In November, Matt and Daniel co-authored an op-ed for The New York Times, in response to Twitter’s announcement that it would ban nearly all political ads for the 2020 election. They recommended four solutions to the challenges presented by political ads on social media platforms, without banning them altogether.

- Matt and Daniel's Op-Ed in the NYT: [Four Ways to Fix Social Media’s Political Ads Problem – Without Banning Them](#)
- [Link to Jack Dorsey’s tweets on the policy](#)

**Transcript**

Matt Perault  0:00
Welcome to TBD: Technology By Design, I’m your host, Matt Perault.

On a rainy Thursday afternoon a few weeks ago, my friend Daniel sent me a text message. He told me to keep my eye on the news, a major tech platform would be making a big announcement. A few minutes later, Twitter announced that was going to ban all political advertising. Daniel's a friend. He's also an associate professor at UNC's Hussman School of Journalism and Media, and he's an expert in political communications. We agree that Twitter's decision was the wrong one. Political advertising certainly has downsides, but it also has a lot of benefits. A ban gets rid of the bad stuff, but it gets rid of the good stuff, too. So, he and I wrote an op-ed for the New York Times on the decision, and we recommended four steps that Twitter could have taken instead of banning political ads entirely. We invited Daniel on the podcast to talk about it in more detail. Let's get started.

Matt Perault  1:10
Welcome Daniel Kreiss, associate professor at UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media. Welcome to the podcast.

Daniel Kreiss  1:16
Great to be here.

Matt Perault  1:18
So, talk to me about Twitter and their advertising policy. They just rolled out in the last couple of weeks a new policy on political advertising a couple of weeks ago, they first announced they were going to ban all political advertising. Then a few days ago, they came out with further details on the policy. So, tell us about it.

Daniel Kreiss  1:38
Well, so it was originally announced by Jack Dorsey and a series of tweets that talked about various forms of social harm that political advertising brought to the platform, in
his view, and basically made an argument that if they were fighting misinformation, in other ways, they weren't going to let people pay to circulate more and more misinformation, so, and then and Jack's initial series of tweets said that they would announce a policy on November 15th, which they did. So they gave us a little more detail. But all official campaign committees campaigns, political candidates for higher office, are banned entirely from running political ads on Twitter. And then there's a set of complicated rules around advocacy organizations and nonprofits where it looks like at least initially, they will be banned from using micro targeting and other tools, but still allowed to run ads but also provided that they're not pushing for any specific legislative outcomes. That's kind of the understanding. Now, we haven't seen a formal written policy. This is what various journalism organizations have written about because there's nothing that was official from a company announced as of yet, at least, that I'm aware of.

Matt Perault  3:02
So, examples of each of those things would be a ban on candidate ads is you can no longer say vote for Trump in 2020, or vote for Elizabeth Warren as the Democratic nominee for 2020.

Daniel Kreiss  3:14
Yeah.

Matt Perault  3:14
And then on the issue outside that is, that is what that's Human Rights Campaign saying you're not Human Rights Campaign is not permitted to say "support gay marriage in this ballot initiative." But they could presumably say "support gay marriage.”

Daniel Kreiss  3:29
We assume they had a very complicated at least in terms of the reporting the it was a complicated statement where advocacy organizations could speak about issues relating to their values, but they couldn't push for any specific legislative outcome. So, you're allowed to say climate change is bad, but you're not allowed to support specific legislation designed to combat climate change, which makes no sense at all.

Matt Perault  3:55
So, when you so so backing up to what you said about the kind of base, the core rationale for this approach. You said in Jack Dorsey's initial set of tweets, he said, the risk of misinformation is so high, we need to ban political advertising. That sounds great. But what's the downside of this of the ban as their as they're approaching it?

Daniel Kreiss  4:16
Well, so I would say there's a couple of downsides. The first is, Jack's view is not empirically informed. So there has in Jack seems to have the assumption that political ads are full of tons of misinformation. Based on our best research, that's just simply not the case, A. B, one big downside is that in getting rid of all political advertising, it means that people with already really large audiences that don't have to pay for reach, like the
president, are fine to say what he wants to say on Twitter, but nonprofit organizations or advocacy organizations or challenger candidates, without that really big reach to start out with, can't counter any of the misinformation that comes from the president or anyone else with already a huge platform on on Twitter. So it's very much tilted in the direction of elites, elites with pre existing large audiences, the ones that don't have to advertise on Twitter. And in fact, the ironic thing is that President Trump doesn't advertise on Twitter because he doesn't need to... He just has a soapbox. But that's exactly the sort of things that you know Jack Dorsey's decrying in other situations.

Matt Perault  5:24
So, um, so can we just, I'd like to understand a little bit more about what you are getting at when you talk about in the state of empirical research. This is what you do in your profession. I'm a policy guy, I would sort of different skill set, you have this ability to conduct and review real research in the field that shines a data spotlight on this and I've heard you say in a number of contexts, not just today, you've talked about whether arguments are empirically based or not what's supported in the research and what's not. This is your specialty political communications, particularly in emerging forms of new types of media. What does the research show about political advertising that's relevant to Twitter's decision?

Daniel Kreiss  6:07
Great. So, a couple of things. First of all, we know for instance, that digital ads are primarily mobilization tools. So, what we tend to see are like lots of appeals to sign up for an email list, lots of appeals, around like identity consonant bases and politics. So, Kamala Harris, for instance, advertising to women in early caucus states, for instance, or Hillary Clinton during 2016, making a pro choice argument through digital ads targeted to other women. Often lots of appeals to volunteer, lots of appeals to give money early on. There's tons of online petitions that are designed to get data from from people, supporters, so that you can go back and mobilize them in another way such as through email. So primarily mobilizational appeals and there's been really great research by people that like the Wesleyan media project, Erica Franklin Fowler and her colleagues, that have looked in explicitly compared ads on TV to ads on Facebook. And what they find is that digital ads lower the cost of advertising. So, a broader array of candidates can actually advertise and

Matt Perault  7:20
...and when you say lower the cost relative to what?

