

**Negotiating Goals and Return:  
Political Campaigns' Ad Spending on Digital and Social Media Platforms**

Travis N. Ridout  
Thomas S. Foley Distinguished Professor of Government and Public Policy  
School of Politics, Philosophy and Public Affairs  
Washington State University  
tnridout@wsu.edu

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**Abstract:** The use of paid advertising on digital and social media has exploded in U.S. political campaigns, but we know very little about why campaign professionals prioritize particular platforms. This research reports on interviews with nine campaign professionals who have been decision-makers in U.S. campaigns. Conversations focused on their use of Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Google search and Snapchat. Campaigns tried to balance return on investment with the pursuit of particular campaign goals. Four features of platforms influenced this negotiation: platform audiences, platforms' targeting capabilities, how easily one can measure return on investment, and the quality of video.

## **Negotiating Goals and Return:**

### **Political Campaigns' Ad Spending on Digital and Social Media Platforms**

During the 2018 election cycle, political advertisers in the United States spent over \$400 million on Facebook's digital platforms, including Instagram and Messenger, and at least \$60 million on Google's digital offerings, including YouTube and search (Tech for Campaigns, 2019). At the same time, just \$1.6 million was spent on ads on Twitter (Edelson, 2019), and about \$600,000 was spent on political ads in the U.S. on Snapchat in 2018 (Snap Political Ads Library, 2019). Why did campaigns flock to paid advertising on some platforms, such as Facebook and Google, while almost ignoring Twitter and Snapchat? More generally, why do campaigns find some platforms attractive while largely avoiding others?

Understanding how campaigns allocate their digital advertising dollars is increasingly important, as digital's share of political ad spending has spiked. Digital spending in the 2018 election cycle in the United States was \$1.8 billion dollars, just over 20 percent of total political ad spending (Cassino, 2018). That is a dramatic increase from digital's 3.3 percent share in the 2014 election cycle (Cassino, 2014). Clearly, digital advertising is here to stay, but most of what we know about how campaign use paid advertising rests on theories that were developed during the television era. As Trent, Friedenber, and Denton (2011) note, changes in communications media often lead to changes in campaign practices. Thus, there is a pressing need to examine how campaigns use paid advertising on digital and social media.

In doing so, one must be careful not to treat "social media" or "digital media" as a category in itself, as the various social media platforms differ in many ways, including in their architecture (Bossetta, 2018) and affordances (Kreiss, Lawrence and McGregor, 2018). I take

that call seriously in this research, outlining how practitioners' perceptions of various social and digital media platforms vary—and how those perceptions influence decisions to invest in advertising on a particular platform.

This research is focused on how digital and social media platforms constrain and enable advertising by political campaigns in the U.S. I used semi-structured interviews with campaign professionals who made decisions regarding the use of various platforms during campaigns in 2016 and 2018. These conversations suggest that the choice of a platform depends on the goals that a campaign wants to pursue and a desire to maximize return on investment. These factors vary with four platform features: the platform's audience, its ability to target, the platform's ability to measure return and the “quality” of video.

The explosion of paid advertising on digital and social media is reason in itself to warrant the study of this topic, but the choices that campaigns make in how to allocate their advertising dollars may have larger consequences as well. As campaigns invest heavily in online advertising, they give certain digital and social media platforms additional power in American politics. Not only do the platforms that are attractive to campaigns make a lot of money from these campaigns, but there is the potential that campaigns could become dependent on them—a possibility I discuss in the discussion section.

### **Allocating Advertising Dollars**

How do political campaigns allocate their advertising dollars? Most discussions of this topic have focused on television advertising. The guiding principle in the allocation of television ad spending is efficiency in reaching a desired audience. Most broadly, campaigns must choose the media markets in which to advertise. Presidential campaigns, for example, focus their

advertising in media markets in battleground states (Shaw, 2008). Congressional campaigns also direct resources to those markets that better align with the district's boundaries, helping them to avoid wasting money by airing ads to those who cannot vote for them (Schaffner, 2006).

