

Google suspends all ads related to Irish abortion referendum

9 May 2018, by Jill Lawless



Google CEO Sundar Pichai speaks at the Google I/O conference in Mountain View, Calif., Tuesday, May 8, 2018. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu)

Google is suspending all advertising connected to Ireland's abortion referendum as part of moves to protect "election integrity," the company announced Wednesday.

The move came a day after Facebook banned foreign-backed ads in the Irish campaign, amid global concerns about online election meddling and the role of internet ads in swaying voters.

Google said that starting Thursday, it would no longer display ads related to the May 25 vote on whether to repeal Ireland's constitutional ban on most abortions.

The prohibition on ads connected to the Irish vote applies to both Google and YouTube, which the company owns.

The online search leader, which is based in Mountain View, California, declined to say how much advertising revenue it was giving up because of the decision.

The role of online ads in elections is under scrutiny after revelations that political consultancy Britain-based Cambridge Analytica harvested Facebook users' data to micro-target political ads to select groups during the 2016 U.S. presidential race—meaning that only those most susceptible to the message would see the advertisements.

Google's statement followed Facebook's decision Tuesday to ban foreign advertisements around the abortion referendum, which has drawn worries about the influence of North American groups.

Both Google and Facebook are working on measures to improve transparency before November's U.S. midterm elections, including tools to show the home country of advertisers.



In this May 16, 2012, file photo, the Facebook logo is displayed on an iPad in Philadelphia. Facebook says it is banning foreign advertisements related to Ireland's abortion referendum, amid concerns that North American groups are trying to influence the campaign. Irish voters will decide May 25, 2018 whether to repeal a constitutional ban on abortion, in a referendum that has drawn international attention. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke, File)

Ireland bars political donations from abroad, but the law has not been applied to social media advertising. Anti-abortion groups based in the United States are among the organizations that have bought online ads in Ireland during the referendum campaign.

Irish lawmaker James Lawless, technology spokesman for the opposition Fianna Fail party, welcomed the moves by Google and Facebook, but said "they are rushed and they are coming at the 11th hour," with less than two weeks until voting day.

"It's a step in the right direction, but it's an awful pity we couldn't have done this six months ago," said Lawless, who has introduced a bill to Ireland's parliament that would require all online advertisers to disclose the publishers and sponsors behind ads.

Largely Catholic Ireland has Europe's strictest restrictions on abortion, which is legal only when a woman's life is in danger. Several thousand Irish women travel each year to get abortions in neighboring Britain.

Voters are being asked whether they want to retain the constitutional ban or repeal it and make parliament responsible for creating abortion laws.

Lawless said he had concerns about some of the online advertising from both sides in the referendum campaign.

"Some quite disingenuous ads have been going around in recent weeks targeting people who are in the middle that aren't always from who they seem to be from," he said.

"What we really need is legislation and we need a proper, robust thought-out approach" to the problem, he said.

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