DEMOS

From Black Box to Glass Box

Opening Up Digital Political Advertising

Elliot Jones

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Introduction

What is Boris Johnson up to? That's the question on everyone's lips. And some journalists have been turning to a new source of information to find out - Facebook's Ad Library.

The Ad Library is a form of political advertising transparency archive, an online openly accessible database of advertisements posted by political parties, candidates or organisation or advertisements about politically sensitive topics, which should include information such as the targeting, actual reach and amount spent on those adverts.

Journalists have been harnessing the ad library to highlight how Boris Johnson's team has been testing campaign messages by posting hundreds of Facebook ads, seemingly a sign that an election might be on the horizon. The library has also been used in the recent Brecon and Radnorshire by-election to understand how Conservatives and Liberal Democrats focused on voters in differing age groups. Hugo Rifkind has pointed to how Facebook is used to test messaging by all the parties and highlighted how little scrutiny these adverts get from the press or other politicians.

Facebook isn't the only large tech company to set up a political advertising transparency archive in the face of growing pressure to become more accountable in the wake of scandals like Cambridge Analytica. Databases like these were advocated by the Electoral Commission last year and since then, Twitter and Google have followed suit, to mixed success.

Advertising Platform	Existence	Completeness						Accessibility	
	Transparency Archive Exists	UK Politician Coverage	Ad Buyer	Ad Spend	Ad Content	Ad Targeting	Ad Reach	Interactive Dashboard	Functional API
Facebook	🟩	🟩	🟩	🟧	🟩	🟥	🟧	🟧	🟧
Google	🟩	🟧	🟩	🟧	🟧	🟧	🟧	🟧	🟥
Twitter	🟩	🟥	🟩	🟩	🟩	🟧	🟩	🟧	🟥
Snap	🟥	🟥	🟥	🟥	🟥	🟥	🟥	🟥	🟥
Verizon Media Group	🟥	🟥	🟥	🟥	🟥	🟥	🟥	🟥	🟥
AppNexus	🟥	🟥	🟥	🟥	🟥	🟥	🟥	🟥	🟥
Microsoft	Do not allow political advertising on their platform								
Amazon	Do not allow political advertising on their platform								

So, how does political advertising transparency stack up across platforms? Do they tell us who is being shown political adverts, the scale of the advertising campaign and who is paying for it? Is this data presented in a way that can be understood by the general public at a glance? And is the underlying data easily available for independent researchers and journalists to probe the patterns and trends.

Facebook (Including Instagram)

Facebook's ad library has been relatively successful in the UK and been well-utilised by journalists to investigate political activity. It does seem to be relatively comprehensive in the UK, at least for political parties, politicians and political causes, from People's Vote to the National Education Union to a well-funded campaign against beer tax.

The library's interactive dashboards give us a summary of who is spending the most across different time periods and for each ad tells us:

- Who bought the ad
- What was the content of the ad, including embedded pictures, videos and links
- Bands of how much was spent on the ad and how many people saw it
- The breakdown by age and gender of who saw the ads

And you can access most of this data via an API, which allows the programmatic analysis of all this data in a relatively straightforward way.

There are problems. The API is still buggy and lacking functionality, along with there being a delay of a couple of days between spending and display. Yet despite these, Facebook is probably still the most transparent platform for online political advertising, especially when it comes to the United Kingdom.

Verdict: Acceptable but room for improvement

Google (Including YouTube)

We don't yet have the financial reporting for 2019 European Elections, but at the 2017 General Election parties spent £1,020,216.16 on Google services tagged as advertising. Since March 21st, Google's Transparency Report has included data on political advertising in the European Union, set up explicitly for the European elections.

According to the Transparency Report, Change UK/The Independent Group were the only ones to serve adverts on Google-owned platforms during the European Election campaign period, spending £7000. Change UK also outspent every other party on Facebook adverts by a considerable margin. So, it is possible they were the only ones to advertise with Google during the election. However, the sheer amount spent by parties on Google in 2017 makes that claim seem unlikely at best. So, it is not clear that many UK politicians or political actors are registered with Google or displayed in this report.

Recent adverts from the Conservative Party that finished in early July or later do appear in the search results, so there is clearly some progress being made to register politicians and political parties but at the least, the major parties need to be registered.

The dashboard view displays pretty limited data:

- Who bought the ad
- For how long,
- Bands for the amount spent
- Bands for the number of impressions.

Targeting data, e.g. which age groups or gender is the advert being shown to, is available separately but not easily accessible for those browsing the site.

Ad by The Conservative & Unionist Party

The Conservative & Unionist Party > **CR551918278381928448**

| Format: | Text | Impressions: | 10k–100k |
| Amount spent: | €50 to €500 · £50 to £500 | Date range: | 26 Jul 2019 - 8 Aug 2019 (14 days) |

Ad preview unavailable
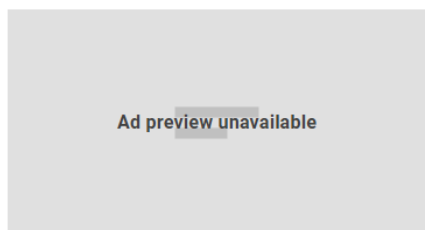
Advertisers are able to use approved third-party vendors to serve ads on Google. While we are able to review these ads for compliance with advertising policies, due to technical limitations, we are currently unable to display the content of the ad in the Transparency Report.

