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Policing Politics: Facebook and a Politician's Right to Free Speech

Facebook executive Shane Ferris¹ sat in his office staring at a Facebook advertisement. Elizabeth Warren, a Democratic presidential candidate, had recently purchased the ad that highlighted how politicians can spread misinformation through Facebook's platform, permissible under a decision made by company CEO Mark Zuckerberg. The advertisement declared "Breaking news: Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook just endorsed Donald Trump for re-election." The ad's false claim aimed at testing the limits of the social media platform's policies.

Ferris, a 10-year veteran of the company and current vice president for advertisements and platform operations, stood behind the company's stance of promoting free speech but wondered, given the use of the platform by foreign actors to influence the 2016 US presidential election, if Facebook should reconsider in light of the backlash from politicians, pundits, and, most importantly, the public.

Advertising spending in 2019 from politicians accounted for only 0.5% of total Facebook advertising revenue. In the 2016 election, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton combined spent about \$81 million on Facebook ads, only 0.3% of the total revenue for that year.^{1,2} Advertisements that appeared on the platform required some form of company approval. Any advertiser had the ability to target ads to specific users.

Ferris couldn't deny that some of these ads, along with those from outside groups, had an impact on the election, but was that not something to be proud of from Facebook's perspective? It seemed like proof that advertisements on the platform could reach millions of people, a strong selling point to future advertising customers.

Zuckerberg had recently testified in front of the House Financial Services Committee about Facebook's new Libra cryptocurrency. Experience testifying to political bodies in both the United States and Europe had

¹ Shane Ferris is a fictional character.

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