Daniel Kreiss  7:23
Television.

Matt Perault  7:24
Okay, so newspapers as well?

Daniel Kreiss  7:27
Um, that's a good question. TV has generally been the benchmark. Newspaper ads would be much cheaper in print, than TV. So, TV ad, you need often a big production budget, you need to buy the 30 second spot. So, it is a very capital-intensive way of engaging in political communication compared to digital ads. Newspapers would fall somewhere in the middle, to just buy like a full-page ad in that time.

Matt Perault  7:54
And when you talk about cost, and so we're really specific about it. What you mean is how much you pay to reach certain number of people? How is cost typically thought of?

Daniel Kreiss  8:04
Yeah, so that's a really good question too. It's, it's how much you pay to reach certain types of people with certain demographic or otherwise market characteristics. There's less efficiency in television advertising for instance, because you're forced to speak to broader audiences... So, it's less efficient, there's more costs on that end, but also production costs are higher. The cost in terms of, like, the labor and the time and resources that it takes to produce intelligent advertisement or higher, so every step along the way, the costs are higher.

Matt Perault  8:40
So, if what you most care about is paying a certain amount to make sure that a person who you want to reach sees that... it's more expensive in TV than in most digital forms of advertising.

Daniel Kreiss  8:53
Absolutely. Absolutely.

Matt Perault  8:54
And so, and so I interrupted you in the middle.

Daniel Kreiss  8:57
Well, so good analogy of ads, in some ways, is direct mail. So direct mail operations, which really came to prominence in the 70s and 80s, very data driven practice, very much targeted down to the individual within households, based on pre-existing political data, all happens through the mail, generally, much lower costs, only takes you the cost of, you know, printing a flyer, actually sending it out to the USPS. And getting it out... So digital ads sort of take that to the next level through social media platforms.

Matt Perault  9:30
Right. And I assume the inefficiencies in direct mail are things like the mail actually doesn't end up in the hands of the person who's who you want to read it. Someone has moved, it gets inadvertently thrown out. And I would think that targeting practices on digital platforms tend to be somewhat more efficient. It's not that they're perfectly efficient, but more efficient than dealing with a physical piece of mail.

Daniel Kreiss  9:53
Yeah, that's right. Although you also have I mean, all the platforms deal with non-
personally identifiable information. The there's a complex way of matching target list that
campaigns produce with things like Facebook accounts, for instance, that match rates
not perfect. So there are, I mean, there's definitely inefficiencies in the system. But,
yeah, I mean, at the end of the day, we would sort of say that if you could, if you have a
good list of people that can be matched with existing Facebook accounts, you can pretty
reliably deliver that information to whoever you're targeting.

Matt Perault  10:34
Okay. And so, you were saying, you were talking about lower costs in the context of kind
of this broader picture of what advertising online looks like relative to TV? Generally
innocuous, or I shouldn't say innocuous, generally, beneficial, sort of basic forms of
mobilization, basic forms of developing engagement with your desired target audience.

Daniel Kreiss  10:58
Yeah, well, here's where it gets complicated, right? So like scholars have debated about
this for a really long time. Right? So, is political advertising beneficial for democracy or
not? It all depends on the normative lens through which you look at these sorts of
questions,

Matt Perault  11:14
Which means what?

Daniel Kreiss  11:15
So, this is sort of like what would good democratic practice be? On the one hand are
sort of critics who say that, you know, hyper targeted appeals or even TV broadcasts
our advertising tends to incentivize simplistic political communication messages, it tends
to frustrate democratic deliberation. You know, people aren't learning good substantive
policy information. They're not encouraged to debate. It's mostly about manipulating the
public and cheapening or deadening politics. On the other side of things would be
people who say, and I think a lot of the empirical literature bears this out, most people
don't intrinsically care a whole lot about politics. Most people are inattentive. Most
people choose to not consume political information; therefore, political ads are one way
that people get actual substantive information about issues that are on the ballot or
candidates that are running for office. And micro targeting in particular, would make
politics more relevant to people. It would help people see political messages who
wouldn't otherwise be exposed. And therefore, things like micro targeting actually would
do things like boost turnout in elections. And I mean, I, it's tough to actually narrow this
down and study it from a clear causal perspective, because the way digital advertising
works, it's not always very transparent, so we don't have really good field studies. But
we do have some limited evidence, for instance, that micro targeting ads does actually
have the capacity to boost turnout. There was a recent study by Katherine Hansen and
her and her colleague that actually showed that micro targeting in the context of a
competitive election boosted younger voter turnout. That was a controlled field study.
So, we do have limited evidence that this is, this is what this is the function of ads serve.
So those are sort of two broad positions. And there's obviously a lot of debate over
ultimately, like, what should be ideal democratic practice, or what should democracy look like?

Matt Perault 13:21
So, it seems like obviously, in an ideal world, we would just remove all the use cases we don't like. And we keep all the use cases we do like and it sounds like the empirical research in the field has unpacked both like it's shed a spotlight on some of the things that are problematic about digital advertising and that's also quantified, in some really helpful ways, what the benefits are. Has there been research done on the cost versus the benefits? Because I think when you look at Twitter's policy, the challenge of it is it eliminates all use cases, or maybe not all given the narrow issue adds exception. But it eliminates most of the uses. And that would be a good thing, if on balance political advertising on Twitter is bad. And it would be a good it would be a, it would be a desirable thing if on balance Twitter, political advertising on Twitter is, is bad and it would be a bad thing if on balance political advertising Twitter is good. So, is there research that sheds a light on how those two things look against each other?