This desire for efficiency has also resulted in campaigns looking beyond local broadcast television. Presidential campaigns now air ads on national cable channels in order to reach more specific audiences, such as conservatives watching Fox News or the Golf Network. Local cable advertising has also become more popular, in part, because it allows campaigns to target cable zones that are much smaller geographically than media markets (Fowler, Franz and Ridout, 2016). One media buyer explained the efficiency of local cable: "If I have the ability to target specific voters [like that], it's worth approximately twice to four times because it's cutting out a population that I just don't want to talk to" (cited in Serazio, 2014, p. 753). Moreover, campaigns target their ads to specific television programs to more efficiently reach desired partisan audiences, as some programs skew Democratic while others skew Republican (Ridout, et al., 2012).

Less known about resource allocation decisions in the digital realm, but the idea of efficiency carries through. Serazio's (2014) report on interviews with digital campaign strategists reveals that they view narrowcasting online as the continuation of a trend away from "roadblocking communications," in which one message was sent to as many people as possible (p. 752). But online media make narrowcasting messages, which are typically tailored to a particular audience, much easier to accomplish. Not only do online platforms make it easy to segment audiences, but the online audience is now sufficiently large to warrant the narrowcasting of messages (Serazio, p. 752).

## **The Role of Platforms**

As Bode and Vraga (2018) note, studies of campaigning in the social media realm tend to focus on a single platform. As a result, scholars tend to draw conclusions about the role of social media and digital media in political campaigns based on data gathered on a single platform. But recent studies have begun to break down “social media” as used in the campaign realm, comparing more than one platform (e.g., Kang, et al. 2018; Stier, et al. 2018).

Two recent studies have even examined how the specific features of each platform influence campaign decision-making. One is Kreiss, Lawrence and McGregor’s (2018) interview-based examination of presidential campaigns’ social media use in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, focusing on both the organic and paid side. Their interviewees point to several characteristics that influence how campaigns use social media in pursuit of their campaign goals. The first is perceptions of candidates’ public personae, such as how comfortable they are in engaging on social media. The second is perceptions of the audience, such as how old it is. The third characteristic is the platform’s affordances, defined as “what various platforms are actually capable of doing and perceptions of what they enable, along with the actual practices that emerge as people interact with platforms” (p. 19). One example is whether a platform allows direct links. The fourth characteristic is its genre, that is, the “types of communication that were deemed appropriate among their particular audiences” (p. 20). Genres are social conventions and can lend a “feel” to a platform. Finally, Kreiss and colleagues point to social media use as a function of the timing of the campaign, with campaigns having a “temporal logic” (p. 24).

A second study that takes variation across platforms seriously is Bossetta’s (2018) work on social media platforms’ “digital architectures,” which he defines as “the technical protocols

that enable, constrain, and shape user behavior in a virtual space” (p. 473). Bossetta prefers to focus on “digital architectures” as opposed to “affordances,” arguing that that the latter concept is vague and contested. He writes that “the architecture of a technology underpins its affordances, while offering a more empirically observable object of analysis” (p. 473). Bossetta focuses on four aspects of a platform’s architecture: network structure (how accounts are connected), functionality (how content is mediated, accessed, and distributed across platforms), algorithmic filtering (how posts are selected and prioritized), and datafication (“quantification of users’ activities on a social media platform”). In developing this typology, Bossetta creates a framework for classifying each of the social media platforms that campaigns use. He also provides examples of how that architecture influenced the relative use of Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaigns, but his contributions are heavier on the theoretical side than on the empirical side. Clearly, though, a platform’s architecture, which opens up particular affordances, is important in understanding how it is used.

## **Methods**

I conducted interviews with nine people who 1) are decision-makers or advise decision-makers in political campaigns and 2) worked with digital advertising in a 2016 or 2018 campaign. Interviews were largely conducted over telephone, though I did have some follow up email communication with two of the participants.<sup>1</sup> Interviews took place between December of 2018 and November of 2019. Interviewees were Myles Bugbee, Digital Director for Montana Senator John Tester’s 2018 re-election campaign; Laura Carlson, digital director for Jacky

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<sup>1</sup> The institutional review board at [university name withheld] has deemed this research exempt from human subjects approval (IRB # 17332).

