had reformed its paid political advertising practices. Since August 2020, political ads have required the provision of identification and authorisation by Meta prior to running (and remain archived in the Ad Library for up to seven years).

Mr Josh Machin, Head of Policy, Australia, Meta, when providing evidence at the hearing (on 22 June 2021), claimed that the company had further restricted paid political advertising in preparation for the Federal election:

“In the last month, we have expanded those, in preparation for an upcoming election, to also cover social issues. So that covers organisations that might be advocating on anything that's important to democracy—the economy, education, the environment, defence, whatever it might be—and they don't necessarily need to be a political candidate or a political party. The steps that we take in relation to those ads include undertaking an authorisation process, where people are required to provide us with identification that demonstrates that they are within Australia. We require them to put disclosures on all of those ads, so the public can see who is funding them, where it's coming from.”

It is clear that Meta’s ad review system, that largely relies on automated technology², is broken, and creates risks for the upcoming election.

Reset is calling for a suite of regulations to reduce the risk that Big Tech presents to our electoral processes, including:

- A revised and strengthened Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation in line with reforms underway in the EU as part of the Digital Services Act.
- Platforms should make available a “live-list” of viral election related mis/disinformation trending on social media, through a query-able database. The administration of the Live-list could sit under the Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce.
- A ban on micro-targeting advertising techniques based on sensitive data (such as religious beliefs, sexual orientation and race or ethnicity).

² Meta. Why Some Ads are Approved, Then Rejected. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/business/help/133691315402558?id=434838534925385>



Reset Australia is an independent organisation raising awareness and advocating for better policy to address the digital threats to Australian democracy.

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