Daniel Kreiss 14:19
We've never really had that case exist before. So, like, I think that's part of the challenge here, right? Like we, it's, we can't ever have a world where, we can't ever have a world where it's sort of, we can test sort of what happens before and after Twitter's ad policy, right sort of takes effect without being able to control for all the other ways that campaigns are also hitting voters. And one of the challenges again, with micro targeting has been that we haven't really been able to easily generate clear control cases in terms of which people are being targeted in which people aren't. What we do know is sort of in the aggregate, how campaigns tend to use that things like digital ads on Facebook, for instance. And, you know, there's some debate on this, but some recent research by Erica Franklin Fowler and her colleagues have shown that, for instance, like appeals look a little bit different on Facebook than on TV. So, on Facebook appeals tend to be a little bit more partisan. That's fitting with sort of the mobilization element of thing.

Matt Perault 15:22
What do you mean when you say appeal?

Daniel Kreiss 15:24
So, this is like, what's the content of that message? Does that message asked you to do something in particular? there's less persuasion attempts on digital and social media, because you're kind of already speaking to the converted... at the same time, right on TV ads, because you have to speak more, less efficiently to broader audiences, you're actually engaging and more persuasion appeals. And again, it's like depends on where you draw the line. Preaching to the converted actually means that advertising then would have more mobilization effects and less manipulation effects. You're actually targeting people who are already going to agree with you in one way or another.

Matt Perault 16:04
Right.
It all depends on where you sit whether that's a good thing or not. From democracy, maybe that's assisting with polarization. We have other experimental evidence that suggests that highly targeted ads might increase polarization. On the flip side, it also undoubtedly increases participation and that's another democratic value. So I think different scholars would draw different lines to sort of say like where they would, what would be healthy for democracy... at the same time is one of the things that we also know and this is the cost piece that hasn't been studied extensively yet, but we can at least logically think about is that if digital advertising lowers the cost of engaging in it, this would mostly hurt challengers this would hurt people who wouldn't be able to get their message out otherwise because larger candidates can still black at the airwaves or YouTube TV or like however else people are consuming information on various platforms.

So, is that the main thing driving your assessment of what Twitter has done? So, I'm just thinking back to when you and I initially talked about Twitter's decision. So, I think it was a rainy Thursday afternoon. You said in a couple of minutes, a major digital ad, a major platform is going to come out with a really important statement.

Yeah. I remember that.

Then the tweets come out, they drop. They drop this this bombshell in the digital platform world. And your response and my response were both initially negative. I'm sort of curious. You just now going into a lot of detail about like the empirical basis for some of your reactions, but what was your reaction? Why is it negative? Because it seems to me like part of what you're saying is how you evaluate whether digital advertising is good is bad, really depends on the kind of world you want? Yeah. Are you more concerned about manipulation? Are you more concerned about mobilization? Are you concerned about certain types of causes or are others but on balance, it seemed like your view was, this approach by Twitter is problematic? Why was it you had that reaction?

Okay, so I would put that kind of in three buckets... first, based on existing research, we would, it would suggest that doing with political ads entirely would favor incumbents and elites, over challengers, etc. That's number one. I think number two, Twitter would be in the position to decide what is political and what is not. And I don't think, frankly, the company will be very competent at drawing those lines. And I don't think it has the capacity or the legitimacy to draw those lines. I think, number three, you'd have to look at from the perspective of it particularly by drawing certain lines around what's political or not, would hurt advocacy organizations and other causes who are going up against well-established interests, especially commercial interests. So, the great example here
is like, you know, BP can push petroleum and fossil fuel based products to their hearts' desire, because it's a commercial product... So, you know, companies can push SUVs that are gas guzzlers.

Matt Perault  19:07
Yeah.

Daniel Kreiss  19:08
But nonprofit organizations fighting for climate change will be barred from advertising in certain ways, let's say pushing higher fuel efficiency standards, or carbon taxes, for instance, would all be off the table. So, Twitter is actually making a political decision by its failure, in essence, to support more broad political advertising.

Matt Perault  19:30
Yeah, I have the same initial reaction, even though I obviously had a sense of the difference between organic content and advertising content. I think it was when we started you and I started talking about this that I started looking at specific examples of it and that really made it feel different to me. So, the one of the first things I did was go to the Smith and Wesson Twitter account. Yeah. And they're not allowed to advertise on Twitter, as is, actually because you can't you can't advertise firearms on Twitter, but they can have organic content. So, they can just post about their products. And so, one of the initial ones that I saw was a weapon that when I first looked at it was like, "oh, wow, this could be used to kill someone." And the thing that they're not advertising, but they are posting about free of charge is about a snag free hammer. So essentially, the ability to fire this weapon more efficiently. It's accompanied by a very shiny photo of a gleaming gun. And I was. And so, my first thought was, that's a very powerful thing. It's a powerful thing for a company that has lots of people following it. But under this new policy, Moms Demand Action can't respond to that content with anything that pushes for specific advocacy. So, I guess they could probably...

Daniel Kreiss  20:42
Through an ad...

Matt Perault  20:43
Yeah, sorry. Right. They could, they could post it. They could advertise against it. And just claim that shiny weapons are a bad thing, but they couldn't have a photo of a shiny weapon and say, and support a ban on firearms and Congress.

