

Digital battleground looms large for 2020 election

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President Donald Trump has been on a social media ad spending spree for his 2020 re-election campaign, but he's about to endure a massive

digital counterattack.

His opponents are rushing in with multimillion-dollar efforts to prevent him from dominating the web, even as the rules of the main platforms are in flux.

Trump has spent more than \$30 million on Facebook and Google since May 2018. His aggressive ads have spurred activists to pressure key sites to better police political misinformation or even ban campaign ads altogether, as Twitter has done.

The digital battleground is expected to be expensive for candidates and, some say, crucial for their prospects.

"I believe the 2020 election will be primarily fought online," said Tara McGowan, founder of the progressive advocacy group Acronym, which has pledged to spend \$75 million on digital ads countering Trump.

"The internet and the rise of social media use by Americans has fundamentally changed how campaigns are run—and how they are won or lost."

Acronym and its political action committee will be advertising on social networks, and even on streaming media services like Hulu and Spotify, aiming to tell voters about Trump's "broken promises and corruption," McGowan said.

Billionaire former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg—who is mulling a presidential run himself—has pledged \$100 million for digital ads taking on Trump, and a similar amount is expected from the Democratic political committee Priorities USA.

Kantar Media analysts predict digital spending by candidates in the 2020

election will grow to \$1.2 billion, compared with \$3.2 billion for broadcast television.

Republican digital strategist Eric Wilson said the 2016 election campaign demonstrated the benefits of online advertising, which can be more easily targeted to specific regions or groups.

"The political narrative continues to be shaped on social media," he said.

"Campaigns want to make sure they are using their resources as efficiently as possible."

Mark Jablonowski, managing partner and chief technology officer of the digital consultancy DSPolitical, said the 2016 race highlighted the power of social media, enabling Trump to defeat Hillary Clinton despite being vastly outspent.

"2016 was a wakeup call for Democrats who had not been utilizing digital media to the fullest capability," said Jablonowski, who works with Democrats and progressive candidates.

But the rules around digital campaign ads have become muddled in recent weeks, with Twitter's outright ban and Facebook pressured to rein in misinformation propagated by Trump and others.

Part of 'conversation'

Facebook claims it wants to remain a part of the political "conversation" and that a complete ban would hurt challengers while helping better financed candidates including incumbents.

Some observers agree, arguing that social media can help emerging candidates.

"Social [media](#) lowers barriers to entry and thereby exposes voters to information about a broader set of candidates and offices," said a working paper by researchers at the Wesleyan Media Project.

While some analysts welcomed Twitter's ban, others warned that it may have little impact on efforts to curb misinformation and manipulation.

Elizabeth Dubois, a researcher at the University of Ottawa, warned that politicians could use "bots" or other accounts to amplify their messages in ways that are less transparent—and more difficult to detect.

In 2016, Russian entities spent some \$200,000 on Facebook ads, but the impact of the influence campaign was largely due to the viral spread of ads and other content.

A Facebook ban could be catastrophic not only for Democrats, but for "any candidate not named Donald Trump," Wilson said.

McGowan added, "It's worth noting that while (Senator Elizabeth) Warren has been one of Facebook's biggest critics, she's yet to call for a ban on political Facebook ads—because it could cripple her campaign."

'Misinformation arms race'

Amid calls to fact-check political ads, Daniel Castro of the Informational Technology & Innovation Foundation, a think tank, said such an effort is likely to be futile.

"Who ultimately decides what is the truth? And how can companies possibly scale such fact-checking globally—across scores of countries, languages, and elections?" Castro said in a blog post.

Karen Kornbluh, who heads the digital innovation democracy initiative

at the German Marshall Fund, said limiting "microtargeting"—which includes using behavioral criteria to deliver ads—may be one way to curb viral misinformation.

Such microtargeting to a small segment of people means the messages may not be subject to enough scrutiny, she said.

"This is what happened with the Cambridge Analytica case, where people's information was collected without their knowing it to infer their [political views](#)," Kornbluh said.

But some strategists counter that curbs on targeting would be another hindrance to emerging candidates with fewer resources.

"If targeted ads are done ethically, there is no issue," Jablonowski said. "That's the basis for all [online advertising](#)."

But a failure to stop the spread of misinformation from Trump and his supporters may prompt others to use similar tactics, said Kornbluh.

"A lot of people are concerned there will be a misinformation arms race," she said.

"The algorithms favor the most outrageous messages and conspiracy theories. The more incendiary ads get a bigger boost."

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