

Facebook gives Russia-linked ads to Congress

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This July 16, 2013, file photo shows a sign at Facebook headquarters in Menlo Park, Calif. Social media giant Facebook is expected to provide Congress on Monday, Oct. 2, 2017, with more than 3,000 ads that ran around the time of the 2016 presidential election and are linked to a Russian ad agency. (AP Photo/Ben Margot, File)

Facebook announced Monday that it is planning more measures to increase transparency in advertising as the company provides Congress

with more than 3,000 ads linked to a Russian ad agency.

Joel Kaplan, the company's vice president of global policy, said in a blog post that Facebook is planning to hire more than 1,000 people to staff teams that review advertisements globally. Facebook will also update its policies to require better documentation from advertisers who want to run ads related to the U.S. election, including a requirement that the advertisers will have to confirm the business or organization they represent.

The moves come as the company is under pressure from multiple congressional committees that are investigating Russian interference in the 2016 election. Congress has recently focused on the spread of false news stories and propaganda on social media, putting pressure on Facebook and other social media companies to turn over more information and release any Russia-linked ads.

Facebook officials are turning over the ads they have discovered to the House and Senate intelligence committees and the Senate Judiciary Committee Monday. The company already has given similar material to Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into the Russian meddling.

Kaplan said in the post that all of the ads violated the company's policies because they come from "inauthentic" accounts. He said the ads "run counter to Facebook's mission of building community and everything we stand for."

Facebook announced last month that it had discovered the ads, which were linked to Facebook accounts that likely operated out of Russia and pushed divisive social and political issues during the U.S. presidential election. The company said it found 450 accounts and about \$100,000 was spent on the ads.

Kaplan said the company's policies already prohibit "shocking" content, direct threats and the promotion of the sale or use of weapons, but that "going forward, we are expanding these policies to prevent ads that use even more subtle expressions of violence."

Facebook plans also to strengthen enforcement against improper ads by boosting manual and automated review systems. In addition, the company will increase the requirements for documentation and share more information on bad actors with industry and government, according to Kaplan's post.

Twitter has said it found postings linked to the same Facebook accounts, and the House and Senate intelligence panels have asked both companies, along with Google, to testify publicly in the coming weeks. None of the companies have said whether they will accept the invitations.

It is unclear whether the Facebook ads turned over to Congress will eventually be released publicly. Several lawmakers—including Virginia Sen. Mark Warner and California Rep. Adam Schiff, the top Democrats on the Senate and House intelligence panels—have said they believe the American public should see them.

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced on Sept. 21 that the company would provide the ads to Congress and also make preliminary changes to ensure the political ads on its platform are more transparent. Zuckerberg indicated that it was up to Congress and Mueller whether to release the ads.

"As a general rule, we are limited in what we can discuss publicly about law enforcement investigations, so we may not always be able to share our findings publicly," Zuckerberg said then. "But we support Congress in deciding how to best use this information to inform the public, and we

expect the government to publish its findings when their investigation is complete."

Schiff said he hopes to release a sampling of the ads at a public hearing with the firms. He said he is committed to making all of these ads public "as soon as possible," while working with Facebook on privacy considerations.

"We will continue to work with Facebook and other tech companies to determine the full extent of Russia's use of online platforms, including paid advertising, since what we now know may only scratch the surface," Schiff said.

Facebook has said the ads addressed social and political issues and ran in the United States between 2015 and 2017. The company said the ads appear to have come from accounts associated with a Russian entity called the Internet Research Agency.

Twitter said last week that it had suspended 22 accounts corresponding to the 450 Facebook accounts that were likely operated out of Russia.

Warner criticized Twitter for not sharing more information with Congress, saying the company's findings were merely "derivative" of Facebook's work. The company's presentations to staff last week "showed an enormous lack of understanding from the Twitter team of how serious this issue is, the threat it poses to democratic institutions," he said.

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