Rosen's U.S. Senate campaign in Nevada in 2018 and Patrick Murphy's U.S. Senate campaign in Florida in 2016; Crystal Ebert, Deputy Digital Campaign Director for the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) in the 2018 cycle; Bradley Engle, a digital strategist at Purple Strategies and former digital director for Americans for Prosperity and Bobby Jindal's 2016 presidential campaign; Chris Georgia, partner at FP1 Strategies and former digital director for Jeb Bush's presidential campaign; Anson Kaye, a partner at GMMB, the firm that handled Hillary Clinton's paid media during the 2016 presidential campaign; Joel Rivlin, a political strategist at the Pivot Group; and Tom Russell, a political consultant who directed Russ Feingold's Senate campaign in Wisconsin in 2016. I also spoke with one person who wished to remain anonymous, a Senate staffer with experience in directing statewide digital campaigns.

With all interviewees, I agreed not to attribute statements to particular individuals so as give them freedom to speak openly. I also do not provide any details that might help identify the one individual who wished to remain anonymous. In the end, interviewees were quite open in sharing specific examples from campaigns for which they had worked in the past.

I used snowball sampling to secure interviews, starting with those whom I knew in other contexts. Interviews lasted from about 30 minutes to well over an hour and took on a semi-structured format. I asked interviewees to describe their experience in digital politics and then asked them a general question about resource allocation in the digital realm. If not elicited through the general question, I followed up with specific questions about when why they might use Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Google search, and Snapchat. These were not the only digital platforms that interviewees reporting using, but they received the vast majority of campaign resources. I also included questions designed to elicit more general views of digital advertising in politics, such as one about perceived trends in digital advertising.

I used thematic analysis to identify themes helpful in understanding the allocation decisions that campaign professionals make regarding digital platforms. Thematic analysis takes many forms (Braun, et al., 2018). My approach is more top-down than bottom-up in that it was driven by the research question (Braun and Clarke, 2006). My approach also tends toward a semantic approach that focuses on the “explicit or surface meanings of the data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 84) as opposed to a latent approach in which one “starts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations...that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 84). Specifically, I typed rough transcripts during my interviews, and immediately after the end of each interview, I reviewed those notes, clarifying and expanding where there were gaps. After the interviews were completed, I familiarized myself with the transcripts and then grouped similar statements across interviewees. I then used these aggregations to develop several larger themes that described how campaigns perceived and used the various digital platforms.

## **Findings**

How do campaigns decide to allocate their advertising dollars across various digital platforms? My conversations revealed two overarching goals in the use of paid advertising: pursuing the specific goals that the campaign wants to pursue and maximizing the potential return on investment. The ability to pursue a campaign’s goals and simultaneously get a strong return on investment varies with four features of the platforms themselves: the characteristics and size of a platform’s audience, the ability to target on a platform, the ability to measure return on investment, and the quality of video. I will first discuss two overarching concepts—campaign goals and return on investment—before detailing how each of the four platform features

influences a campaign's ability to negotiate the tension between pursuing its goals and attaining a high return.

*Goals:* Online ads pursue a variety of goals. Ballard, Hillygus and Konitzer (2016) classified each ad in a sample from the 2012 presidential campaign by its objective. They concluded that 37 percent were aimed at persuasion, 25 percent sought funds, 20 percent tried to recruit people to the campaign, and 18 percent encouraged voting. Digital ads, then, pursue a variety of goals beyond the persuasion goal of television ads. These conclusions were backed by my interviewees who identified four central goals of running advertising on digital and social media. The first was acquisition, that is, acquiring contact information of potential supporters and donors. The second was fundraising through "direct donate" ads that ask for contributions. The third was mobilization through ads that encourage people to vote or provide them with the information that they needed to vote. Finally, campaigns used advertising to persuade people to vote for particular candidates. These were not the only goals mentioned—for instance, occasionally ads were used to raise awareness of a candidacy among the public or news media—but they were the primary objectives pursued.

