Dark Advertising and the Democratic Process

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Political advertising is changing. Dominic Cummings, Campaign Director for Vote Leave sums this up well in an article on how Brexit was "won":

> We were urged by everyone to hire a big advertising agency and do traditional posters. 'When can we discuss our posters?' I was asked constantly by people who would then try to explain to me their creative ideas ('we need another Labour Isn't Working, Dominic, I've got an idea for a picture of the globe and arrows…'). […] Instead of spending a fortune on an expensive agency (with 15% going to them out of 'controlled expenditure') and putting up posters to be 'part of the national conversation' weeks or months before the vote, we decided to […] put almost all our money into digital (~98%) […] (Cummings 2017)

Facebook also advertised its own "success story" with the election of the Conservative Party in the UK in 2015. The advert claims:[1]

> In a tightly contested election, the UK political party combined powerful creative with Facebook's targeting tools to achieve what the pollsters and media had universally predicted to be impossible: a win by outright majority.
>
> 80.6% reach in key constituencies on Facebook
> 3.5 million video views
> 86.9% of all ads served had social context

This advertisement also contains the following quote from Craig Elder, Digital Director of The Conservative Party:

> The level of targeting we had available to us on Facebook—coupled with the research and data we produced internally—meant that we can say for the first time in a UK election that digital made a demonstrable difference to the final election result.

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[1] This advertisement can still be found online: https://www.facebook.com/business/success/conservative-party#u_0_p

Political advertising is changing. And in this chapter, I want to consider some of the implications of this for the democratic process.[2]

Things do not look great on that front. We have now become aware that Cambridge Analytica, for instance, harvested data from Facebook, and used it to create targeted online political advertisements in both the Brexit vote and the 2016 US Presidential Election.[3] Of course, this raises numerous ethical concerns, including issues of consent, privacy and respect for citizens' data and information. These are seriously important issues, but I will not explicitly address them here. In this chapter, I want to focus on online political advertisements.

And I begin this inquiry with a hunch. My hunch is that online political advertisements can undermine important parts of the democratic process. And in what follows, I explore that hunch, looking to unpack what – if anything – is wrong with online political advertising.

I begin with recent reports of online political advertising. From this, two related concerns emerge. The first is that online political advertisements sometimes *occur in the dark*, and the second is that they can involve sending *different messages to different groups*. I consider these issues in turn. This involves an extended discussion of the importance of *publicity* and *discussion* in democracy, and a comparison between dog whistles and dark advertisements. Through this, I look to outline some of the ways in which online political advertisements can undermine the democratic process.

1. What – if anything – is wrong with online political advertising?

The ways in which advertising can be ethically problematic are relatively well understood. Advertising can involve deception, manipulation, and puffery; it can also have negative consequences, such as contributing to the over-sexualisation of woman. But advertising is not *all* bad. There are ethical problems with advertising, but it can play a useful role. For one, it

[3] For an overview of these issues, see Greenfield, P (2018).

can help raise awareness. And at its most basic, advertising is a persuasive form of communication, and one can inform and persuade people for the better.[4]

The same goes for both *online* advertising and *political* advertising. Both of these can serve useful roles – raising awareness, and informing and persuading people well. Of course, as with advertising in general, these forms of advertising can also be ethically problematic. Indeed, the ethical worries are presumably greater in political – rather than commercial – advertising, as the stakes are higher when we are electing a political party to govern us, than they are when we are buying a new phone charger online.

In this chapter, I want to consider whether *online political* advertising poses a new threat to the democratic process, over and above the traditional worries one might have with advertising, online advertising or political advertising in general. And for this, it helps to turn to recent reports about online political advertising.

Julia Carrie Wong, in an article titled ''It might work too well': the dark art of political advertising online', writes the following:

> Any candidate using Facebook can put a campaign message promising one thing in front of one group of voters while simultaneously running an ad with a completely opposite message in front of a different group of voters. The ads themselves are not posted anywhere for the general public to see (this is what's known as "dark advertising") […]
>
> That undermines the very idea of a "marketplace of ideas", says Ann Ravel, […] "The way to have a robust democracy is for people to hear all these ideas and make decisions and discuss," […] "With microtargeting, that is not happening." (Wong 2018)

So, what – if anything – is wrong with online political advertising? Wong points towards things:

1. Online political advertising can occur in the dark

2. This creates the possibility of sending different messages to different groups

In what follows, I will look to unpack each of these worries in turn. In doing so, I hope to articulate what exactly is worrying with online political advertising.

