

Written evidence submitted by Who Targets Me?

Although I am speaking on behalf of Who Targets Me? It's worth noting that we are just one of a handful of organisations that have been raising awareness for the lack of transparency of Facebook advertising, political advertising in particular. Others affected in this space include ProPublica and Mozilla.

Who Targets Me? established itself as a not-for-profit in 2017 to help the public understand how they are being targeted with digital advertising during the general election. Our tool can be installed as a browser extension, it then collects data from Facebook users and shows them personalised statistics of how many adverts they have seen.

The data is also collated into a master database, that is shared exclusively with researchers and journalists interested in exposing misinformation, election overspending and microtargeting, among other issues.

Without our tool, and similar tools, the following articles could never have been written:

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/03/free-software-reveal-facebook-election-posts-targeted-chrome-extension>

<https://www.propublica.org/article/facebook-advertising-discrimination-housing-race-sex-national-origin>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-45569227>

Access to advertising data, including the content of the advert, the details of who paid for the advert, and the targeting criteria of the audience that saw the advert is important in the context of the UK especially because of the implications of dark money in politics, foreign influence and campaign spending. This data exists only on Facebook's servers and ours. We are the only watchdog, looking out for signs of malice on the platform. If we are unable to access this data, Facebook is allowed to self-regulate, which in our opinion is not in the public's interest.

To analyse this data we have partnered with the LSE, Oxford Internet Institute and Sheffield University.

On January 9th, Who Targets Me? And all other tools operating in this space lost access to this data. Facebook pushed a change, exclusively aimed at breaking tools that operate as ours does. We have not received a response from Facebook as to why they have made this change. We are not a newsroom and do not have a large platform with which to ask questions of this corporation. We call on members of the committee to hold Facebook accountable and ask for clarification on behalf of the public as to why this data has been obscured from ours, and the public's view.

To comment on Facebook's statements in 2017 and last year, where Facebook announced a series of changes to its platform including the creation of the Political Ad Archive. These changes do not go far enough to improve transparency for the public. They are aimed at creating the perception of transparency, rather than a genuine tool that can be used by legislators, researchers and journalists to improve transparency on the platform.

Before June 2018, Facebook did not share any advertising data. In June 2018 Facebook started sharing incomplete advertising data.

Who Targets Me? Was founded in April 2017. Who Targets Me?'s access to data was significantly reduced in January 2019.

It might be easiest to describe this as examples:

If you wanted to view Russia Today Facebook adverts prior to April 2017:

- Facebook may hold a record of these adverts, but they do not share them publicly

If you wanted to view Russia Today Facebook adverts from April 2017 to May 2018

- Who Targets Me? Has a copy of the advert content and detailed targeting information available to researchers and legislators
- Facebook may hold a record of these adverts, but they do not share them publicly

If you wanted to view Russia Today Facebook adverts from June 2017 to December 2018

- Who Targets Me? Has a copy of the advert content and detailed targeting information available to researchers and legislators
- Facebook allows users to view the content of the advert, and offers significantly limited information about the targeting information

If you wanted to view Russia Today Facebook adverts from January 2019 to present

- Who Targets Me? Has a copy of some advert content, and no targeting information
- Facebook allows users to view the content of the advert, and offers significantly limited information about the targeting information

Facebook makes this data incredibly hard to collect, that the only way is to use web scraping. Significant manpower is required - over 20,000 users have volunteered to install the Who Targets Me? software and scrape Facebook advertising in order to make this data available to researchers. We are not aware of any other projects active in the UK that have tried to collect this data (and it would be difficult to collect so many volunteers without a public campaign). Therefore we believe no other groups have this data and Facebook holds the only other copy of their own advertising.

Since January 2019 there is no practical way for researchers or legislators to study or audit Facebook advertising.

Any misinformation adverts could be running right now, and unless the users targeted with the advert identify it as misinformation, the advert will go unnoticed.

Louis Knight-Webb
Co-Founder
Who Targets Me?

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