*Return on investment (ROI):* Return on investment refers to the ability of a campaign to pursue its stated goal for the least cost. All campaigns are resource constrained, so achieving efficiency in spending on advertising, is essential to everyone. Campaign professionals did not view one platform as providing uniformly higher return. Perceptions of return depended on the audience one wanted to reach at a particular time, the ability to target that audience, the ability to measure return and the quality of video, which was especially important for the goal of persuasion.

## **Audience**

One theme to emerge from the interviews was that the size of the audience—and the characteristics of the audience on the platform—was key in the decision to use a platform. Almost all interviewees mentioned audience directly. One advantage of Facebook is the large size of its audience and its wide potential reach. Interviewees cited various statistics about the percentage of the population that one could reach on Facebook, ranging from 60 to 80 percent. But everyone agreed that the size of Facebook’s audience was unrivaled compared to other platforms. Still, there was some skepticism. “How many of those people spent enough time on Facebook to actually get fed the ad? How many never check Facebook or infrequently log in?” asked one consultant. Another interviewee noted that there has been a decline in the Facebook audience, leading some to shift their social media focus toward Instagram.

Consultants perceived the audience on Instagram to be much smaller than the audience on Facebook but expanding. One was very skeptical of its reach but still agreed that campaigns needed to be on the platform. There was also agreement that the audience on Instagram was much younger than the Facebook audience. “The majority on Instagram are still 25-35,” reported one campaign advisor, but that age range is expanding. The importance of Instagram varies by state, with the platform perceived as much more useful in “young states” than in states with larger populations of old people. Instagram, then, was seen as great for reaching young people who are difficult to reach through more traditional media.

The audience on YouTube was described as fairly large and general and was thought to well represent younger users. One interviewee noted that “YouTube is increasingly popular—from watching music videos, to looking for a dinner recipe, or getting tips on a do-it-yourself project.”

The audience on Twitter was viewed as much smaller in size than the audience on Facebook or YouTube, and that perception is backed by surveys (Smith and Anderson 2018). Interviewees also perceived the audience on Twitter to be elites, such as journalists, or those with high levels of political interest. A campaign is “speaking to an inside club” or “the chattering class” on Twitter. One digital director suggested that the people on Twitter, because they are high in political information, had already made up their minds, so persuasion ads were a waste of time. Others aimed messages directly at reporters who were covering the campaign, perhaps using the platform to publicize an endorsement that they hoped reporters would write about.

The audience using search engines was described as extremely broad; almost everyone on the Internet uses a search engine. Google is the most used by far, though some campaigns had tried using Bing. One consultant described users of Bing as older than users of Google, in part, because Bing is the default on Microsoft web browsers. The perception was that Bing could be desirable because older individuals are more likely to vote and donate. Search was lauded for its potential to persuade because “you are capturing people at their moment of highest interest, and so your ability to influence is much higher.” The problem, though, is scale. For down-ballot races, there may just not be that many people searching for the race.

All agreed that the audience on Snapchat was young. It was thought to be a good way to reach college students who might be difficult to reach through more traditional means. But there was also a recognition that just not that many people used Snapchat, making it more difficult to reach potential voters.

In sum, the large size and wide demographic distribution of users on Facebook, YouTube and Google search made these platforms quite attractive for campaigns, while the perception that Instagram and especially Snapchat users were young made these platforms attractive only when

a campaign wanted to reach that demographic group specifically. Twitter's audience was perceived to be small and elite, making it relatively useless for persuasion ads.

