

TO: Interested Parties
FROM: Future Majority
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RE: A Series on Digital Warfare in 2020 - Overview

They say 2008 was the first online campaign. But, Donald Trump changed the landscape in 2016 with the most advanced digital political operation in history. And in 2020, candidates and outside groups are organizing and advertising across the digital ecosystem at an unprecedented scale. In the 2019-2020 cycle alone, digital spending on political ads is projected to eclipse \$1.5 billion, versus a mere \$22.5 million in 2008. In just two years since the 2018 midterms, we'll likely see a greater than 50% increase in digital ad spending.

Political advertising on Facebook, Google, YouTube and other channels only scratches the surface of how the use of digital tools and more insidious forms of manipulation are playing into political campaigns and politics broadly. In a new memo, the Future Majority team is taking a deep dive into the **digital warfare that will shape the 2020 elections and beyond.**

State of Play

As voters increasingly get their news online and spend much of their time on social media, campaigns are meeting them where they are: with political ads that run primarily on Facebook and Google. And with digital ad spending reaching the levels spent on traditional media ads (e.g. broadcast television, cable and radio), we are learning more about how digital spending works and the impact it is having.

Unlike its traditional media counterparts, digital ads often go through a series of message effectiveness testing and are distributed via micro-targeting, allowing campaigns to ensure the right message is reaching the right voter, all the way down to the individual level. TV ads on the other hand blanket the airwaves of an entire market, and while the ads may go through representative focus groups, they do not have the benefit of being field-tested, altered, tested, altered again and deployed directly to voters of interest (whether for persuasion or turnout).

Trump and the Republicans have built a sophisticated digital infrastructure dating back to his first campaign to leverage Mobile Advertising IDs -- an identifier unique to every smartphone. These MAIDs allow third parties used by campaigns to track users' locations and other data gathered from smartphone usage. As Trump and the Republican fundraising machine continue to outpace the Democrats, they maintain an important advantage over big data and the ability to use that data to craft unique messages and get their voters to the polls. For example, during the height of the 2016 campaign from June to November, the Trump campaign spent [\\$44 million](#) on digital ads and tested 5.9 million permutations, while the Clinton campaign spent \$28 million during that period and only tested 66,000 different ads.

In 2020, the story is similar. But Democrat-aligned groups have taken notes from Trump's campaign and have begun to build their own digital infrastructure. In the next section, we'll take a look at how digital spending is shaping the election so far this cycle.

Digital Spending

2020 has and will continue to set records for digital spending on political ads. But until former New York City Mayor Mike Bloomberg entered the Democratic Presidential Primary and spent close to \$600 million on political ads (only \$50 million of that was on digital), Trump has far outpaced Democratic spending.

For context, as of the date of this memo, Trump and Trump-aligned committees have spent over \$45 million on Facebook and Google ads. The leading Democratic challengers have spent a *combined* \$24 million (Sanders: \$17 million, Biden: \$7 million). While Bloomberg's unprecedented campaign put the spotlight on Democratic spending, his rivals spent far less. During one week in February, [Bloomberg spent \\$5.4 million on Google ads](#), while 7 other leading candidates spent on average \$281 thousand. However, in key Senate matchups this cycle, both Democratic candidate committees and the party committee are outspending their Republican counterparts on digital ads in big ways.

But Trump and Trump committees have a war chest that, if not for Bloomberg's commitment to run independent expenditures to support the eventual Democratic nominee, far exceed the Democrats' cash on hand. In the 4th quarter alone, the Trump campaign, the Trump Victory committee, and the Trump Make America Great Again Committee raised a staggering \$154 million. If 2016 and current spending to date is any indication, much of this war chest will be deployed on sophisticated digital ads in key battleground states.

Digital Warfare

Ad spending is only the tip of the iceberg. As McKay Coppins detailed in [The Atlantic](#), there is a "billion-dollar disinformation campaign" in full swing to help reelect Trump, and it primarily lives on digital.

