

Facebook lets users block political ads, aiming to quell outcry

17 June 2020, by Rob Lever



Facebook will allow users to stop seeing political ads, but analysts said it remained unclear if the move would curb social media misinformation

Facebook is allowing users to turn off all political ads in a move aimed at quelling criticism of the leading social network's hands-off approach to election misinformation.

The feature being rolled out in the United States from Wednesday and some other countries will give Facebook and Instagram users the option of blocking paid ads from candidates and political groups.

The initiative announced late Tuesday comes amid intense pressure on Facebook and other social media services to stem the flow of false information while remaining open platforms for political debate.

Facebook has steadfastly rejected calls to fact-check politicians including a plea from Democratic White House hopeful Joe Biden to clamp down on what he called rampant disinformation from President Donald Trump.

Facebook vice president of product management

and social impact Naomi Gleit said the initiative expands on the social network's "ad preferences" options which already allowed users to see fewer political ads.

She said the feature was being made available "as part of our preparations for the 2020 US elections" and would be offered "in countries where we have enforcement on ads about social issues, elections and politics" later this year.

Adam Chiara, a University of Hartford professor who follows social media and politics, said Facebook's announcement may be a public relations move with little real impact.

Chiara said Facebook would be able to tout "a victory for not censoring speech" but that it "does nothing to help move away from the toxic speech on the platform."

"I'm curious how many people will actually opt out," Chiara said. "Many Facebook users don't even change their default privacy settings. How many will take the time to do this?"

Shannon McGregor, a University of North Carolina professor of political communication, said Facebook is "outsourcing" its content moderation to users and at the same time limiting the reach of political challengers and newcomers.

"This is likely to exacerbate the incumbency advantage," McGregor said.

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