

Facebook, Questions on Notice – 16 September 2020

1. **Senator WATERS:** Do you have any information on how many Australians are aware of the ad library? Do you have figures on how many have either accessed the library or accessed that aggregation that you just referred to?

Mr Machin: We don't have those figures with us today but we're very happy to take it on notice and come back to the committee with anything we might be able to provide.

Response:

Unfortunately, we do not have data that we could share on the number of Australians that have accessed the Ad Library or the number of Australians who are aware of the Ad Library. The Ad Library is available and accessible by anyone, even if they do not have a Facebook account and shows detailed information on such ads run across Facebook's family of apps.

We have seen a continued increase in news reporting in Australia that has relied on information sourced from the Ad Library, which contributes to the overall awareness about the ability to scrutinise ads on Facebook.

2. **Senator WATERS:** Thanks very much. Can you also advise what you're doing to promote the existence of the library so that people are aware of its existence and can do that checking if they so choose? Have you run an awareness campaign? How are you letting people know that this ad library is even a thing? I'm happy for you to address that now or to take it on notice if you need to.

Mr Machin: We have communicated about the launch of the ad library through our public global newsroom, in which we have indicated when different features have become available and we have let those within Australian media know about this new functionality. This is a continual effort. It is an industry-leading and pretty new kind of initiative. So the work's not done in terms of letting people know that it's there. I'm very happy to let you know if there are additional awareness raising steps that we're taking that I've not mentioned. But I'm sure that there will be additional steps in future in order to make sure people know it's available.

Senator WATERS: That's great. If you can take on notice what those additional steps might be and what work you're putting into determining what those additional steps will be and when those steps will be taken, that would be great.

Response:

As with all our launch of all of our products, we have made this information available through a range of sources, including:

- An announcement in our global newsroom in April 2019, prior to the Australian election¹
- Announcements in our global newsroom when the Ad Library has been made available or expanded²
- Containing information about the Ad Library in a standing place on information centres for users and advertisers.³

We have directly briefed political parties and journalists about the launch and expansion of the Ad Library. We have seen continued increase in news reporting in Australia that has relied on information sourced from the Ad Library. Sharing information about the Ad Library in Australia policy processes (such as the inquiry being undertaken by the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters) also helps to raise awareness about this tool.

Users are able to access the Ad Library through the Page Transparency tab⁴, which is available and made prominent on every Facebook Page.

¹ <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/04/safeguard-elections-in-australia/>

² <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/06/offering-greater-transparency/>;
<https://about.fb.com/news/2020/01/political-ads/>

³ <https://www.facebook.com/business/m/one-sheeters/electoral-political-ads-overview>;
<https://www.facebook.com/business/m/one-sheeters/ad-library>;
<https://www.facebook.com/business/news/requiring-authorization-for-ads-about-elections-and-politics-in-32-countries>

⁴ For more details about this feature, please see the Facebook Help Centre:
<https://www.facebook.com/help/323314944866264>

We continue to raise awareness amongst key stakeholders and consumers about the Ad Library in future.

3. **Senator WATERS:** I have one final question about the ad library before I move on to other matters. Is it still opt in for Australian political players, or have you changed that as well?

Mr Machin: During the election last year, it included all currently running ads, so it was not opt in at that stage. There were additional features in which parties could opt in. In terms of where it stands now, it is now mandatory for all political ads to be displayed in the ad library, not just as they are running but to be archived for seven years after the ad is initially run. That's not opt in; that's a compulsory requirement for anyone running political ads on our platform that are targeting Australia.

Senator WATERS: When did that become mandatory?

Mr Machin: I'd have to double-check the exact date for you. I'm happy to come back to the committee on that.

Senator WATERS: Lovely. Thank you. I'd appreciate that.

Response:

As mentioned in the Committee hearing, we have instituted new mandatory requirements for advertisers who use our services to run political ads targeting Australia. Any advertiser who wants to create or edit ads targeting this country that reference political figures, political parties or elections (including "get out the vote" campaigns) must go through the authorisation process, place "Paid for by" disclaimers on ads and have these ads enter the Ad Library.

The timeline for political ads authorisation in Australia is as follows:

- Voluntary authorisation for political ads came into effect in Australia in June 2019, after our authorisation was tested in the United States in 2018.
- Mandatory authorisation for political ads came in effect on 5 August 2020. We initially planned for these requirements to come into effect in mid-March 2020; however, we delayed the commencement of these requirements due to COVID-19. We rescheduled these requirements to come into effect in Australia for August 2020.
- The Ad Library Report, which contains aggregated information drawn from political ads authorisation, became available on 5 September 2020. It requires 30 days of information and took effect one month after mandatory ads authorisation came into effect.

