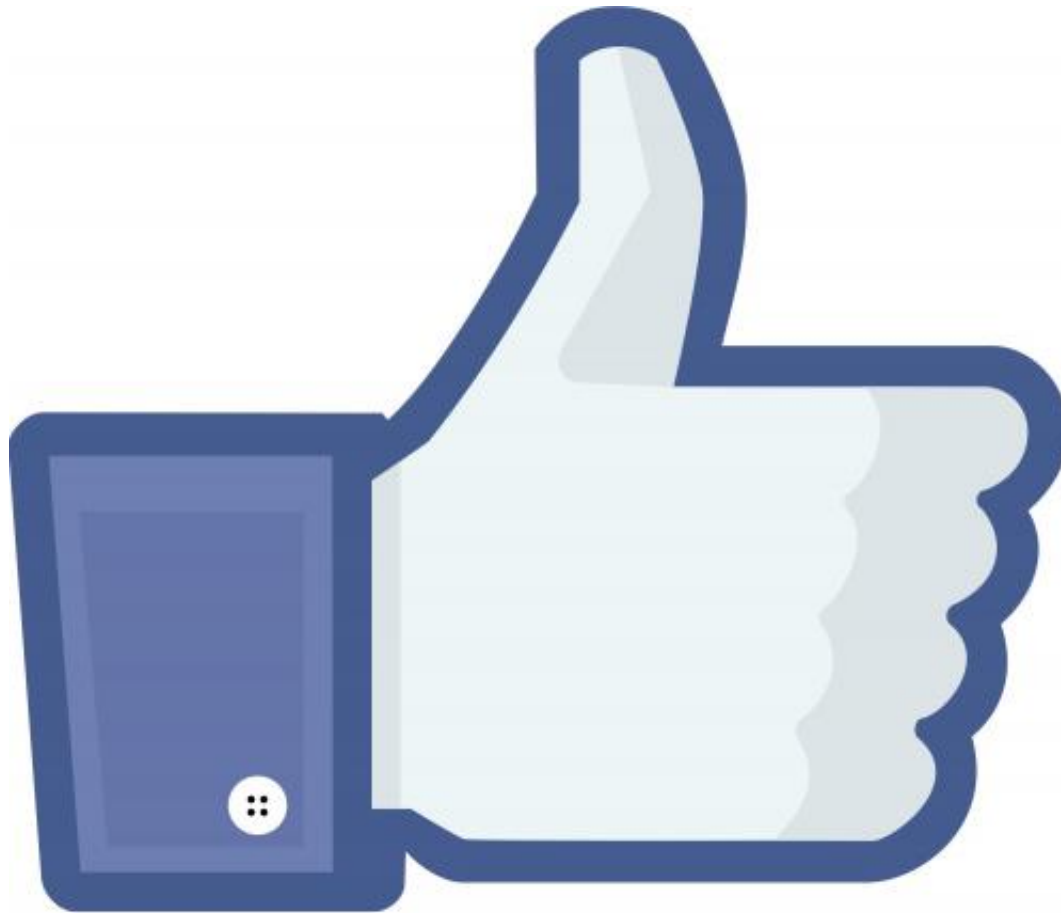


How do Facebook ads target you?

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The House Intelligence Committee is preparing to release to the public the 3,000 ads the Russian-based Internet Research Agency bought on Facebook as part of its coordinated disinformation campaign to sway the electorate, information that may help explain how voters were duped and

which campaign benefited.

The unprecedented disclosures bring to the forefront questions some of Facebook's two billion monthly users may have about computer algorithms that underwrite what ad gets shown to which user: why was I shown one ad and not another? Did I see any Russian ads, and could I have known?

The largely automated ad system has turned the 13-year-old Facebook into one of the world's most valuable companies by allowing businesses, from small entrepreneurs to large chains, to show specific ads to finely sliced groups of users.

Here's what happens.

How do Facebook ads target users?

In the days when print, radio and television were the only games in town, advertisers selected the publication or TV show they wanted to advertise in and perhaps the specific section or program. For a national publication or show they might be able to specify a certain area of the country, but that was about the extent of it.

Ads on Facebook are several orders of magnitude more specific. The company constantly collects information about its users, including age, gender, education and income level, job title, relationship status, hobbies, political leanings, favorite TV shows and movies, what kind of car they drive and what kinds of products they buy. In addition, Facebook tracks the pages users like, the ads they click on and the sites they browse.