Daniel Kreiss  20:55
Yeah, yeah, under this under this new Twitter rule. I mean, that to me is what's incoherent about the policy? And it's kind of like, what gives Twitter right? The legitimacy to sort of make this broad set of distinctions around sort of what political information people are going to see. And I would say like, even more broadly than that, the policy did not seem well thought out. There were no details in the initial announcement. It felt more like, you know, Jack's personal feeling about something that's bad, rather than something that was carefully reasoned and thought through. And in fact, even in the
announcement on Friday, which again, was done to a call of various journalists. The
details were confusing. They were they were unclear details. They were confusing
details. To me, what's the most breathtaking is to say that you can talk about issues to
your heart’s extent, but don't talk about specifically what we should do about them?

Matt Perault  21:53
Right.

Daniel Kreiss  21:53
So, you're not allowed to talk about legislative outcomes legislative outcome. I mean,
that's the bread and butter of politics. That's right way democratic systems work. It
would all be great if we got in a room and just shared our feelings all the time. But if
there was like no real course of action, something to get behind, a specific bill, you take
all the real pieces of democracy, sort of. I mean, that's a key tool for creating legislation
is what legislators do when you have advocacy groups push for... To take all that off the
table, frankly, just also rewards the status quo. I mean, this is why I'm really glad to
Facebook and Google have not followed suit. Because Twitter's policy is just ill advised.

Matt Perault  22:32
Yep. So I want to get to our recommendations for addressing this in a second. But
before we do, I just want to unpack a little bit more the decision-making process that
Twitter might have been engaged in, so it's easy to sit on the sidelines and sort of
criticize a company for making a decision that's made. And both of us think this is the
wrong decision. But I think it's also really important to think about why they would have
made it and I can understand why, given all the press attention on this issue, all the
criticism that tech companies have had for the political advertising policies they have in
place, it makes sense to me that Twitter would sort of throw up its hands and say, we're
no longer gonna have we're no longer going to have political advertising on the platform.
And I think that's problematic, not because Twitter can't go and make whatever decision
it wants to make. But because I think there's such a significant sense in reading the
press, that I think the benefits of political advertising are lower than they are and the
costs are higher. And that's coupled with pressure from policymakers. You have Ellen
Weintraub, the chair of the Federal Elections Commission, who is writing a book, who
wrote an op ed in the Washington Post calling for a ban on micro targeting. And so
there's this intense pressure from the press and from policymakers to permit less in
political advertising. And so it's against that backdrop that that Twitter's making a
decision that makes a lot of sense to me. It makes sense to me that they would make
that decision. I don't think it's a good thing. I think you might disagree. What do you
think about it?

Daniel Kreiss  24:02
Well, I think so. First of all, I think the point of agreement that we both have is, is that the
Federal Election Commission needs to do its job it needs to set the rules around
transparency and disclosure, it needs to develop clear standards for public disclosure of
campaign advertisements and advocacy, organization advertisements, they failed in all
these things. We haven't had a serious conversation around things like political privacy,
or even like, you know, safeguards against things like political data breaches and the like. So, the FTC needs to do its job. The second thing I guess, I would say is that, to me, the decision-making onus is is on these companies, that they have largely, I think, sort of been very reactive and failed to sort of proactively outline what principles that they have. And I think one of the fascinating questions here is actually like how Twitter came to make this particular decision.

Matt Perault  25:00
Right.

Daniel Kreiss  25:00
Um, it could be it could have been the result of a long and substantive debate sort of within the company or it could have just been like, you know, Jack decided that he was going to want his platform to live out his own particular values. Frankly, we saw this with Mark Zuckerberg making the decision around like their Supreme Court for speech that was, at least according to reporting, it was kind of done in the moment on stage at an event and then oriented the company in that particular direction. I don't know. I mean, it just didn't seem all that that well thought out. It felt very reactive. I mean, I guess what I would say is like, I don't disagree that regulatory companies need to do their job. I also see the forms of accountability, such as through press pressure as being an important part of democracy in its own right, right. Yes, I would say that companies have a certain responsibility to think through principles to make evidence-based decisions to have a framework that guides what they do to draw on research, and other interest. To me, this felt more like a PR move that Jack sort of made because they don't really have a lot of revenue coming from political ads anyway.

Matt Perault  26:04
Right? To me, I guess the thing that's feels problematic is Congress could pass laws, in theory, prohibiting political advertising on digital platforms, but the First Amendment bars them from doing so. And I think a lot of people have just said that instead of this if it's a bad thing, but there are reasons that the first amendment would prohibit the government from imposing those kinds of restrictions on speech, and there are very good reasons for it, including many of the things that you and I have talked about the downsides of this decision. So, if Congress can't do it, then next you would probably look at the FEC and the FEC, obviously, still has those first amendment limitations. Yeah. But in addition to that, they also politically have been unable to build consensus, so as to tackle some of the difficult issues that you raised. I'm not sure if in the absence of the political consensus, and when you have a constitutional bar on government from taking certain action, we should put all of the weight on companies to make these decisions on their own. One thing, one interesting thing for me is I, when I, in my last year and a half at Facebook, I was working on antitrust issues. And people were really concerned about digital platforms accumulating all this power. And so, what we're basically saying here is, well, Congress can act and the FEC is essentially, is essentially entirely impotent in the area for which they've been given authority. So, we think it's great for members of Congress to be making speeches of this that get picked up in the press and the chair of the FEC, to be writing op eds about it. And then there will be all this pressure and even
though government couldn't act, we really want to put all the responsibility on platforms to make decisions on their own. And as you said, my guess is that the company didn't make a decision in one second, because their CEO has an idea on a whim. But whether it's a decision was made in that form or over a long and considered process. It's still a lot of weight to put on a company to make that decision in the absence of the ability of the government to act.