4. **Senator WATERS:** When you geoblock, do you geoblock the content or the person?

Mr Machin: We geoblock the content.

Senator WATERS: How is it able to keep getting reposted under different names then?

Mr Machin: I would have to double-check exactly what occurred with the specific video that you're talking about. But if a video is reposted by a separate person then that would go through another review process, as per the first one. If it did appear to violate an Australian electoral law, we would be able to apply the geoblocking approach, after undertaking proper legal review.

Senator WATERS: Even though it's the same video being posted by a different user?

CHAIR: Senator Waters, I'm going to have to ask you to put further questions on notice. We're running 25 minutes late, and the program has been changed to bring forward other witnesses. I'll check if any other colleagues have any other questions. If not, I'd like to thank Facebook for their attendance here today—

Senator WATERS: May I have one final question?

CHAIR: Of course.

Senator WATERS: Could you take that last one on notice.

Response:

Prior to the 2019 election campaign beginning, the Australian Electoral Commission escalated a video to us that misrepresented the outcome of informal voting in Australia. The AEC advised that it was not unlawful. We reviewed the content against our Community Standards, found the video violated our standards, and we removed it.

In subsequent days, the same user posted a number of additional videos that were similar but each made different claims about informal voting. The user also posted links to the original video. The AEC escalated the posts and asked us to review.

Where the post contained the same content as the original escalation, we removed those posts. For content that was not the same as the original, we urgently reviewed that content against our Community Standards. Where the specifics of those particular pieces of content did not violate our Community Standards, but were likely unlawful, we geo-blocked that content out of respect for Australian law.

Subsequent to the election, we removed this user's account permanently for repeated violations of our Community Standards.

5. **Senator WATERS:** Finally, we heard from Responsible Technology Australia earlier this week in evidence to this committee about an experiment that they ran posting ads with obvious misinformation into a closed group. That information encouraged young people not to enrol. It included ads saying that the Electoral Commission would not count votes in safe electorates. They told us that at least a dozen members of the closed group reported the ads to Facebook as misleading, false or offensive, but those ads were not taken down, and they remained approved and published for two months. Are you aware of that experiment, and have you taken any action since then to improve the processes around the authorising and removal of ads that are misleading, false or offensive?

Mr Machin: I'm happy to give a high-level answer and follow up with more detail to the committee about the specific timing in these particular instances. I think I'm broadly aware of the particular ads that you were talking about that were run as an experiment [inaudible] our systems. I'll begin with the caveat that obviously our technology is not perfect, and, despite significant investment, there can be instances where we rely on reports from users, the Electoral Commission or other trusted partners in order to detect particular ads. In order to detect ads that might violate our advertising policies, we rely on a combination of artificial intelligence and human review, and we prioritise those resources on the basis of advertisements that are being seen by the most people, because they can have the greatest impact.

My recollection of these particular ads is that at the time they had very low or close to zero 'likes' and very few people had seen those particular ads. Once a report was given to us, we moved to act quickly in order to address them. I'm very happy to follow up with some additional information about the time frame, and what occurred in that particular instance, for the committee's benefit.

Senator WATERS: Yes, please. Thanks very much.

Response:

We are aware of a Page called "Ozzie News Network" that ran eight ads designed to test our enforcement systems. These ads included:

- Four that included harmful COVID-19 misinformation (all of which violate our Ads Policies).
- Two ads which contained information about elections (one of which violates our Ads Policies and one of which does not).
- Two ads which contained general political claims (neither of which inherently violate our Ads Policies; however, one ad is eligible for fact-checking by our independent Third-Party Fact Checking partners and could be actioned if one of those partners chooses to fact-check them).

As outlined to the Committee, in order to detect ads that might violate our advertising policies, we rely on a combination of artificial intelligence and human review, and we prioritise those resources on the basis of advertisements that are being seen by the most people, because they can have the greatest impact. We also prioritise proactive enforcement on electoral-related ads around elections, and there were no Australian, state or territory elections in the first half of this year.

For this reason, the ads were not proactively detected (and user reviews had not yet been reviewed) because so few people saw them. At the time it was raised with us, the Page had less than ten likes or follows, and the number of people who had seen the ads was very low. In terms of the number of user reports we received:

- Three ads (including ads that violated our Ads Policies) did not receive any user reports.
- The remaining ads had been reported between one to five times each, but had not yet been reviewed prior to being alerted to us by a third party.

As soon as this experiment were raised with us by a third party, we reviewed and removed ads that violated our Ads Policies.

Our systems are not perfect and we acknowledge the important and vital work of civil society in applying external scrutiny to our systems.