Some of the information is collected directly by Facebook, some of it is purchased from data broker companies that use public records and

buying behavior to learn about you.

Facebook then uses that information to decide to whom to show a specific ad. If you clicked on an InstaPot ad, you might be shown ads for other types of pressure cookers, or more generically, cooking. If your interests were the Bible, faith or Christianity, you could have been shown an ad placed by the Russians showing Jesus and Satan arm wrestling, with the caption, "Satan: If I win Clinton wins! Jesus: Not if I can help it! Press 'Like' to help Jesus win!"

What's the difference between a post and an ad?

Not much, sometimes.

When an organization posts something on its Facebook page, its Facebook friends see it as simply content that appears in their News Feeds. The organization also has the option of "boosting" the posting by paying to have it seen by people who are not friends of the page. In that case, their posting gets a "Sponsored" note on it, so the people whose News Feeds it appears in know that it's an ad.

The same is true if someone buys an ad on Facebook, the "Sponsored" note will be attached to the content.

But there's a catch. If someone who sees that ad, or that boosted post, decides to share it with their Facebook friends, the "Sponsored" tag no longer appears because it's no longer a paid ad.

So if ACME FishFood Inc. posts a piece on its Facebook page about The Care and Feeding of Goldfish, then boosts the piece or pays for it to be distributed as an ad, it will contain a "Sponsored" tag. But if someone forwards it along to a friend on Facebook, they will only see it as a post, not as a paid advertisement.

It's this kind of ad, one so compelling that people begin to forward it along to their friends, that advertisers (and the Russians) aim for. One example distributed earlier this month by the House Intelligence Committee shows a line of Texas Border Patrol agents on horseback with a dramatic sky filled with lightening behind them. The caption reads, "Don't mess with TX Border Patrol. Always Guided by God."

'It's known as 'hacking the attention economy' and social media has made it even easier to do, said Jeff Hemsley, a professor of information studies at Syracuse University who studies viral social media.

How much does this cost?

Pricing for Facebook ads is somewhat non-intuitive. The more popular an ad is, the less the organization placing it pays. That's because Facebook is always trying to balance making money from ads with showing people what it thinks they will want, on the theory that if it shows them a lot of content they don't like, they'll leave.

In the aggregate, the price of an ad depends on how much demand there is in the system, how many advertisers are trying to reach people with the specific requested profile (new moms who live in the Pacific Northwest, say) and even what time of day it is, said Logan Young, a vice president of strategy at BlitzMetrics.

Facebook uses artificial intelligence and machine learning to make all these determinations on the fly, looking at what the specific user has done in the past and also what people who fit the same profile of interests have done when they've seen the ad, or a similar ad.

As we scroll through our Facebook News Feeds, it is constantly running instant, computer-controlled auctions in the background, deciding what ads to show us and how much to charge for them.

In the case of the Russian ads, pricing may not have mattered because the desire appears to have been to create feelings among the electorate rather than to make money.

How do ad sellers know which ads work best?

It's become pretty standard for organizations placing ads on Facebook to create multiple variations of their ad and then test them to see which generate the most viewer engagement. Ads can be sent out for as little as \$1 a day, so it's simple to test multiple ads, see which one resonates the most and then use it.

Sometimes ads might target slightly different groups. In that case, an agency might test which ads resonate best with which group and target each specifically with the ads that seem to work best.

Not all work. For example, an ad that features a coloring book image of Sen. Bernie Sanders and was aimed at members of the gay and lesbian community, for example, was seen by only 848 people and got just 54 clicks.

The way Facebook's algorithms work, the content that does best is often that which elicits some sort of strong reaction, either negative or positive, that would encourage people to either "like" or forward along the content.

In the case of the Russia ads, it looks as if this type of testing might have been going on. According to testimony by Facebook's general counsel Colin Stretch, less than \$3 was spent on 50% of the ads. That could mean that the Russians created multiple ads, tested them in small batches and decided at least 50% weren't worth placing broadly.

Can I change what ads I see?

Facebook users have the power to influence the ads they see not only by how they interact with ads in their News Feed, but also by changing their ad settings. To do that, go to your Facebook Profile, then click on the Settings link. From there, look for the word Ads and click to see and set your "Ad Preferences."

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