## **Targeting**

Another theme to emerge from the data was that the ability to target was an essential factor in the choice of a platform. Facebook was perceived to offer the most advanced targeting, though Instagram, owned by Facebook, shares many similar features. Interviewees pointed out that Facebook allows for geographic targeting, in which people living in particular states, congressional districts or zip codes can be reached, and location-based targeting, which means that ads appear based on where one is at a particular moment. Facebook also allows for demographic targeting and interest-based targeting, that is, feeding ads to those who, for example, express an interest in outdoor activities. In addition, Facebook has a custom audiences feature, allowing campaigns to upload lists of individuals (names or email addresses) whom they want to target, and then Facebook will match those names to Facebook users. Facebook also allows one to "geo-fence." That is, a campaign can delineate a geographic area on a map, and only those located within the area will be fed the ad. One campaign used this feature to deliver ads about a candidate's support for a local health center only to those individuals who were in physical proximity to that health center.

Targeting was seen as slightly more limited on Instagram than Facebook, but a lot of the buying on Instagram is done using the same dashboard. In fact, one consultant noted that the "default" option is to let Facebook place ads on both platforms, placing them wherever needed in order to reach a desired audience.

Campaign professionals appreciate the many ways in which they can target on YouTube. One can target viewers by geography, including at the level of the congressional district. One can target by viewer demographics, and one can target by interests through Google's "custom intent audiences" feature. One interviewee spoke of this feature being extremely useful for "broad reach awareness campaigns." Additionally, campaigns can upload their own lists of individuals whom they want targeted or excluded from advertisements.

Twitter allows for demographic targeting, such as by gender, and it allows for geographic targeting by state or zip code. It also allows for targeting ads on the basis of behavior and key word search. A campaign could, for example, target people who searched for "immigration" or those who had recently posted about "immigration." Although these targeting capabilities exist, it can be difficult in practice to reach a desired audience because the number of people on Twitter is so small. Campaigns, for example, find that the number of women with an interest in the environment who live in a single congressional district (or a state with a small population) and are on Twitter is really small. Targeting, other than at the broadest level, is difficult on Twitter.

Campaign consultants are positive about search ads. Their genius is that people interested in your campaign signal that through their search behavior. Campaign professionals spoke about the art of choosing the right search terms. Google provides a keyword planner with suggested keywords for proposed searches. One consultant spoke of using 10 to 20 search terms, mostly variants on the candidate's name. Return on investment was reported to be small when the terms became too broad. There were mixed feelings about buying search results connected with an opponent's name. Some believed it was a good way of communicating a negative message about the opponent, while others questioned its usefulness given that those searching for

an opponent might not be particularly receptive to a negative message about that candidate. In addition to buying search terms connected with a candidate's name, some liked buying search terms connected with events of the day or particularly important issues. One consultant recalled attacking Republican opponents for their health care votes in search ads connected with searches about the opponent and the issue of health care. Another campaign bought search terms like "election," "election day" and "polling place" to be able to speak to people who intended to vote.

Search ads can also be targeted by geographic location. A campaign would not want to run an ad that encourages someone to vote if the user lives out of state, and one would not want to run a fundraising ad if the user lives outside the United States. However, at least in the case of a high-profile Senate race, someone who searches for a candidate name from out-of-state is potentially a very good target for a fundraising appeal.

The only form of Snapchat targeting noted by interviewees was geographic. One can geo-fence, limiting access only to those who are within a particular geographic boundary.

The many ways that one can target with Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and search ads make those platforms particularly attractive to campaign professionals, while the limited targeting—combined with limited audience reach—make Twitter, and Snapchat much less attractive.

## **Measuring Return**

A third theme to emerge from the data had to do with the ability to measure return on investment. Strategists wanted a platform that could provide the metrics necessary to accurately measure return on investment, and they perceived much variation across the platforms in their

ability to do so. Importantly, though, the ability measure return depended on the ad's goal, with acquisition and fundraising much easier to track than persuasion.

