

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

5 on 45: Facebook's Offensive Ad Targeting

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Intro: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings podcast network analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the trump administration.

Fellow: Hi, I am Nicol Turner-Lee. I'm a fellow at the Center for Technology Innovation; that sits within Brookings Governance Studies Program

And, I'm here today to talk about the recent occurrence that many of us may have read about with regards to Facebook's offensive ad targeting options. That has gone to actually exploit the experience of people that are of Jewish descent, people who are against Muslims etc... By just inputting keywords that say Jew haters or Muslim haters etc... into the Internet. And, so I'm here to talk a little bit about how did we get here and what do we do about it given the prevalence of hate speech right now online.

This occurrence is not unfamiliar to Facebook just not too long ago they were targeted because of the fact that they were allowing advertisers to discriminate against people based on their racial background and ethnicity. In this case, what we're seeing after Facebook essentially corrected that previous occurrence by making it pretty much illegal for advertisers to do such (and aligned with the Federal Housing Act and other civil rights laws). What we're seeing here is the use of information that appears within the profiles of Facebook users, that advertisers are mining to come up with these categories within the marketplace. Now, I could be very critical of the advertisers and for the sake of time I'm not going to be. But I think all of us are on the same page of why advertisers would want to actually have this information should be questionable. But this actually came out of an experiment that was conducted by Pro- Publica who was also the source to blow the lid on the last Facebook investigation. They essentially went in and using these ad words of "Jew-haters" and "anti-Muslims" and other

anti-Semitic code words. They were able to place ads that targeted people with those views and opinions. And, though the sample of people that they found were minuscule maybe 100 or 200. The bottom line is that they were able to do it and within minutes as the article actually writes they were approved for those ads.

This becomes a very complicated problem. On the one hand, it's a societal issue of why we actually have these public domains where people feel comfortable posting that content still remains to be a question. But, these also provide what I would like to consider teachable moments that allow us to also understand what can we do about this growing tension between First Amendment rights and what people feel is within their own right to actually harbor when it comes to supremacist ideas and values. And so let me first stay on the point of you know what did Facebook do about this and how did it get there. From what I understand this data was accessed through free text profile fields. Meaning just like Google ad words if you put in certain words categories that are related to that string will come up.

In the case of these profiles these are the content in which people like you and I actually provide to the social media platform the comfort of people using these types of statements really speaks volumes to the type of society in which we have become particularly the type of society that has become much more known to all of us since the advent of online media. And I would say that that is a broader societal issue that we need to continue to tackle. Do we police this type of hate speech that appears within the public domain the public marketplace? Who polices that? Do we want the government to come in and police that? Or is this the policing of people who are perhaps strange bedfellows in the Internet universe. I think either way we need the responsibility of platforms like Facebook to come to the table with civil rights social justice leaders, academia, government, and others to have a conversation on what we do about this. Clearly, we have to have more conversations about what we're doing about speech online and platform violations. That's the first thing. Secondly, we have to acknowledge that people today are finding all types of ways to promote this type of content because of the context of Charlottesville. We are actually seeing more of this perhaps not because it's not always been there but because it's become more transparent in the American consciousness, and we have to do more about that.

But third, we also have to think about the society in which we live that we've created and the extent to which these actors will exist in our civil world. And what do we do about that moving forward and what are the consequences if we remain quiet.

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