Recent examples like Trump's misleading use of the official Census for a [political ad](#) was too deceptive even for the lax rules at Facebook. The social media giant took down the ad after first allowing it. A deliberately misleading edit of a [clip of Joe Biden](#) by the Trump campaign -- which Twitter for the first time labeled as "manipulated media" -- is one of many examples in which the Trump campaign is using digital technology to spread disinformation to his 73 million followers in hopes of improving his reelection chances. And as recently as the March 10th primaries, hashtags clearly meant to spark intraparty fighting -- #ByeByeBernie and #LoseWithBiden -- were [posted tens of thousands of times](#) on Twitter.

In general, Republicans and those on the right are leading on new and emerging tactics digitally -- from 4chan and Reddit to Twitch and Discord -- the right has cultivated a digital network that is effective in mobilizing their base. More nefarious tools like opposition content farms create

false realities that are easily spread online. Moreover, the Trump campaign is aided significantly by partisan media (including Fox News, Breitbart, Sinclair and the digital PragerU) that are seemingly willing to amplify disingenuous messages. And with the on average 3,000 data points the Trump campaign reportedly has in their arsenal on every voter, they can tweak their messages -- legitimate or not -- and micro-target all the way to changing the color of an ad's call to action button.

With [reports](#) and intelligence all pointing to Russia again interfering in the 2020 elections, the Kremlin is already using digital political warfare to disrupt our elections with the goal of helping Trump get re-elected. The use of bots and fake accounts to sow division online, increased manipulation of big data, and technologies like deepfakes (i.e. videos that use someone's likeness to make it seem like they said or did something they did not) that will make it almost impossible for voters to distinguish between real and falsified information online are just some of the ways malicious actors in Russia and elsewhere will meddle in American democracy.

Recommendations

It is not too late for the Democrats and progressive organizations to fight the misinformation machine online. The 2020 elections will be fought and won in the digital battlefield. Here's what Democrats can do now:

- 1. Use data wisely to go big on digital.** Democrats and progressive-aligned organizations have the data they need to identify the voters that they need to persuade and turn out to the polls. They should take advantage of inexpensive tools on Facebook to reach these voters and distribute micro-targeted messages that are proven through testing to be effective. Democrats should increase digital spending but not confuse digital ads with TV ads. What works online is very different from what works on a Cable ad. Democrats have facts and public opinion on their side on a slew of issues -- digital ads need not be a recitation of facts, but rather a chance to connect emotionally with voters. Data affords us the opportunity to understand the emotional message that will resonate best with the right voters.
- 2. Leverage organic online spread.** The left has a digital infrastructure that is largely untapped. And while good content is out there, left leaning meme pages consistently underperform their right-wing counterparts. Paid digital is important, but it alone won't close this performance gap. Organic distribution can be even more game-changing. Democrats should target micro-influencers across digital platforms to reach the right people and scale messages. In turn, these influencers can inspire organized social and digital armies, whether for volunteer recruitment, amplifying winning narratives, or getting out the vote and much more.
- 3. Get out in front.** Winning the digital game doesn't mean just rapid response to combat right-wing misinformation. It means getting out in front with a narrative that can drive organic engagement and not being afraid to push quantity over quality. When the digital space is flooded with false stories, exposure to true and honest messages is more important than engagement. And being strategic about picking up trends, not so much



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breaking news, gives campaigns a chance to correct the record and change the narrative.

Conclusion

Since 2016, Republicans have gained a clear advantage in the digital space and are willing to use dirty tricks and tap into their sprawling financial network to keep that advantage. But Democrats have an opportunity to use digital to get out messages that can win hearts and minds of voters. And while a large section of the Democratic base are youth voters, it is critical to meet them where they engage most often: digitally. Future Majority is building the digital war room to generate online content that gains organic traction with the message that our data show will work. Our affiliate, America's Future Majority Fund, is positioned to distribute dozens of digital ads to talk directly to the voters that will likely decide the election: suburban women in key battleground states. Democrats can win the narrative game. It's time to bring that narrative to the masses quickly and often.

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