Interviewees touted Facebook for the many ways by which a campaign could measure return. The platform offers a large variety of metrics for measuring success, including click-throughs, engagement (measured through "likes" and emotional reactions), number of views and completed views for video—and these statistics can be broken down by demographics. For example, one might find that an ad produces much more engagement among women than men, and thus the campaign might decide to limit its distribution to women. Of course, these metrics only tell part of the story. As one consultant pointed out, "you could show a cute puppy and have high completed views, but that wouldn't mean you got your message across." Campaigns do put more stock in cost per acquisition (CPA), which is how much the campaign must spend in order to get one person's contact information. One consultant reported hoping for a CPA in the "couple of dollars range." Return on investment can also be measured through both immediate donations and longer-term donations. That is, an ad campaign of a certain cost might generate 400 email addresses, which may result in donations weeks later after repeated email requests.

Finding ways to measure return on ads aimed at persuasion is more difficult. Some campaigns try to match up dollars spent on an ad campaign with movement in tracking polls, but that can be imprecise. One consultant reported doing a sort of quick and dirty sentiment analysis of Facebook comments, looking up individual commenters in the voter file so that the campaign could see how the ad played with people of various characteristics.

The metrics used for measuring return on investment on Instagram were viewed as similar to those used for Facebook, though perhaps not as detailed. One professional reported that engagement costs were higher on Instagram than on Facebook, possibly because attention

spans on Instagram are shorter. That said, in the words of one consultant, the “younger audience is valuable because it’s harder to reach through other channels like TV and mail and the buying interface allows campaigns to track results efficiently.”

Campaigns have access to a variety of statistics about their YouTube ads, including traditional engagement metrics (e.g., views, likes, shares, and comments). Still, persuasion, the primary goal pursued with advertising on YouTube, is the most difficult to measure. As with running an ad campaign on Facebook, one might use a third-party to test the effectiveness of video ads online, or one might examine public opinion polling to see if a candidate’s support changes when an extensive video campaign is launched.

One reason campaigns did not embrace Twitter more is that they found it difficult to measure return on investment. The one exception is for acquisition ads. As with other platforms, one can measure ROAS (return on ad spend) by seeing how much money was raised from individuals added to one’s list through acquisition ads. One consultant explained: “if you spend \$10,000 on Twitter lead acquisition and raise \$12,000 from the acquired emails in the first three months you’d have a 120% ROAS.”

Because Twitter can be good at raising awareness, campaign professionals suggested using it in coordination with larger events, such as a campaign launch or debate. One spoke of using promoted tweets in Spanish during the World Cup in order to reach Spanish-speaking voters, many of whom follow soccer. This same person spoke of using “direct to donate” ads on Twitter later during the campaign when there was already excitement around the candidate’s campaign. Another discussed using Twitter early during a primary to try to clear a field. The intent here was speak to journalists and other political insiders who were assessing the comparative strength of a party’s candidates.

The ability to measure return on investment was perceived to be relatively high with search advertising. Because most search ads link to a secondary page, the campaign has fairly concrete indicators of success, such as the amount of money raised and the number of new sign-ups (and how much those newly signed-up individuals eventually gave to the campaign). As with other platforms, it is more difficult to measure persuasion, though consultants in general did not expect a lot of persuasion to result from static search ads.

There was agreement that there is no good way to measure whether advertising on Snapchat (in the form of a geo-filter) was successful or not. The platform does provide some metrics, such as the number of uses and views of a filter, but such data are hard to translate into metrics that campaigns care about like dollars raised and votes earned. One campaign adviser reported trying Snapchat but giving up. The interviewee suggested that “people don’t go to Snapchat to engage with a politician.” Another suggested Snapchat is best for “self-expression,” which may be more relevant for a presidential campaign than for a House or Senate campaign.

### **Video Quality**

A final theme to emerge was that, when it comes to persuasion, campaigns want a video format that closely resembles television. Although only one interviewee explicitly held up television in this way, the point was alluded to in many of the discussions. For persuasion, campaigns want video options that are high in quality. One strategist explained:

“With Hulu, you have to finish watching the ad to continue the program that you really want to watch, the sound is most likely on as well, you are watching on a big screen. Hulu is similar to TV: it is high quality.”