It also seems odd that 'technical limitations' prevent Google from displaying the content of the ad in the Transparency report and yet they are perfectly capable of serving and displaying the advert to those the advert was targeted at.

Google does provide bulk aggregated data on political advertising. However, this is in the form of weekly updated spreadsheets, which split spending and targeting data across different workbooks and leave it up to the reader to cross-reference and link data themselves. This data is useful but not being to access the data programmatically and in relatively real-time via an API is still poor.

Verdict: Mediocre but moving in the right direction

Twitter

At the 2017 General Election, parties reportedly spent £56504.32 on Twitter services tagged as advertising. Spending on Twitter is significantly lower than on the previous two platforms, perhaps because many politicians use Twitter to interact other politicians or journalists and disseminate information to their supporters rather than convince the general public.[i] Nonetheless it is important to have oversight of what is being spent. Twitter has put in place an Ads Transparency Center. So, what data does it provide?

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i   Andreas Jungherr (2016) Twitter use in election campaigns: A systematic literature review, Journal of Information Technology & Politics, 13:1, 72-91, DOI: 10.1080/19331681.2015.1132401

This campaign has 1 Tweet. Targeting information includes the performance metrics across all the Tweets in this campaign.

Campaign performance summary

This is how much the advertiser spent promoting this campaign and how many times Tweets in the campaign were seen.

Spend	Impressions
€126.2	**94.9K**

Campaign disclaimer

This is the payment information for this campaign.

Paid for by Party of European Socialists

Targeted audience

These are the demographics of the advertiser's intended audience for this campaign. Because audience data may be inferred, some ads may have been delivered to demographics outside those the advertiser targeted.

Country
Austria · Belgium · Germany · Italy · Poland · Spain · The Netherlands

Actual audience

These are the demographics of the audience the advertiser actually reached with this campaign. Totals for campaigns may not match the totals for each demographic as each ad impression may be counted against multiple demographic criteria.

Age   Metro   Gender   Language   Region

	Impressions
13-19	11.1K

For a given promoted tweet from a registered political organisation, you can:

- See the content of the advert
- See who paid for the advert
- How much was spent
- Who they targeted and when
- How successful they were in reaching a range of demographic groups.

However, you cannot access this data programmatically as there is no API.

Further, as of August 6th, the Twitter ad transparency archives section on the European Union still uses 'US' in the copy and only includes Europe-wide national parties and a scattershot of Irish politicians.

Political campaigning advertisers   European Union ⌄

As part of our increased transparency efforts, we clearly label and show disclaimer information for Promoted Tweets that fall under our Political campaigning policy.

Political campaigning on Twitter in the US is defined as:

- Ads that advocate for or against a candidate or political party.
- Ads that appeal directly for votes in an election, referendum, or ballot measure.
- Ads that solicit financial support for an election, referendum, or ballot measure.

We require political campaigning advertisers to self identify and created stricter requirements for who can serve these ads.

You can read more about how we define political campaigning in our Political Campaigning Policy.

There is not a single British politician or party listed. Their political advertising transparency library was explicitly set up for the European elections and doesn't appear to have been updated since, despite campaigning across countries clearly not ending on polling day.

Ultimately, the infrastructure does at least exist for holding British political parties and politicians advertising to account and the level of detail does suggest potential if properly rolled out in the UK. However, for now it is only potential.

