

Facebook tells FEC it supports campaign advertising transparency

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A new AI tool created to help identify certain kinds of substance abuse based on a homeless youth's Facebook posts could provide homeless shelters with vital information to incorporate into each individual's case management plan. Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Facebook says it supports policy measures that promote transparency in

online campaign advertising, according to a comment filed with the Federal Election Commission.

The company fought for years for blanket exemptions from the FEC from the political advertising disclosure rule - a position that has come under fire since it was revealed that Russia bought ads on the social network's platform in an attempt to sway the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Facebook said it still needs to know exactly how it can comply with transparency laws, and asked that digital companies be permitted to be creative and flexible with how they display the paid sponsors of [campaign](#) ads. Facebook said it's already adopted measures to show its users who paid for all kinds of ads, but its business could be hurt if these policies aren't broadly applied to all digital ad companies.

"These internal measures will apply only to advertising on Facebook's platform, which could have the unintended consequence of pushing purchasers who wish to avoid disclosure to use other, less transparent platforms," the company said.

A bipartisan group of three senators has introduced a plan to impose new disclosure requirements for political ads on Facebook, Twitter, Google and other online services. The companies haven't specifically backed that proposal, though they've all said they're open to some regulation.

Facebook's statements come in response to the FEC's reopening its comment period for rulemaking on disclosure for online ads "in light of recent developments since the close of the latest comment period." Federal election law requires all political ads purchased by campaigns and other political organizations to include disclaimers identifying sponsors.

In 2011, Facebook sought an exemption from those requirements, saying its ads have a character limit that precludes saying who paid for a campaign. The agency's six commissioners split 3-3 on the request. Facebook didn't get its exemption, but it allowed ads to run without disclaimers, leaving it up to ad buyers to comply.

After disclosing the Russian activity, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced in September that it would become possible to click on an advertiser and see what they were touting to other audiences. Facebook's self-serve advertising business generates hundreds of millions of dollars in political campaign spots.

In addition, Google, the other online ad giant that has faced scrutiny from lawmakers over Russian use of its platform, said in comments dated Nov. 9 that it "strongly supports" the FEC proceeding with rulemaking that puts the onus on political advertisers.

"The Commission can provide the clarity that campaigns and other political advertisers need to determine what disclaimers they are required to include on the digital advertisements they purchase," said the comments, which Google provided to Bloomberg.

"They're focusing on the obligations of the people putting the ads on the websites, not what if any obligations they should have," said Larry Noble, a former general counsel at the FEC who has pushed for more disclaimers online.

Noble, who is now general counsel at the Campaign Legal Center, said the "pressure" on Google and Facebook because of their role in the Russian campaign to influence the 2016 election had prompted the FEC to reopen the issue.

"I'm cautiously optimistic that at least they're open to considering what

needs to be done," he said of the companies.

Twitter also filed comments with the FEC highlighting its plan to change internal policies on transparency of online [political ads](#). In its comments, the [company](#) said it wants to work with the FEC and others on possible new regulatory requirements, but stopped short of advocating specific new rules or laws.

Google, in its comments, also suggested amending the Foreign Agents Registration Act so "that an agent of a foreign principal who purchases digital 'issue ads' with the purpose of influencing the U.S. public on election or non-election matters would be required to identify themselves as part of the ad."

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