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[4] For a helpful overview of the ethics of advertising, see Dow (2013).

2. Dark Advertising

Dark advertising, as the name suggests, involves advertising *in the dark*, without sufficient light or illumination. These are advertisements that are not publicly aired, but sent to people privately, for them to view on their own. In this section, I want to consider the threat that dark political advertising might pose to the democratic process. And to get this into focus, I want to begin by sharing three pieces of evidence from: 1) Dominic Cummings; 2) Ann Ravel; and 3) the LSE Media Policy Brief.

Let us start by returning to Dominic Cumming's own account of how he helped "win" Brexit:

> Instead of spending a fortune on an expensive agency […] and putting up posters to be 'part of the national conversation' weeks or months before the vote, we decided to […] put almost all our money into digital (~98%) […]

> The world of advertising agencies and PR companies were sure we had screwed up because they did not see what we were doing. […] it is actually hard even for very competent and determined people to track digital communication accurately, and it is important that the political media is not set up to do this. There was not a single report anywhere (and very little curiosity) on how the official Leave campaign spent 98% of its marketing budget. There was a lot of coverage of a few tactical posters. (Cummings 2017)

Cummings did not put up posters "to be 'part of the national conversation' weeks or months before the vote". He also notes that "it is actually hard even for very competent and determined people to track digital communication accurately, and it is important that the political media is not set up to do this."

Earlier, in the article by Julia Wong, we saw the following claim:

> That undermines the very idea of a "marketplace of ideas", says Ann Ravel, […] "The way to have a robust democracy is for people to hear all these ideas and make decisions and discuss," […] "With microtargeting, that is not happening." (Wong 2018)

Echoing John Stuart Mill, Ravel claims that democracy requires a marketplace of ideas, people hearing political policies and proposals and discussing them together. I will return to unpack this shortly, but first want to share one final piece of evidence.

The LSE Media Policy Project has recently released a report, 'The New Political Campaigning'. Here I want to share two points that they make. The first is that:

- Targeted content can make elections less fair as potential voters are only exposed to limited information.

Message targeting encourages contact and engagement only with those who are deemed worthy of political campaigning, for example those in marginal seats or judged to be undecided voters […] Groups less likely to vote risk being further disenfranchised if they do not see campaign messages, and there is also a risk of a compounding effect. […] If democratic societies flourish through the free flow of information which in turn allows citizens to consider issues on balance, then any move to restrict information flow might exacerbate polarization. (Goodman, Labo, Moore and Tambini 2017: 19)

The second finding from the report is that:

- Targeted messaging can increase the focus on divisive issues

The ability to micro-target political messages increases the likelihood that parties and candidates campaign on wedge issues, which are highly divisive in a public forum but also have the ability to mobilize voters such as matters on immigration and welfare. Research from the U.S has shown that candidates are more likely to campaign on these wedge issues when the forum is not public. […] Because these messages are being played out largely in secret they cannot be challenged or fact checked. (Goodman, Labo, Moore and Tambini 2017: 19)

Pulling together these three sources of evidence, we can begin to answer our initial question. What – if anything – is wrong with dark advertising? The evidence considered here suggests 5 things. Dark advertisements:

1. Are not part of the national conversation
2. Are difficult for the political media to track
3. Undermine the marketplace of ideas
4. Cannot be challenged or fact-checked
5. Cause long-term issues, such as disenfranchisement and polarisation

These all seem like important ways in which dark advertisements can undermine the democratic process. It is worth thinking about whether a single general issue can be abstracted here, or whether that urge might be counter-productive; it might be that there are 5 distinct issues here, and any attempt to bring them together could distort this. Philosophers often tend towards abstraction, but we should not always scratch that itch.

So what can philosophy add here? First of all, it is worth briefly saying something about number 5, the *long-term* issues involved with dark advertising. Here I want to note the second

half of the phrase 'democratic process'; democracy is not an event, but a *process*. It occurs over time. In thinking about a healthy democracy, we should not exclusively focus on a single election (or referendum), but also longer term trends. There is a difference between a group of people not voting *in a particular election,* and a group of people being disenfranchised *over time*.

