UK campaigner takes on Facebook 'dark ads' during election
1 June 2017, by Dario Thuburn

Louis Knight-Webb has created a browser plug-in that tracks how political parties target people with advertising on Facebook

From a tech hub in London, a teenage entrepreneur is working to shed light on the use of targeted Facebook ads in Britain's election campaign, amid concern that they are skewing democracy.

Thousands of people have downloaded a browser plug-in created by 19-year-old Louis Knight-Webb, which monitors the advertisements to which people are exposed when they go online.

The aim is to understand the political "dark ad"—an electioneering message, derived from internet data, that targets specific groups, right down to the micro-level.

"It's clearly an issue that resonates with a lot of people," Knight-Webb told AFP at his work space near the British parliament.

"There's a lot of people trying to understand how they're being manipulated."

After Prime Minister Theresa May in April announced a snap general election, Knight-Webb designed the programme and founded a group called Who Targets Me? with Sam Jeffers, a business consultant.

More than 6,500 people have downloaded his extension, covering 630 constituencies—almost all of the 650 up for grabs in the vote on June 8.

"This is the largest study of its kind ever carried out to my knowledge," said Knight-Webb, who plans to extend the project to elections in Germany in September as well as to Brazil, the Czech Republic and Italy.

He hopes the project will encourage people "to be sceptical about the advertising they're receiving, to get outside of their bubble a bit more and understand what the rest of the country is seeing".

Campaign 'game changer'

Micro-targeting of digital ads to particular groups has come under scrutiny after being used by the victorious Brexit campaign last year and by Donald Trump's team in its campaign for the US presidency.

Spending returns published by Britain's independent Electoral Commission showed that the Vote Leave campaign spent 40 percent of its £6.8-million budget ($8.8 million, 7.8 million euros) on the services of Canadian digital marketer AggregateIQ.

Leave.EU, which also campaigned for Brexit, denied it had hired a similar group, Cambridge Analytica, which then worked on the Trump campaign, saying its contacts with the company had been informal.

Gerry Gunster, who worked on the Leave.EU campaign, has hailed Facebook's role as a "game changer".
"These tools have a significant potential impact on individuals’ privacy," it said in a statement, adding that public awareness about how personal data was being collected online was generally low.

"It is important that there is greater and genuine transparency about the use of such techniques."

Facebook itself has declined to comment on its advertising sales strategy for the British election but has confirmed recent media reports that it was hiring former senior Conservative and Labour officials.

Much of the data collected by Who Targets Me? will be analysed fully only after the election in conjunction with the London School of Economics and the London-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism.

But Knight-Webb said one trend was already clear—the use of Facebook ads has expanded hugely since Britain last voted, in the 2015 election.

In that campaign, the Conservatives spent £1.2 million on Facebook advertising compared with just £200,000 for all the other parties combined, including £16,500 by the Labour Party.

"All the parties have realised the potential of digital and are putting more money behind digital this year," Knight-Webb said.

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