Daniel Kreiss  27:54
Yeah, I mean, I agree with you 100%. I mean, I would also say though, that from a commercial perspective, Facebook and Twitter and Google do have the right, and likely the responsibility of their shareholders, and to their other user base, to decide what should be the boundaries around the sorts of ads that that people see. Let's so let's play the hypothetical out, right. Like, let's say, you get really turned off and you're less interested in using Facebook, if you see lots of extremist political ads? Should Facebook make a decision that like, if we see large amounts of our user base is turned off by these extremist political messages, they don't want to see him anymore? It's hurting our bottom line. Yeah, absolutely. I think Facebook should make that decision, sort of set sensible guidelines that and again, I mean, I think part of the problem here is that it's so extreme like, I do think that there's a number of middle ground solutions, like that we called for Yeah, live. Where you can sort of mitigate some of the downsides, but while also like very much sort of respecting the idea that most people would say that we should have a healthy democratic debate and ads are one way that candidates put messages in front of voters.

Matt Perault  29:11
So that's a great segue. So, we've talked about challenges in the decision that Twitter made and what some of the downsides of that might be. But we wrote this op-ed piece. It was published in the in the New York Times that looked at some of those downsides, but then also went into four possible solutions that companies could think about that we were thinking we're a middle ground, they're not going to ban political advertising, which we both think is problematic, but they also would address some of the downsides. So, should we just Marshall through what the other ones were?

Daniel Kreiss  29:40
Well, so let's lead with the one that we should have led with if we didn't feel like re-editing.

Matt Perault  29:44
Okay, great. So which one is that?

Daniel Kreiss  29:46
So that's the counter speech one.

Matt Perault  29:47
Yeah. Which was our latest edition, which is probably why it was almost in there.
Yeah. Yeah. And our best but by the time you start the editing process, you can’t go back and rewrite everything.

But

Yeah, exactly. Yeah. So, talk about that one.

Right. So, the one of the big challenges with microtargeting has been that it doesn't easily facilitate counter speech. So, one of the one of the values of the First Amendment, and one of the rationales behind having unfettered political debate is the idea that, you know, false speech can be met with counter speech, or that, you know, arguments in favor of one side can be met by the strongest arguments at the second side, and people can make decisions for themselves. The problem with a lot of micro targeting and other database forms of political communication is that it makes counter speech much harder, much more difficult than if you're speaking on TV, for instance, where you can see what certain people are saying. So, in that world, what we proposed was, you know, companies like Facebook, for instance, could make the targeting universes that various campaigns are sending advertisements to available to rivals for the same office to also target so you say the exact same things to the same groups of I'm sorry, you could say different things, the same groups of voters to try to meet what your opponent is saying,

Right and then facilitate, at least in theory, a more robust marketplace of ideas. So, if we're on the you could go in two directions, you could say, the best way to protect people. And the best way to promote expression is to narrow the forms of speech, because we want, we want to make sure that any speech is on a platform is good speech. That's one approach. The approach that we're pushing at is the best way to have a robust debate is to actually facilitate a robust debate, the best way to have expression is to ensure that as many voices as possible can speak. And hopefully, by having as many voices in the public domain as possible, you can people will be able to make their own decisions about what ideas are the best ones...

I think the best counter exist. So, the best example of this is during the 2016 election. You know, the Trump team was reputed to have sent messages with Hillary Clinton's super predator comments, from the 90s, targeted to African Americans in cities like Philadelphia, and this is something that that the digital team on to Trump sort of alleged after the campaign. People said, "Oh, that's vote suppression." It's basically negative advertising designed to make some core group of voters for your rival less likely to vote, less likely to be enthused. I think the solution to that is, if Hillary Clinton could see that those, if Clinton's team could see those were the ads that were being run, right, what she would want to do is, is counter the super predator remarks, with, I don't know,
maybe a positive message about things that she’s done in the African American community or, you know, positive policies for that community around things like criminal justice reform. Something that would be able to counter that speech and hopefully re mobilize those voters in certain way.

Matt Perault  32:52
Right.

Daniel Kreiss  32:53
So, I that's why I think that's the so rather than waiting into content, what you're actually doing is just enabling rivals for the same office to better vet and better contest one another's ideas.

Matt Perault  33:06
Yep. I think the public chatter and microtargeting sometimes leaves the wrong impression. Sometimes I think people make it sound like microtargeting is the way through is the way that you are able to reach a certain voter. So, if I can target Daniel, I can target him with a unique message just for Daniel. And, and no one else will know. And it's a problem because no one else can reach him. And I, as I thought and more and more about the issue, I thought, it's mainly primarily about efficiency. So, it's about being able to pay the least amount of money possible to ensure I can reach Daniel, because I could always I could, if I could target you individually. With a certain message. Someone who wants to reach you with a different message could always instead of targeting Daniel, they could target professors at UNC or they could target people who live in Chapel Hill or they could target people who live in North Carolina or they could target all men in the United States. Or they could target all men in the world. So, it would always be possible for them to reach you. The thing that microtargeting enables is that they can reach you for the lowest possible cost, right?

Daniel Kreiss  34:12
Well, kind of I mean, so nobody ever runs individualized advertising, right? Because the cost of doing that is astronomical, you'd have to develop, what? Millions of individual pieces of creative content, how would you ever test whether it works or not? So right, but what you would do is just figure out like, how do you aggregate Daniel into larger groups of people who look like Daniel and salient characteristic?

Matt Perault  34:35
Right, right.

