



Kumar Sambhav Shrivastava [REDACTED]

URGENT: Media Queries from Al Jazeera

Kumar Sambhav Shrivastava [REDACTED]

10 March 2022 at 00:30

To: [REDACTED]

Bipasha Chakrabarti

Director, Corporate Communications

Meta India

Dear Ms Chakrabarti,

I am a journalist with [The Reporters' Collective](#). We are currently working on a series of stories commissioned by Al Jazeera. The reportage has references to Meta's policies on political advertisement and their implementation in India.

In this regard we have the following queries.

Kindly respond to the queries by 11 am on Saturday, March 12, so that we can appropriately incorporate the information you provide into our reportage.

1. Before the Parliamentary elections in 2019, Facebook [removed](#) 687 pages and accounts that promoted the Indian National Congress Party but concealed their association with it, in what it called a crackdown on "Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour." At that time it removed only one page and 14 accounts that promoted the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) but were funded by an IT firm. But a large number of proxy advertisers continued to place pro-BJP political advertisements on Facebook without disclosing their real identity or association with the party between February 2019 and November 2020, which saw the Parliamentary elections and nine state elections.

Why did Facebook not take the same action against a large number of the pro-BJP accounts and advertisers that boosted BJP's visibility during elections without declaring their association with the party, as it did against Congress' proxy advertisers?

2. Several pro-BJP advertisers (such as [this](#) and [this](#)) show BJP headquarters in Delhi as their address but did not list BJP as the funding entity behind their ads, some proxy advertisers placed pro-BJP ads dressed as news (such as [this](#) and [this](#)), while many others listed inactive websites (such as [this](#)) or show no information about source of funding (such as [this](#)). Facebook officials in the past have [claimed](#) that the company would take action

against accounts or pages that are designed to look independent, such as news pages, but are linked to political parties and trying to hide the link. Why did Meta find no wrong in allowing a large number of pro- BJP proxy advertisers to continue to campaign during elections?

3. Did Facebook internally declare in March-April 2019, a global freeze on actions against Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour originating from within a country? If yes, what was the reason for declaring this freeze?
4. A Facebook page [NEWJ](#) represents itself as an independent 'news/media company' on Facebook but published a large number of political advertisements promoting BJP and its leaders and denigrating their opponents. Some of these ads presented false information about the election candidates (such as [this](#)) while others showed election candidates with distorted context (such as [this](#)). Some of its ads fired up anti-Muslim sentiments. All these ads were dressed up as "news content" or news reports. Why did Facebook allow such misrepresentation on its platform?
5. Election law and regulations in India do not allow surrogate advertisements—ads in favour of a political candidate that are not directly funded or authorised by that candidate. Why has Facebook not implemented these rules on its platform for all advertisers?
6. Facebook participated, along with the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), in developing a "Voluntary Code of Ethics" for self regulation of social media platforms during elections in March 2019. Why did the Voluntary Code of Ethics not include any provision on surrogate or proxy advertisers as shown above?
7. Media has [reported](#) that documents leaked by Facebook whistle-blower Frances Haugen show Facebook had pushed industry body Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) to lobby with the Election Commission of India to not impose stiff regulations on social media platforms during Parliamentary elections. Any comments that you would like to make on these facts?
8. Data accessed from the Meta Ad Library show that in 22 months between February 2019 and November 2020 and in nine out of the 10 elections during this period, advertisements placed by BJP's and its candidates' got more views for less money, on an average, as compared those placed by their competitors. Why were BJP's ads charged at a cheaper rate (cost per view) by Facebook's ad

platform as compared to other political parties, including its opponents?

9. Meta's advertising policies show that its algorithm offers subsidies to advertisements that it finds are more "relevant" to the targeted audience and makes them cheaper. Academic [research](#) has concluded that this arrangement, when applied on political ads, could be leading to polarisation in the society and boosting the reach of large polarising groups. Any comments that you would like to make on these facts?
10. Facebook has worked closely with BJP in the past during election campaigns. Do you think Facebook's political advertisement policies, its algorithm and the learnings from closely working with Facebook in the campaigns have helped BJP get more views for less money for its ads than its opponents?
11. Any other comments that Meta would like to make on its political advertisement policies and their implementation and impact in India.

We look forward to your responses. The information you provide is important to comprehensively report the facts in the story.

Thank you,

Kumar Sambhav