Moving on, is there anything more general we can abstract from the above 5 claims? I think one general theme does seem to emerge. All 5 issues recall Ann Ravel's claim that, "[t]he way to have a robust democracy is for people to hear all these ideas and make decisions and discuss". And this seems right. The trouble with dark advertising is relatively simple: it happens in the dark, and thus seems to involve less public discussion of political advertisements, policies, and campaigns.

Here, I want to offer two general claims:

1. The healthier the discussion of political policies, advertisements and campaigns, the healthier the democracy

2. The more dark advertisements there are, the less healthy the discussion is, and so the less healthy the democracy

The first of these puts forward a basic claim about democracy and discussion, and the second makes explicit how dark advertisements pose a threat to this.

Before we move on, I think it is helpful to say a little more about the exact formulation of these claims.

In an initial attempt to formulate the first claim, I hypothesised that:

> 1.* The *more discussion* of political policies, advertisements and campaigns, the healthier the democracy

While this seems vaguely correct, I have come to worry that the phrase 'more discussion*'* does not quite capture the issue at hand. For one, the sheer *quantity* of discussion is not what makes a democracy healthy. And this seems relevant to dark advertisements. Dark advertisements, for instance, could foster more discussion of a certain kind: micro-targeted citizens might comment on the same dark advertisement, confirming each other's prejudices

on some topic, in an echo-chamber like fashion.[5] (This could also be driven – or encouraged – by covert affiliates of the political party in question.) Here we have a relatively clear case of *more* discussion, but not a healthier democracy. For this reason, instead of claiming the *more* discussion, the healthier the democracy, I now claim the *healthier* the discussion, the healthier the democracy.

Of course, this raises the question of what makes discussion *healthy*. When it comes to dark advertisements, we already have a relatively clear idea of what leads to *unhealthy* discussion, namely that dark advertisements:

1. Are not part of the national conversation
2. Are difficult for the political media to track
3. Undermine the marketplace of ideas
4. Cannot be challenged or fact-checked

The flip-side of this is that *healthy* discussion would involve political advertisements being part of the national conversation, easy for the political media to track, part of the marketplace of ideas, and open to challenge and fact-checking.

The second issue of formulation that arose concerns the strength of these claims. In formulating the first claim, I was tempted to try for something stronger.[6] For instance, it is tempting to propose a very tight link between democracy and public discussion, and claim something like the following:

> 1.** Democracy *requires* public discussion of political policies, advertisements and campaigns

One could even go further and make the connection explicitly stronger:

> 1.*** Public Discussion of political policies, advertisements and campaigns, is *essential* for democracy

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[5] Thanks to Cezara Nicoara for this helpful suggestion.

[6] I suspect that it is not just an idiosyncratic intuition that drove this. Indeed, as we will see over the course of this paper, other people have characterised the relationship between democracy and discussion in strong terms. Martin Moore, for instance, writes that: "Campaigning in secrecy is enormously destructive of the basic principle of democracy. […] Democracy cannot function in darkness." (Moore in Cadwalladr, C (2017)

While these claims might have more rhetorical force, I have to come to think that they are not quite true.[7]

Allow me to indulge in a philosopher's fancy: the thought experiment. Imagine a more digital, but also more equal world: *Democracy 2.0*. In this world, are several political parties, they all have equal funding, and are proposing different, but informed, thoughtful and ethical policies. They also refrain from manipulation and deceit. So far, so good! The fanciful wrinkle is that in this world, *all* political campaigning is done online. Citizens go online, and privately receive information from each of the political parties there. Through this, the citizens are well-informed and vote in line with their information, interests, and values.

What is the point of this thought-experiment? The basic idea is that we can imagine a democracy *without* public discussion of political policies.[8]

Now in order to get this basic idea to stick, we will have to engage in a bit more philosopher's fancy: objections and tweaks to the initial thought-experiment.

First of all, one might think that the above scenario is too *passive*.[9] Proper engagement with politics, so the thought goes, requires interaction; one cannot passively intake political information. But we can tweak the example to account for at least part of this. Teaching someone ethics typically involves interaction, but you can also teach ethics online. And you can do so without public – or even group – discussions. Returning to Democracy 2.0, the political parties in question could put their platforms online, but then correspond with individual citizens one-on-one, in private. (And we can further stipulate that this all occurs in good faith, and that it is monitored by suitable regulatory bodies.) Here we have what looks like an informed citizenship, *actively engaging* with proposed policies, *without* public discussion.