But the thing that people are, I think, are really concerned about is targeting one certain class of voters by race and one very narrow area. And I guess my broader point is, but you could, you could always reach those people if you just target a broader group. So, if I knew that some group if I knew that the Trump campaign and I disagree, I disagree strongly with the Trump campaign in the message that they're trying to use with voters. They've targeted some narrow group and I don't know exactly what it is, I could always target a broader one and reach the same people. When you're talking about counter
speech and micro targeting, what you're really talking about is transparency. So, do I know what the Trump campaign has run to those voters? Do I know what the messages and do I know that they've run that ad, and then facilitating counter speech with the same level of efficiency? So, if I know their audience, or if I have the functional ability to target that audience, then I can then have access to the same efficiency? In other words, I can pay the same amount to reach the same voters.

Daniel Kreiss  35:33
Exactly right. And it's contingent on two things, right. It's contingent on seeing the ads that were run, which has only been put in place since 2016...

Matt Perault  35:41
And that's through the ad's archives...

Daniel Kreiss  35:42
...through the voluntaristic, right ads archives that all the major companies have set up on their own on their own dime without any other regulation. And then it would be building on the audience targeting at the back end of that.

Matt Perault  35:58
So, our proposal here is that you could go into the ad's archive, you could see that Trump campaign or the Warren campaign or the Biden campaign has run an ad, you would see in the ad's archive the number of impressions that's currently in the in the ads archive,

Daniel Kreiss  36:10
Potentially, yes, that right? Yeah.

Matt Perault  36:12
So, the number of impressions are there. And you would say, based on that, I decide I want to send a counter message, the same group of people. And our proposal is you could push a button, and you could get access to them, that same group of people, you would essentially get their exact same audience targeting audience but no personally identifiable information or no specifics of that targeting would get passed to you. So it's a Privacy Information, no strategic information. So it's a privacy protective way and of strategic information protecting way to achieve counter speech. Okay, so that was a recommendation three should be recommendation one. Yes. Let's go back to the top recommendation one.

Daniel Kreiss  36:49
Yeah. So recommendation one was to move from data opacity to data transparency, right. So at least before Twitter's ad ban all of these major platforms were basically, for all intents and purposes, practically data agnostic when it came to the sorts of data that people were bringing to their platforms to target on. They might have had various guidelines about like what's legitimate targeting universes, in essence, but for all the major companies, there's no practical way of checking that. So, you were in his odd
situation where, based simply on targeting data, political campaigns and advocacy groups could actually undermine platforms own stated policies and community standards. By like finding, let's say, racist groups of voters that you were going to send advertising to, which undermines their own standards. So, having more transparency in a system where those companies were actually vetting those targeting lists. Maybe they were setting parameters around them, to make sure that they accorded with their other stated values or their missions or their standards would actually help them ensure, right, that they were policing, in essence, uses of their platform to make sure they fit within their already existing policies.

Matt Perault  38:06
Yep. And so, I think the use case that we were trying to think of addressing would be something like someone who said, let's say there's, let's say, in a national election in November, you're trying to make sure that you suppress turnout of black voters in Michigan. And let's say there's a, it's a cloudy day there, maybe it's potentially going to snow, maybe there's a potential for freezing rain, if you just tweeted to, if you just tweet it to a broad group, "likelihood of adverse weather to get today probably want to stay home dangerous to get to the polls." That's not a violation of Twitter's policies or wouldn't be a violation of Facebook's policies. If you show that message only to a group of black voters, then that would violate Facebook's prohibition on voter suppression. And so is that the kind of use case that

Daniel Kreiss  38:54
Assuming Yeah, that's right. Yeah. So you'd have to then I mean, I think even the better the better example would be, take out any mentions of the polls whatsoever and just say "very adverse weather, right, like stay home today stay off the roads." If that was run to a very targeted, you know, protected category sort of group of voters that exists on Facebook currently, that's when that should raise red flags for the company.

Matt Perault  39:19
Right. So, in general, that wouldn't run afoul of the company's terms. But if you're bringing your own audience list to it, and therefore able to target in a way that has the effect of suppressing certain voters or even mobilizing voters in a way that would otherwise violate the company's terms, that would be a problem.

Daniel Kreiss  39:36
Yeah, it's just all about sort of bringing targeting practices in line with already stated policies and standards that all these firms have, whether it's on a content basis, or like with Twitter and Google actually on a targeting basis where they do set parameters around how ads should be done. The problem has been is that all these companies are practically unable to enforce it, because they all deal with not identifiable data by the time advertisers bring data to their, to their platforms.

Matt Perault  40:07
Which they're doing in order to protect privacy. I think they don't want to see this specific individual information at the same time that enables abuses that are problematic.
Daniel Kreiss  40:15
Exactly. So there needs to be. And then one of the, one of the recommendations we had is to do like random audits, to build accountability into the system or having people proactively have to adhere to a code of conduct or if they're going to run things like custom audience advertising.

Matt Perault  40:16
So I want is one way to think of this recommendation almost like a burden shifting exercise, like it shifts the... anyone can use a custom audiences product, you could you can bring your audience to Twitter, Facebook, Google and run a targeted ad using the list that you brought to that service, but you have to establish in some way that it's not going to run afoul of the company's terms.

Daniel Kreiss  40:57
Right. That's right.

Matt Perault  40:59
So okay, so we've done the first recommendation, the third recommendation. The second one is basically a review of targeting categories to make sure that they're not easy to circumvent.

