

DIGITAL POLITICAL ETHICS

CONCERNS FROM THE FIELD

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Over the course of the summer, we conducted interviews with 13 professionals working in digital politics, including both digital political consultants and those working at platform companies.

Two categories of comments emerged from our conversations. The first concerns **what practitioners want platforms to improve** in the context of electioneering. The second is **what practitioners themselves should do differently** or figure out a solution to as they move forward.

Throughout, a vision of **ethical behavior as that which is transparent and rule-following** emerged.

Broadly, the ethical discussion revolved around three ideas: **transparency, electoral integrity, and electoral fairness.**

CONSIDERATIONS RELATED TO PLATFORMS

TRANSPARENCY

Political practitioners want ads databases. They argued they were strategically useful even if they also disclosed their own strategy. They also stated that they were important to the public, even if they could be cumbersome to use. The main problem practitioners had with ads databases was that they were buggy and unreliable; if anything, they were willing to contribute relevant information to make databases work better.

Political practitioners stated that they desired the same data disclosed regarding paid communications as television advertising buys, including the source of the content, the size of the advertising buy, and the geographic region it is being displayed in. Practitioners are also largely supportive of some sort of accreditation for digital ad buyers (even beyond current models), and penalties for those who create content that breaks terms of service or community standards.

ELECTORAL INTEGRITY

Political practitioners called on platforms to do a better job validating advertisers, disclosing paid political advertising, and cracking down on fake accounts and content designed to mislead, confuse, or limit the electoral participation of voters (even those who were less clear that creating fake accounts is over the ethical line still want clearer rules).

Political practitioners called on platforms to instigate more formal processes with the political field to secure electoral integrity, including creating clear reporting mechanisms and collaboration to identify and address mis- and disinformation.

Political practitioners pointed to examples of states and countries that have created laws around ad disclosures, and major platforms that have simply decided to not offer advertising to political entities at all. They see these as having a cost to democracy and also hurting campaigns that are willing to do more to collect and use data ethically.

ELECTORAL FAIRNESS

Broadly, political practitioners pointed to platform rules, processes, and functions as raising issues for electoral fairness. For example, they pointed to the fact that changes in platform targeting capabilities, the increase of reporting or validation requirements, and ongoing changes in platform functionality often favors larger consultancies and political campaigns with the budgets and staffers to address the uncertain and changing landscape of social media platforms.

Political practitioners across the board argued that platforms' rules governing accounts and both paid (ads) and unpaid (posts) speech were often unclear and unevenly applied. Practitioners especially pointed to the need for clear and contestable platform rules and mechanism for disputing decisions, as well as better systems of equal enforcement.

CONSIDERATIONS RELATED TO PRACTITIONERS

TRANSPARENCY

Political practitioners, especially on the right, called for more transparency in the field in relation to digital advertising spending, including where and what the buy is and the margins that the practitioner was gaining.

Political practitioners across the board called for greater transparency for the public around list buying and selling, data aggregation, and data sharing, and consent. They saw this as both ethical and strategic.

Current practices were largely not seen as an ethical problem, though some raised concerns about how to meaningfully document the status of data (eg. is it legally and ethically collected).

Practitioners also called for greater disclosure of the content, authorship, and financials of both paid and seemingly 'organic' social media content.

ELECTORAL INTEGRITY

Political practitioners, especially on the left, highlighted a growing concern about mis- and disinformation, especially coming from elites and candidate campaigns, in addition to the need for authenticity in communications.

A sizeable number of practitioners pointed to the act of creating or buying fake accounts as behavior they would commit to calling out and not engaging in. This covered both "bots" and human-run "sockpuppet" profiles.

Many political practitioners more broadly raised the issue of creating a shared commitment to factual accuracy in the field, and the need for forms of professional sanction for violations of shared standards.

Across the field, practitioners called for a shared commitment to both call out and condemn foreign influence in elections.

Several practitioners agreed that messaging strategies of microtargeting and demobilizing turnout, which have been widely criticized in the press, are ethical as long as the data used is obtained legally, is accurate, and there is more transparency about the ads produced.

Practitioners raised the concern that digital tools have long enabled covert coordination between campaigns or between campaigns and PACs.

ELECTORAL FAIRNESS

Political practitioners on both sides of the aisle raised the issue of misrepresentation in digital appeals, especially fundraising (e.g.: emails claiming matching donations, misrepresentation of fundraising aims.)

GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Across all areas, the question of how to hold practitioners accountable was a concern. While answers are few at this time, practitioners see the following problems and possible solutions.

Political practitioners asked what analogies or lessons can be drawn from rules in other mediums, such as television, where networks have long vetted content for truth and enforced speech standards and there are more formalized reporting requirements governed by the FEC.

Political practitioners are ambivalent on an institutional body that sanctions bad actors. They sometimes raised the possibility, but were also quick to point to the irrelevance of existing codes of ethics (like AAPC's). In lieu of those, practitioners cited potential market mechanisms (such as not hiring bad actors in the future), and even parties as credentialing mechanisms.

All political practitioners cited, in one way or another, that the Federal Election Commission was not equipped to deal with the complex and constantly-changing digital ad environment, even outside of its current structural problem of not having a quorum.

A number of political practitioners cited that the press is an important mechanism of accountability, but changes in the news industry have mitigated the ability of the media to play this role. At the local level, there were concerns about shrinking newsrooms or shuttered publications. At the national level, practitioners were concerned that these stories would not be major enough stories to warrant coverage.