The video formats offered by Facebook were, by and large, considered low quality. For a viewer to see a video on Facebook, that person must stop scrolling (which is difficult to get

people to do). Moreover, that person is likely watching on a phone, leading to less attention and less time engaging with the content. Moreover, a huge percentage of the time the sound is turned off. Thus, the viewing conditions of a video on Facebook are quite different from those on television.

Consultants were skeptical of the quality of video ad they were being sold on Instagram. On the one hand, Instagram features more visuals and video than Facebook, but one interviewee reported a belief that people were constantly swiping on Instagram. Therefore, the video creative needed to be extremely short; a 15-second video that might work on Facebook was perceived to be too long for Instagram.

By contrast, YouTube was thought to offer good quality video. The platform allows campaigns to buy pre-roll video, an advertisement that automatically plays before the viewer can watch a desired video, which results in relatively high completion rates. Ads can be skippable after a few seconds or unskippable, which comes with additional costs. Unskippable ads are especially desirable because they considerably boost the chances that the individual will view the entire ad, similar to the viewing situation on television. But because of their desirability, sometimes there is no inventory of unskippable ads remaining—even though it was perceived that the unskippable inventory on YouTube was greater than on other platforms.

Moreover, the sound is generally turned on for YouTube ads because the viewer is preparing to watch another video, and thus both the eyes and ears are engaged. YouTube ads can also be bought in various lengths. There are 6-second “bumper ads,” 15-second ads, 30-second ads and even longer. Because many ads shown on YouTube are shorter than television ads, campaigns often create a different type of ad to be shown online. “You don’t just throw TV ads on YouTube,” said one interviewee. “You need to hook users at the beginning.” One

interviewee spoke of studies showing that “digital first” creatives work better in an online environment. Another professional noted that, because some ads on YouTube are unskippable, it gives the ad maker “more room to breathe.” By contrast, you must get to the point immediately in Facebook for fear that people will stop watching your ads.

## **Discussion**

This research highlights the factors that influence campaigns’ decision to purchase ads on a certain platform, including audience size and characteristics, targeting capabilities, the ability to measure return and the quality of the video format. Yet the relative importance of these factors depended on the campaign’s goal: the ability measure return was far more important when the goal was acquisition and fundraising, while the quality of the video was key when the goal was persuasion.

Few interviewees made the claim explicitly, but digital advertising is not a completely different ballgame than television advertising, especially when the goal is persuasion. Digital advertising is just one more step in the move toward efficiency in targeting desired audiences. Campaigns are not only trying to determine which digital platform gives the best bang for buck, but they weigh television in that calculation, too. As one consultant explained, “In places where the cost per [gross ratings] point is high, digital should be a larger percentage of spend because the efficiency of each dollar is stretched farther than TV. In lower CPP markets, a higher percentage of spend might be concentrated on TV.”

Strategists expressed a strong desire for more of the “quality” television-like inventory on digital, such as unskippable ads on YouTube or on Hulu. There was hope that Facebook might develop a new video format that was unskippable or that Disney Plus might provide quality video options for campaign.

This desire for more options reminds us that two companies dominate paid political advertising in the U.S.: Facebook and Google (providing both search and YouTube). They dominate because they have vast audiences that are broad in their demographics, they provide many ways to target ads, they offer sophisticated ways to measure return, and in the case of YouTube, there are quality video options. Instagram, because it shares so much with Facebook, is also seen as useful—and important for reaching younger people—but because the audience skews so young, spending on Instagram is somewhat limited. Twitter lags in importance because of its small audience, its lack of targeting capabilities, and limited ways to measure return, so campaigns find Twitter more useful for organic as opposed to paid messaging. Indeed, in October 2019, the company announced it would ban all political ads (Conger, 2019). Snapchat is seen as least essential for campaigns—and often not worth the effort.

