

Vote Leave's targeted Brexit ads released by Facebook

BBC - 26 July 2018

The official Vote Leave campaign spent more than £2.7m on targeting ads at specific groups of people on Facebook, helping it to win the 2016 EU referendum. The US social media giant has now released these ads to a committee of MPs investigating fake news, meaning everyone - not just those they were originally aimed at - can now see them. The ads, created by Canadian company Aggregate AIQ, often focused on specific issues, such as immigration or animal rights, thought likely to influence certain groups of people, based on their age, where they lived and other personal data taken from social media and other sources.

The documents appear to back up the findings of the Electoral Commission, which ruled last week that Vote Leave broke electoral law by working jointly with another campaign, BeLeave - something denied by both groups. There are 1,433 different messages in the data set released by Facebook. The adverts were seen more than 169 million times in total.

The BeLeave messages were more closely directed at younger voters, promising a "brighter future" if the UK could stop "EU regulators keeping us in the past" and accusing Brussels of regulating ride-sharing apps such as Uber and enforcing quotas on data streaming.

Data provided by Facebook suggests some of the most seen images were produced by BeLeave.

Older voters tended to be treated to claims about how much money the UK was sending to the EU. More than 140 ads made reference to the controversial claim that £350m a week sent to the EU could be spent on the NHS instead. Alternative uses for the £350m included schools and flood defences.

Immigration was another common theme, with one ad appearing to suggest the entire Turkish population was headed for the UK.

Boris Johnson was the only politician to be pictured in the ads, apart from one featuring Jeremy Corbyn, which was targeted at younger voters and accompanied by an old quote from the Labour leader: "The EU takes away from national parliaments the power to set economic policy and hands it over to an unelected set of bankers."

Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party spent £32,750.73 with AIQ on pro-Brexit Facebook ads. Only 16 of the ads were delivered to users in Northern Ireland, according to the Facebook data. The remaining 24 were primarily seen by people in England. The 24 adverts, seen at least 1.96 million times - and potentially as many as 4.2 million times - were all posted in the final three days of the EU

referendum campaign.

Early on in the campaign, Vote Leave launched a giant data harvesting exercise through a competition to win £50m if you could correctly guess the result of all 51 games in the 2016 European football championship. This allowed it to gather the contact details of thousands of potential voters, many of whom would not normally be interested in the referendum.

The Culture Media and Sport Committee is expected shortly to publish interim findings from its inquiry into fake news, which has taken evidence from whistleblower Christopher Wylie and technology company bosses, as well as representatives of the separate Leave.EU campaign.