Daniel Kreiss  41:08
Exactly. Yeah. So, all the all the major platforms had certain categories that are built in. So, if you're not bringing your own data, the platform you can choose which voters you want to target based on certain characteristics that they might have. So, what we would say is sort of do a review of those categories to make sure that they're in line with preexisting standards, or preexisting goals, right. So, you know, Mark Zuckerberg, for instance, talks a lot about social cohesion now, right? So, if you're enabling targeting categories, based on let's say, ideology, which they were up until a few months ago, before they removed it from the platform that would undermine your own stated goal of cohesion and then you're enabling actors to target on the basis of who are the most extreme liberals or the most extreme conservatives. So, bringing those sorts of categories in line with other stated goals, I think is kind of a no brainer.

Matt Perault  41:59
And then the fourth recommendation is...

Daniel Kreiss  42:01
This is all yours...

Yeah, I mean, to me, this is like a no brainer. And it's kind of surprising that nobody's done this before. Because, I mean, Facebook, for instance, spends far, many more dollars I would say intellectual integrity efforts and building up teams and you know, groups like Facebook research, all the things that they're funding around this likely they're they're doing more on that than the revenue they're generating from political ads.
So like, why wouldn't they say that what they're going to do is just create a, you know, a separate revenue stream just from political advertising, that's going to go right back into securing electoral integrity around the world.

Matt Perault 42:02
Yes. The fourth recommendation is if you say that political advertising doesn't really have much of an effect on your bottom line, then make sure it has no effect on your bottom line. So the recommendation that we had is that anyone who accepts political advertising, any digital platform that accepts political advertising dollars, should use that money either to donate to election integrity research, or to develop the election integrity functions and its own products.

Right? In other words, it makes sense that you would have political advertising as a public service, essentially, because you believe for all the reasons we've discussed in the importance of that type of speech. But then if it's a public service, make it a public service and don't use it in any way for profit.

Daniel Kreiss 43:16
Yeah.

Matt Perault 43:17
And I assume a my assumption is is like yours? I don't know any. I don't really know the specifics. But my assumption is, as you say that, that Facebook already spends more money on the integrity components of the product that it makes in revenue, and I would have thought the same thing would have been true for Twitter.

Daniel Kreiss 43:32
Yeah, I don't know for sure. So I should walk that back. I mean, I don't know for sure. I would say it's probably likely. Particularly if you factor in everyone who's associated with the company working on electoral integrity in some way.

Matt Perault 43:44
Right.

Daniel Kreiss 43:44
And that includes various research teams that include, you know, and sort of around the world. So yeah, I mean, that's, why wouldn't they do that?

Matt Perault 43:54
So maybe that's a jumping off point to another issue. You've alluded to the work that Facebook does alignment around election integrity issues, researchers, you do research and election integrity. So what is your relationship like with various different companies? How do you work with them to ensure that there's good empirical research in the field?

Daniel Kreiss 44:15
So let me I'll speak more broadly and say that one of the things that I'm cautiously optimistic about is that since 2016, I think in particular, the platform companies, pretty much across the board, I would say Facebook in particular, as well as Twitter, have been much more proactive about engaging with academics and scholars, in part around trying to correct all the sorts of issues that arose during 2016. So, this is things like helping to identify misinformation and disinformation trying to identify coordinated and authentic activity. Having, I think, robust debates around things like political advertising and the like, Twitter as a whole initiative that they've been, you know, working on with MIT around how do you promote more healthy forms of democratic discourse? I don't think anyone would say any of these things are perfect. They're all deeply challenging. These are massive companies. It's not always clear that one part of the company is talking to another. So. But I would say that there's much more openness. I think that these forms of collaboration than there's been in the past. I mean, for my own part, I, you know, I've written a number of times about how companies make decisions, these various issues relating to things like political speech and political content more generally. You know, over the years, I've had lots of, I think, substantive conversations with people inside the company about various implications of my research. I found people to be thoughtful and open to listening. I think. Another piece is, for instance, you know, a few weeks back, you know, Facebook invited a number of researchers to work with their research team about identifying what should be the questions that, you know, Facebook is asking in this particular space. And, you know, ultimately what would help them make better decisions for the platforms when it comes to democratic processes? I, you know, I think these are all really good starts. I think for these global platforms, these are global issues, so that they should be replicated in every country around the world. In some ways, the US is the easiest case, compared to countries like Sri Lanka or, or India, for instance, or Brazil. So, you know, working with I think academics who are truly impartial are, you know, social scientists that are committed? I think, ultimately and institutionally held accountable and in various ways not to profit motives or you know, other forms of motives, but one access to the data to sort of help inform these sorts of questions, I think is the way to go.

Matt Perault  46:58
So, there are two big downside that jump out to me. The first is privacy issues... Cambridge Analytica, for instance, was Facebook giving data to an academic researcher? I'm not saying that was, obviously there were there were problems and how that was done. But it was Facebook giving data to an academic researcher. And then the other thing is just the skepticism. It seems like within the academy about academics who work closely with industry, whether they take money or not, it seems like there's sort of strong skepticism of that, which I understand kind of superficially that like it looks, you don't want to do anything that makes it look like your work is compromised. But at the same time, it seems for the reasons that you just described, it's very helpful to have a close relationship with industry so you understand how they're thinking about the products they build. So, you understand so you have access to data when that will help you do good work, so you can integrate it into what you're doing.

Daniel Kreiss  47:49
Yeah. So I guess in two responses, I mean, I would say without getting into the, you know, black box of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, I could say that there's been some attempts to figure out how that can be done better right way that safeguarded privacy and the security of the data? I don't think anyone's figured that out yet. But I do think that these companies can do better at sort of making a good faith attempt to sort of say, how can we, how can we collaborate on a closer basis with the research community to get the data in the hands of the people who can help analyze it? In terms of the reputational questions about people who collaborate with these companies? I would sort of say two things. I would say, first of all, it's a comment on social scientists in a research community, I think to engage in constructive engagement of these companies to help them design better policies. I do think that there are some critical voices out there you know, that would say that it's all that it's all legitimate. I you know, I think they're wrong. I disagree with that. But I would also say that like we also have a certain responsibility to make sure we're not enrolled in various company's PR efforts. I think if you if you look at like, you know, the big effort around like the Facebook data, social science One, which was released very closely before Zuckerberg appeared before Congress that felt like more of a PR push that it was a substantive effort that had already had all the various issues sort of in place.