A second worry with the above thought experiment concerns *empathy*.[10] Perhaps a crucial part of democracy is the ability to empathise with other individuals and groups, and to understand their perspectives, thoughts and feelings, and *this* requires public discussion.

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[7] I want to thank Thomas Hancocks for pushing me on this point.
[8] Machin (2012: 107) briefly considers two other ways in which democracy and publicity are importantly connected, namely that 1) "citizens are entitled to some account of why their legislature passed law *f* rather than law *g*", and 2) "the requirement of publicity are better satisfied where citizens elect and remove their legislators than when citizens do not have this power."
[9] I am grateful to Nathan Wood and Sean Sinclair for prompting me to think about this.
[10] Thanks to Natasha McKeever for suggesting this.

However, I suspect we can tweak the thought-experiment to accommodate this. Imagine that a significant part of the information that you are given online does convey the perspectives, thoughts and feelings of others.

Now of course, none of this might be perfect. Perhaps public discussion fosters interaction and empathy in a richer way than can ever be done online. That might be true, but the point of the experiment is that we *could* have an informed, engaged and empathetic citizenship without public discussion. Perhaps we could do *better* on all these accounts with public discussion, but the point in question was whether public discussion of political policies is *essential* for democracy, and I suspect that the thought-experiment shows that it is not, strictly speaking, necessary.

A third worry is that Democracy 2.0 is *too individualistic* or atomistic. The thought is that a flourishing democracy would involves *shared* understanding, which would realise the idea of *collective* autonomy of citizens.[11] Another related thought is that democracy requires *horizontal* engagement, *between*, rather than just *vertical* engagement between citizens and political parties.[12] This all seems to point towards a plausible ideal, which again might show that Democracy 2.0 is not an ideal democracy. This seems fair, but just because Democracy 2.0 is not an *ideal* democracy does not mean that it is *not* a democracy at all. In Democracy 2.0, we have an informed, engaged and empathetic citizenship voting in line with their information, interests and values, and that looks like a democracy.[13]

What then is the upshot of all of this? Is this philosopher's fancy, philosophy's folly? Angels dancing on the head of a pin? Perhaps. However, I am not sure that it is *entirely* fanciful. There are two aspects to the thought experiment: 1) a utopian picture of political parties and citizens; and 2) a world in which all political campaigning is done online. If we recall Dominic Cummings article, we can remember that he boasts about spending ~98% of the vote-leave budget on online advertisements. Large parts of political campaigning are moving online, and it would not be surprising if this trend continued. Of course, that is not to say that Democracy 2.0 is plausible, but we do seem to be moving online. And given this, I think it is

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[11] Thanks to Megan Kime and Andrew Stanners for this suggestion.

[12] Thanks to Lea Salje for this suggestion.

[13] Of course, there are other additional issues with Democracy 2.0 that I have not discussed here. One set of issues concerns how these political parties and their policies are formed *in the first place*. This, it might be thought requires public discussion. As with the other worries about Democracy 2.0, that seems vaguely right, but still does not entirely count against the thought that Democracy 2.0 is some form of Democracy.

worth spending some time spelling about precisely *why* dark online political advertisements are bad, and exactly *how* bad they are for democracy.

It is also important to note that just because public discussion is not *essential* to democracy, that does not mean that is *not extremely important* to democracy, and it also does not mean that public discussion is not *extremely important* to democracy *now.*

We do not live in Democracy 2.0. In our world, political parties do not have equal funding, they do not all pose informed, thoughtful and ethical policies, and they do not all refrain from manipulation and deceit. And we fall short too: citizens are not always engaged, informed or empathetic. In this world, *our* world, public discussion of political policies, advertisements and campaigns help safeguard against these shortcomings.

In his work on democracy and public deliberation, Cristiano (2008: 190) notes that public deliberation embodies a number of fundamental values. These include the following:

> […] the process of public deliberation is a public realization of equality to the extent that the process is reasonably egalitarian. Citizens' abilities to receive hearings for their views are not undermined by a skewed distribution of wealth or power. (Cristiano 2008: 190)

We live in a world marked by gross inequalities of wealth and power; and public discussion (and deliberation) can help safe guard against this.

How exactly can it do this? Of course, this is a big question. However, there is something that we can say here. Earlier, I claimed that healthy discussion would involve political advertisements being part of the national conversation, easy for the political media to track, part of the marketplace of ideas, and open to challenge and fact-checking. And in the above discussion, we saw that an ideal democracy would involve an active citizenship, engaging with policies together, and these virtues can also help improve the democratic process in a non-ideal world.

