

Warner Urges Facebook, Twitter, & Google to Reinforce Efforts Against Political Content Abuse

Washington – U.S. Sen. Mark R. Warner (D-VA), former telecommunications entrepreneur and Vice Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, today urged Facebook, Twitter, and Google to implement robust accountability and transparency standards ahead of the November election, including requirements outlined in the Honest Ads Act – bipartisan legislation championed by Sen. Warner to help prevent foreign interference in elections and improve the transparency of online political advertisements.

In individual letters to Facebook, Google, and Twitter, Sen. Warner detailed the various ways in which each company continues to contribute to the spread of disinformation, viral misinformation, and voter suppression efforts. He also warned about the imminent risk of bad actors once again weaponizing American-bred social media tools to undermine democracy ahead of the November election, and urged each company to take proactive measures to safeguard against these efforts.

In his letter to Facebook, Sen. Warner criticized the platform's efforts to label manipulated or synthetic content, describing these as "wholly inadequate." He also raised alarm with instances of Facebook's amplification of harmful content.

"The pervasiveness of political misinformation on Facebook – and the ways in which your company chooses to amplify it – was on display just this week, when a baseless conspiracy about Vice President Biden was highlighted on Facebook's own News Tab, a result of Facebook choosing to amplify The Daily Caller as a verified news publisher and fact-checker despite its long track record of promoting false information," wrote Sen. Warner in a letter to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg. "More broadly, Facebook has repeatedly failed to ensure that its existing policies on political advertising are being enforced – an issue that my colleagues and I recently raised in a separate context relating to Facebook's failure to enforce its policies against violent far-right organizations. Facebook has long been accused of facilitating divisive advertisements from dark money groups. A recent report by Avaaz revealed that despite Facebook's claims to prohibit false and misleading information in ads by outside political groups, it allowed hundreds of such ads in key swing states earlier this month to be run by super PACs. And despite your personal pledge to stamp out voter suppression efforts on Facebook, a recent report by ProPublica revealed that voting misinformation continues to flourish on Facebook."

Similarly, in a letter to Google, Sen. Warner raised concern with the company's efforts to combat harmful misinformation – particularly disinformation about voting, spread by right-leaning YouTube channels. He also criticized the comprehensiveness of Google's ad archive, which presently excludes issue ads.

"Concerns with the comprehensiveness of Google's archive extend beyond simply Google's under-inclusive policies. Prominent researchers have identified multiple glaring examples where

qualifying political advertisers have been omitted from the ad archive... Moreover, a marketer recently demonstrated how easy it is to circumvent Google's verification systems for political ads – running a series of search ads, targeted to run alongside election-related search queries, that attacked Presidential candidates without being included in Google's ads database or being accompanied by a disclaimer," wrote Sen. Warner in a letter to Google CEO Sundar Pichai. "Further, researchers found a particularly egregious example of election disinformation – spread via Google search ads – that ostensibly targeted to users looking for information about voter fraud. The ad would not appear in Google's ad archive, given its exclusion of issue ads; moreover, the ad clearly violated ad policies relating to "claims that are demonstrably false and could significantly undermine participation or trust in an electoral or democratic process." The same researchers have found similar ads promoting false information about the election – ostensibly indicating a systemic failure by Google in enforcing its advertising policies."

In his letter to Twitter, which has banned paid political content and placed restrictions on cause-based advertising, Sen. Warner noted that doctored political content continues to spread organically without adequate labeling that slows its spread or contextualizes it for users.

"I ask that Twitter examine and strengthen its synthetic and manipulated media policy as it applies to political misinformation – particularly in the context of organic content," wrote Sen. Warner in a letter to Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey. "I appreciate the leadership Twitter has demonstrated to take steps against the promotion of false, deceptive, and manipulated political content; however, more must be done to secure our political discourse from disinformation on digital platforms like yours. Under your company's existing policy, manipulated media has still reached millions of users with only limited response from your platform."

In all three letters, Sen. Warner urged the companies to reinforce their efforts against abuse of paid and organic content policies, and to more aggressively identify, label, and remove manipulated or synthetic media to prevent efforts to amplify disinformation by Russia and other bad actors, both foreign and domestic. Sen. Warner also posed a series of different questions for each company on a number of issues, including the availability of political ad targeting information, the enforcement of companies' own policies, the adoption of a bounty to remunerate researchers who identify policy violations, and the measures being taken to slow the coordinated dissemination of deceptive, synthetic, or manipulated media.

The Honest Ads Act, as introduced by Sens. Warner, Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) and Lindsey Graham (R-SC), would safeguard the integrity of American democracy by requiring large online platforms to maintain public records of advertisers who purchase political ads. It would:



U.S. Senator Mark Warner

Amend the definition of 'electioneering communication' in the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002, to include paid internet and digital advertisements.

Require digital platforms with at least 50,000,000 monthly visitors to maintain a public file of all electioneering communications purchased by a person or group who spends more than \$500.00 total on ads published on their platform. This file would contain a digital copy of the advertisement, a description of the audience the advertisement targets, the number of views generated, the dates and times of publication, the rates charged, and the contact information of the purchaser.

Require online platforms to make all reasonable efforts to ensure that foreign individuals and entities are not purchasing political advertisements in order to influence the American electorate.

Sen. Warner has written and introduced a series of bipartisan bills designed to protect consumers and reduce the power of giant social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Google. Among these are the Designing Accounting Safeguards to Help Broaden Oversight And Regulations on Data (DASHBOARD) Act – bipartisan legislation to require data harvesting companies to tell consumers and financial regulators exactly what data they are collecting from consumers and how it is being leveraged by the platform for profit; the Deceptive Experiences To Online Users Reduction (DETOUR) Act – bipartisan legislation to prohibit large online platforms from using deceptive user interfaces to trick consumers into handing over their personal data; and the Augmenting Compatibility and Competition by Enabling Service Switching (ACCESS) Act – bipartisan legislation to encourage market-based competition to dominant social media platforms by requiring the largest companies to make user data portable – and their services interoperable – with other platforms, and to allow users to designate a trusted third-party service to manage their privacy and account settings, if they so choose.

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