Verdict: It does at least exist

The Rest

highlights that while Google, Facebook and Twitter are the most visible in the minds of politicians and political actors, we shouldn't forget the rest of the advertising ecosystem when it comes to transparency.
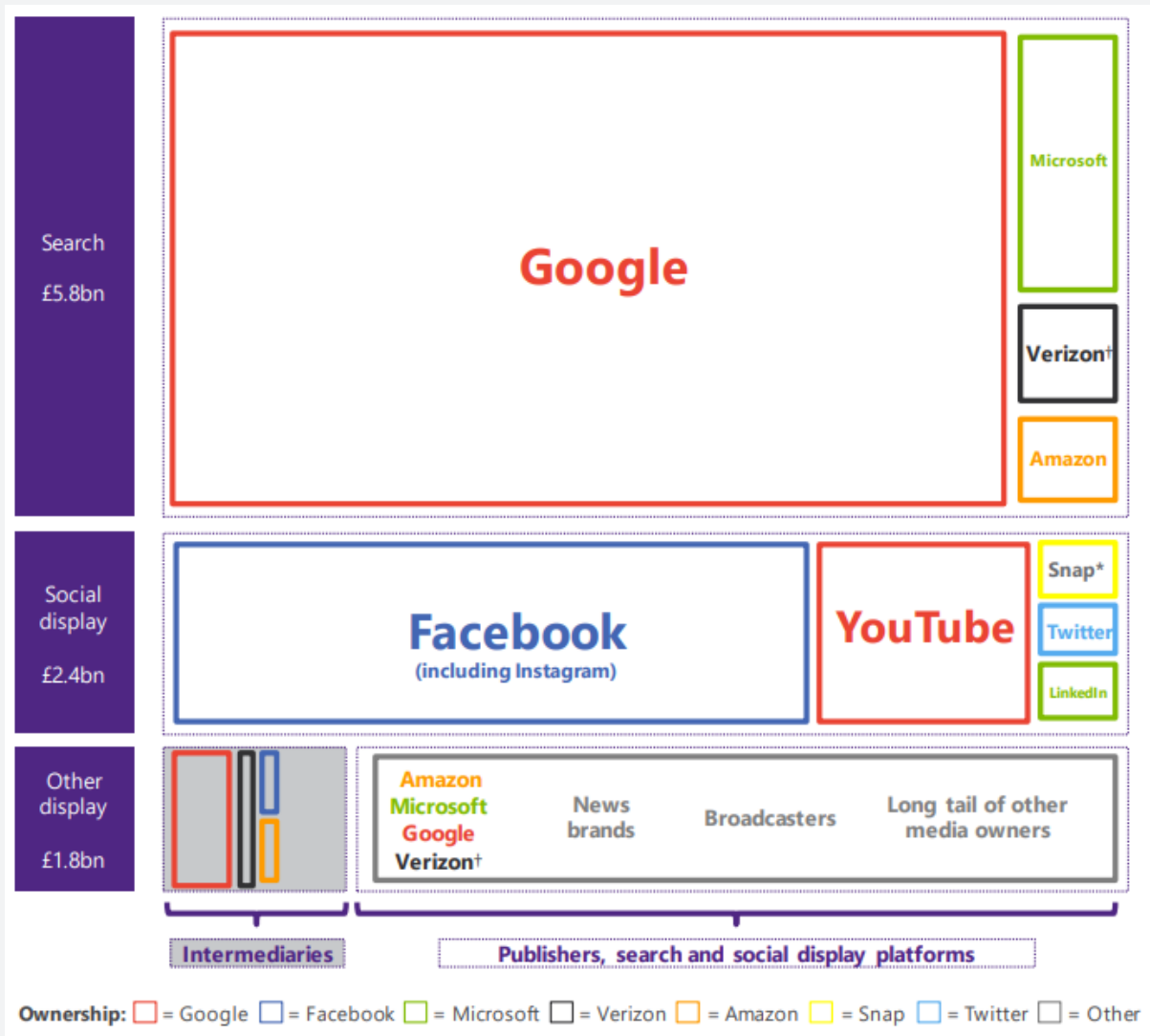
Let's start with the big players. to Google, Facebook and Twitter. It has consciously disallowed advertising for election-related content, political parties and candidates globally since April 2019. Amazon, not known for being an advertising mogul, but has also opted to

So, Microsoft and Amazon do at least have a good excuse for not having a political advertising transparency archive, even if banning political advertisements outright seems like an overly cautious move. Promoting positive and truthful advertising seems to me a better alternative than preventing it outright.

Other digital advertising services that do allow political advertising fail to provide any transparency. [Snapchat explicitly allows political advertisements](#) and has definitely been used by [the Conservative Party at the 2017 election](#). Similarly, [Verizon Media Group](#) and [AppNexus](#) allow political advertising to be distributed through their services. Yet they do not provide any transparency on who is spending, how much, or who they are targeting with adverts.

Verdict: Fails to exist

What could be done?

Ideally, functional and complete political transparency archives should be created and maintained by all providers of digital advertising, whether or not they currently provide services to political actors. This would allow journalists and civil society to pre-empt and react in real-time to messaging by political actors.

In practice, it might prove difficult to make them compulsory for all platforms, given issues of jurisdiction and scale (it may not be reasonable to expect ad providers below a certain revenue threshold, say £10m, to provide a library for competition reasons). However, governments can definitely encourage and put reputational pressure on companies to provide the libraries.

The government could do a great deal by setting out guidelines for what it expects political advertisement libraries to provide. First, what data should be provided and an open standard reporting format if possible:

- Who bought the advert?
- How much was spent?
- The content of the advert?
- Who was targeted by the advert?
- Who did the advert actually reach?
- Impressions
- Engagements
- Likes
- Replies
- Clickthroughs
- etc.

This data should be provided in two formats. First, an informative dashboard easily accessible and understandable to all users, to allow members of the public and non-technical members of civil society to easily understand a summary of advertising activity. Second, a well-maintained and free API to allow for programmatic analysis of advertising content.

The Electoral Commission have said they expect the platforms to discuss with them whether they can publish their data in the same format. Whether they or not they can agree on a common format, a central website collecting advertisements from across platforms across the UK would also be useful to get the full picture of what messages political actors are pushing. A common standard and a central repository may also make it easier for smaller providers to be transparent about their political content if the transparency infrastructure already exists and they simply need to plug into it.

Finally, these systems only work if they can actually keep tabs on political actors within the country. Government and civil society should work together to encourage political campaigners to register with all relevant advertising libraries and encourage platforms to be proactive in identifying those who should be covered.