Martin Moore writes that:

> Campaigning in secrecy is enormously destructive of the basic principle of democracy. If you are not engaging people openly, you cannot be challenged, and you cannot be held to account. It's not possible to hold politicians to their promises.
>
> The more this is done, the more democracy loses its legitimacy. It's already looking pretty unhealthy. Large numbers of people are questioning whether it's sustainable, and this just takes us further down that road. Democracy cannot function in darkness. (Moore in Cadwalladr, C (2017)

What then is the relationship between democracy and darkness?

Publicity might not be strictly *necessary* for democracy, but it is important. And here, I want to return to endorse my previous two claims:

1. The healthier the discussion of political policies, advertisements and campaigns, the healthier the democracy

2. The more dark advertisements there are, the less healthy the discussion is, and so the less healthy the democracy

To summarise, dark advertisements pose a threat to democracy, because they circumvent public discussion of political policies, advertisements and campaigns.

One reason why this can be especially problematic is that dark advertisements can allow for the same political party to send different messages to different groups and individuals. This brings us to the next section.

3. Different Messages to Different Groups

I want to begin by considering some recent work on dog-whistle politics. Actual dog whistles sound at a high frequency that can be heard by dogs, but not humans. Dog whistle politics attempt something similar. At their most basic, they are an act of communication that contains two distinct messages: one that typically comes from taking the communication at face value, and another that does not. This can be used to say different things to two different groups of voters through one act of communication. An example is the use of 'inner city' in political discourse in the United States. As Saul notes:

> In the United States, 'inner city' has come to function as a dogwhistle for *black*. Thus, politicians who would be rebuked if they called for harsher measures against black criminals can safely call for cracking down on inner city crime. (Saul, forthcoming, § 2.2.2.)

There is a lot of interesting work on dog whistles, and the subtle differences between different ways in which they operate, but here I want to consider the simple fact that they

provide a way of politically campaigning through sending different messages to different groups.[14] In this, I find a helpful analogue to dark advertising.

Indeed, in looking at the literature on dog whistles, I found the following claim:

> In a way, dog whistle politics merely resurrects a practice common in the days of 'whistle-stop campaigns' and segmented news markets, when candidates could say different things to different audiences in complete confidence that no one would ever notice the discrepancies. Clever marketing techniques do for today's politicians what moving trains and localised newspapers did for those of a previous generation. (Goodin and Saward 2005: 471)

This suggests a curious history to political campaigning, with the following three stages:

1. Whistle-stop campaigns, segmented news markets, moving trains and localised newspapers

2. National TV, national newspapers, posters, and clever marketing techniques

3. Online dark advertisements

In the first period, political campaigners could offer different messages to different groups, relatively in the dark. In the second period, political campaigners used clever marketing techniques (dog whistles) to offer different messages to different groups, also often in the dark. And now, online advertising allows political campaigners to offer different messages to different groups, again in the dark.

Seen in this light, online political advertisements do not pose a radically new threat to the democratic process. Offering different messages to different groups and advertising in the dark seem is not a new practice. Nevertheless, something new might be happening now, even if it is just a matter of degree (rather than a new *kind* of problem). What might make it different by degree? The scale seems worse now, given the availability of information. As Wong notes:

> What did that money buy? […] In the first instance, everything that any Facebook advertiser can get: access to one of the most powerful databases of personal information that has ever existed, with insights into individuals' intimate relationships, political beliefs, consumer habits and internet browsing. (Wong 2018)

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[14] For a full account of how dog whistles function, see Saul (forthcoming).

This level of information seems to amplify the ways in which advertising can go wrong. At the beginning of the chapter, I noted that, amongst other ethical problems, advertising can involve deception and manipulation. Unfortunately, this will be made easier the more information is available about voters, and the easier it is to micro-target voters.

The good news is that the analogue with dog whistles provides us with excellent resource, in that we can draw upon recent work upon dog whistles to help illuminate what is wrong with sending mixed messages to different groups.

In what follows, I will do just this, beginning with Goodin and Saward and moving onto Saul.