What does it matter that campaign place most of their digital advertising with two social media giants, Facebook and Google? For one, it means that the companies' revenue streams depend, to some extent, on politicians. Facebook reports over \$1 billion in spending on political ads on its platform between May 2018 and March 2020 (Facebook Ad Library Report, 2020). Thus, these giants may be particularly responsive to the wishes of politicians. At the same time, politicians are dependent on social media platforms for re-election as digital's share of ad spending rises. One might even call the dominance of Facebook and Google a duopoly.

Think of the Democratic nominating contest in 2020 in which candidates had to meet several metrics to qualify. One of those for the September and October 2019 debates was having 130,000 individual donors. This drove candidates to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars—in the case of Tom Steyer, millions—on digital ads to boost their number of donors.

A duopoly when it comes to buying online political ads is much different than the situation with television, in which perhaps half a dozen television stations in each media market compete for the candidate's ad business, not to mention the companies that provide local cable television. Moreover, because the law requires television stations to provide the lowest unit rate for political ads to candidates, politicians do not need to worry about price gouging. But as digital constitutes an increasing share of advertising—and the online options are dominated by two companies—campaigns may be faced with massive price increases for the digital ads that are increasingly essential to their electoral success.

The prospect of another platform stealing some of these online advertising dollars appears to be slim. Digital campaigners want platforms with audiences large enough to segment in a meaningful way. Although a new social media platform might take the world by storm, for that company to break into the political ad business in a big way it would need to avoid being purchased by one of the two large firms (as Instagram did not) and have features that appeal to political campaigns, such as an ability to target congressional districts. In other words, the platform will need to take an interest in selling political ads. But it is doubtful that new platforms would want to enter that market. TikTok has indicated it has no interest in selling political advertising (Perez, 2019), and as noted earlier, Twitter has abandoned the political ad business.

## **Conclusion**

With any research, there is always the question of how far the conclusions generalize. The nine interviewees are not a representative sample of all those involved in digital politics, nor do they represent all races up and down the ballot. Therefore, it is best to limit the scope of these

conclusions to federal races in the U.S. that were able to afford digital staff. Conducting nine interviews, however, was sufficient to reach a considerable degree of saturation in the information I gleaned; my final interviewees generally repeated what I had heard before.

Another concern is that only two of my interviewees were on the political right. Indeed, Kreiss and Jasinski (2016) noted a distinct Democratic advantage in data, analytics, technology and digital in presidential campaigns from 2004 to 2012, suggesting there may be key party differences. If so, one should be cautious about extending my conclusions to Republicans. On the other hand, Republicans and Democrats had access to the same the platforms with the same features during the 2018 campaigns, which would seem to mitigate partisan differences. Moreover, my interviewees on the right did not provide a significantly different account than those on the left.

In addition, my findings may not generalize beyond the United States. Although the global reach of most platforms, combined with the “Americanization” or “globalization” of campaigns (Scammell, 1998), suggests that my conclusions may have some validity elsewhere, there are several important cross-national differences that might influence how campaigns use paid advertising on social media, including differences in data protection laws, campaign finance laws, access to digital expertise and political culture.

In addition, my findings speak only to paid media and not to the organic side of social media use. Thus, Kreiss, Lawrence and McGregor’s (2018) finding that the extent to which candidates feel comfortable with social media influences its use was not repeated by my interviewees. Clearly, candidate comfort matters more on the organic side—where candidates are tweeting themselves or creating a snap—than it does on the paid side, where professional consultants develop the creatives. But the findings of Kreiss and colleagues (2018) regarding the

importance of the audience were echoed repeatedly by the campaign professionals with whom I spoke.

Finally, the features offered by the various platforms change rapidly. New tools are introduced all the time, though one consultant suggested that many of them “burn out quickly” because no one is using them. Thus, not only do the capabilities of specific platforms change, but perceptions of their capabilities change, too. Therefore, the specifics reported in this research represent a particular point in time. That said, I suspect the importance of audience characteristics, the ability to target on a platform, the ability to measure return and the quality of the video format will remain important components of campaign decision-making as campaigns juggle pursuing their goals with maximizing return on investment.

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