Matt Perault  49:21
Yeah.

Daniel Kreiss  49:22
And I think that there was that burned a lot of goodwill there from a lot of people in the research community who felt used a bit. So, I think there's a way to do it, right. And I think it's like, don't go to the press before you sort of ironed out all the details, right, figure out exactly what it looks like, figure out what the legal basis is going to look like, figure out what the organizational basis is going to look like. I think that's the right way to handle it. And not just make it feel like we're being used in some way.

Matt Perault  49:47
Great. So thanks so much for coming on the pod. Anything else you want to discuss?

Daniel Kreiss  49:51
Yeah, so your wife is due today?

Matt Perault  49:52
She's due today? Do you have the crib? I don't know.

Yeah, we did the crib. The crib is crazy.

I don't understand, how... I wonder if they design it so that it's hard enough that it feels like a marital accomplishment when you build it together. Because... you realize

Daniel Kreiss  50:08
You built it together?
Matt Perault  50:08
We built it together and there was no, it was, the instructions were like not intelligible to a normal human, like there were these two wooden dowels that were basically exactly the same size that were but one was like, one 1,000,000th of an inch bigger than the other and you can only use one in certain places and the other and other places and the instructions never said in any place these are almost exactly the same size so we got like halfway through building it and then had to pull it apart and take out all the wooden dowels from one side and put them in the other.

Daniel Kreiss  50:36
There you go. Wait till you tied down that's very sad moment when you take your trip down because it's...

Matt Perault  50:42
like no longer... cause you're youngest is not in a crib anymore?

Daniel Kreiss  50:46
Yeah, he's still in a crib, but for only like two more months. He's 19 months old.

Matt Perault  50:50
Wow. So, and then you do you have a like...

Daniel Kreiss  50:54
yeah, like a big boy bed right now for him which will be all the sister’s hand-me-downs. right? cuz I've got a nine year old to right kept it so

Matt Perault  51:03
yeah, and then it's sad because it's like bye-bye infant.

Daniel Kreiss  51:07
Yeah, I have to say though I'm not the biggest fan of the infant stage. This is a sweet spot like 19 months on, even a little younger… personalities, they run around it's amazing… it gets so much better than the infant stage.

Matt Perault  51:23
Yeah someone said to me that he realized at a certain point when his kid was like three months old if it were this bad forever no one would ever have a second one.

Daniel Kreiss  51:32
Oh yeah. No, it's like mind numbing. Yeah, I don't know some people really love it. I mean, some people love it. It just wasn't my favorite stage. Which is which you know it's sad because they give you paternity leave like at the worst possible phase which is probably why because the hardest the most labor intensive. Like, I want paternity leave now that my daughter is nine years old. Like, give me give me three months to hang out
with her every day. That'd be awesome. Or even my 19 month old like I would love that... we'd have so much fun.

Matt Perault  52:01
But some people call it bonding leave. And if you think of it as bonding leave Yeah, in theory that could be like almost like a function like a sabbatical. I'm sure...

Daniel Kreiss  52:08
I'm sure they have that in Sweden, but not in the US

Matt Perault  52:11
Exactly, well, you know, so at Facebook where men and women get the same amount of leave, and everyone gets four months. A lot of men stagger it so they, you know, take two weeks at the beginning and then like three and a half months. Yeah, once the kid is about three months old. Which I think for dads is a good way to do it.

Daniel Kreiss  52:30
Yeah. Yeah, no, I agree. Because it's also tough in particular, like with breastfeeding to be... there's only so much you can do as a dad at least initially, right? If your wife isn't pumping and you can do bottles all that other stuff right?

Matt Perault  52:44
I've been told laundry, diapers, cook some food

Daniel Kreiss  52:48
Yeah, yep.

Matt Perault  52:49
Yeah. People in like a very nice way have talked to us about a meal, about setting up meal trains and stuff, and I and I'm excited about that. But I've also thought I can't be entirely useless. Like that is a job that I could actually do. I think it will be wonderful to have people bring food and we should do that but I also have thought like in a world where there aren't that many things that where dad can be helpful I can actually make some pasta.

Daniel Kreiss  53:12
Yeah, you can it's just nice to like have two or three days a week that are covered and right. You can just kind of chill out because yeah, remember, like, you know, yes, you can do it, but like somebody is going to want to be sleeping. Like every sort of extra minute, you get right. Particularly if your kids up every hour, right?

Matt Perault  53:33
A revealing thing is that when you ask people about it, a lot of people say I just can't quite remember.

Daniel Kreiss  53:38
Yes. So, I don't remember. I really honestly don't remember like,

Matt Perault  53:41
I remembered it was hard. And then it and it happened. And it was and then it got to a time when it was better.

Daniel Kreiss  53:48
Well, I think that's evolution's way of making sure people have babies... continually because you even forget your first like between your first and your second right? Well, not everyone waits nine years. So that did something to wipe the memory away too... Right.

Matt Perault  54:02
Thanks so much to Daniel Kreiss for coming on the podcast today. This has been Technology by Design, a podcast hosted by Matt Perault. Produced by Sarah Cromer, with music by Velvet Negroni.