Goodin and Saward (2005: 472) distinguish between the mandate to rule and a policy mandate:

> The *mandate to rule* is "the right to govern, to occupy offices of the state and [so on]"

> The *policy mandate* is "a right to implement a specific set of policies explicitly stipulated during the election and explicitly endorsed by the electorate at that election"

Goodin and Saward (2005: 473) argue that dog whistle politics do not undermine the right to rule, but that, "insofar as the winner's victory was tainted by dog whistle politics, the second sort of mandate proves more elusive".

They offer the following example:

> A conservative party dog-whistles an encouraging message to racists that its own traditional supporters would instantly repudiate. It wins the ensuing election. Half its voters voted for it purely because if its (coded) support for racist policies half voted for it purely because of its traditionally decent policies on race.

> Clearly, the party won a majority; clearly, it has a mandate to rule.

> But under those circumstances, it equally clearly could not claim a policy mandate to pursue either of the two contradictory policies that won it its votes (Goodin and Saward 2005: 475)

They note that:

> In order to secure a mandate to implement any policy in particular, candidates must first tell people what specific policy or policies they propose to implement if elected. Only then can they claim to have some special mandate to implement that policy in particular (as opposed to 'rule' more generally), […]

> Politicians engaging in dog whistle politics are doing almost the opposite of that. They are not telling everyone what specific policies they propose to implement if elected.

> Instead, they tell one group of voters one thing, while allowing (and indeed, encouraging) another group to believe another. If they win the election on the basis of such mixed messages, what does their victory add up to in substantive policy terms? Nothing, we suggest. (Goodin and Saward 2005: 473)

This seems right to me. And the same concerns apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to online political advertisements. If a political party uses dark advertisements to propose different (incompatible) policies to different groups, that thereby undermines their policy mandate.

Saul (forthcoming) claims that Goodin and Saward "do not go quite far enough" here. She argues that:

> If they are right about the policy mandate, then the mandate to rule may also often be undermined. This will happen, for example, in the case of single-issue voters, of which there are likely to be many. If a voting decision is based on abortion policy, and different messages are sent about this to different groups of voters, then surely the mandate to rule is also—in any meaningful sense—undermined. Jennifer Saul (§5.1, forthcoming)

Neither Goodin and Saward nor Saul are claiming that *every* case of sending different messages to different groups undermines democratic mandates. What they show is how sending different messages to different groups *can* undermine democratic mandates. They focus on how this can – and does – occur through dog whistles, but given that dark advertisements allow for the same phenomenon, we should also be wary of the threat that they can pose to the democratic process.

Online political advertising does not pose any *radically* new threat here, but it is still a new tool. And as with any tool or source of information, part of its ethical status will depend on who has *access* to it, the *power* to use it, *how* they use it, and *what ends* they use it for.

This seems especially important for the issue at hand, for two reasons. Firstly, we are talking about democracy, which does not just concern the ends or outcomes of elections, but also the democratic *process* itself. And sending different messages to different groups can undermine this, both in terms of the mandate to rule and specific policy mandates.

Secondly, this new tool is very powerful. As Wong notes, we are now dealing with a situation where Facebook advertisers have access to:

> […] one of the most powerful databases of personal information that has ever existed, with insights into individuals' intimate relationships, political beliefs, consumer habits and internet browsing. (Wong 2018)

This is more information than we have ever had access to before, and it is up for sale. If we want to seriously safeguard against inequalities in wealth translating into inequalities in political power, we should tread carefully here.

We are seeing some progress on this front. After the recent public outcry about Cambridge Analytica, Facebook has promised to make political advertisements more transparent in the future.[15] This is an important development, and it could help curb the threat of dark advertisements.

However, we still need to remain on guard. One serious underlying threat to the democratic process originates from vast inequalities in wealth, and the ways in which this can translate into vast inequalities in political power. We have seen this in the past (think of Rupert Murdoch for instance, who has had more political power than you, me, and probably everyone we know). We see it now, in how vast sums of money have been able to influence elections through dark advertisements, and I suspect we will see it again in the future. What are we to do in response? That question is too big to answer in this chapter. But one thing we can say here is that public discussion of political policies, advertisements and campaigns can help safeguard against this.

Conclusion

I began this chapter with a hunch. I suspected that online political advertising could undermine important parts of the democratic process

Through looking at the available evidence, and the literature on dog whistles, I am now able propose two things that are wrong with online political advertising. For one, public discussion is an important part of a healthy democracy; and dark advertisements circumvent

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[15] See Hern (2018).

this. Secondly, mixed messages can undermine democratic mandates; and dark advertisements make this easier.

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