

IN LARGE PART, Facebook's rationalization for not addressing the outrageous misbehavior on its platform was just that: Clinton was going to win anyway, so why needlessly alienate the losing team?

In 2008 and 2012, the Obama campaign had been masters at Facebook. Rather than building on that experience, the Clinton campaign acted as if social media was some fringe unproven medium. The Clinton-Kaine team stuck to traditionalist media buys and seemed to take almost a perverse pride in being clueless novices at Facebook. When Facebook offered to provide on-site guidance on how to run campaigns on Facebook, the Clinton team spurned the opportunity. "The Hillary camp just did not understand the value," says a Facebook official. "They didn't see it." They spent only a fraction of the Trump team's Facebook budget. And the few Facebook ads they did use were woefully misspent. One example was a painstakingly produced two-and-a-half-minute ad about her campaign—a mini-documentary of sorts—that for some reason the Clinton media people felt was appropriate for Facebook. The ad resonated more with women, and as a result, the Facebook algorithm delivered it to female users. Because the Facebook ad auction rewards advertisers who target people who most would want to see the ad, it also

cost less to show it to an audience of exclusively women. But the Clinton team wanted it shown to both men and women, even though it would bust the budget to show the ad to men as well.

“Hillary’s team looked at that and said, I see the problem, so we’ll increase the budget to get more men,” says a tech executive familiar with the ad. “They are effectively paying more money to get the ad to people who don’t want to see it!”

The Trump team also began as novices on Facebook. But they learned quickly, hiring a hitherto obscure forty-year-old website designer named Brad Parscale to run their digital campaign. Parscale got the job by playing a long game. Years before the election he’d hooked up with the Trump family by underbidding rivals to get the job of designing a Trump corporation site. His work impressed Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner, who tapped Parscale in 2016 to help with the election.

Parscale understood that a traditional campaign would not work for this nontraditional candidate. He also understood that the microtargeting tools of Facebook—and the expertise of Facebook’s free consultants—could compensate for a gap in spending between Trump and his opponent. Parscale *did* accept the professional guidance Facebook offered all big advertisers, and several Facebookers worked virtually full-time advising the Trump team how to maximize their ad spending.

“I asked Facebook, I want to spend \$100 million on your platform, send me a manual,” Parscale said to *Frontline*. “They said we don’t have a manual. I said send me a human manual then, and that’s pretty much it.” The advantage of having people on site was, when a glitch arose, the Facebook person could contact the engineers immediately to address the problem. “If I would have chosen the way Hillary’s campaign did it,” said Parscale, “I’d have to send an email and make a phone call, wait a couple of days, and then have it fixed. I wanted it fixed in thirty seconds.”

Parscale started with a budget of \$2 million to build up a database, and sunk it all into Facebook, eventually spending, as he noted, much, much more. Like Facebook itself, the Trump campaign’s Facebook team

was a giant testing machine, treating every ad like an experiment, and sifting through the results to figure out which groups responded to which ads. They took Trump's stump speeches, cut them into fifteen-second slices, and ran them to a variety of demographics. The ones that Facebook delivered were repeated and further refined. The ones that didn't work were junked. By October, Trump was running hundreds of thousands of different video "creatives"—meaning styles of ads—with algorithms testing almost infinite variations. One Trump campaign official told *Wired* that the campaign once ran 175,000 variations of an ad on the same day.

The targeting was made possible by specific Facebook tools designed to ostensibly make ads relevant and welcome to its users. Parscale began directing ads to groups defined by Facebook as Custom Audiences, where advertisers could mix and match traits like gender, race, residence, religion, and other interests (BMW owners! Gun lovers!) to isolate groups. When a group was found to be a particularly fertile ground for sowing Trump affinity, the campaign used a tool called Lookalike Audiences to expand its targeting to non-obvious but algorithmically like-minded populations. This strategy—known as “uplift” or “brand lift”—had been pioneered by the Obama campaign.

Furthermore, Parscale used multiple creative agencies that competed with one another to deliver the best Facebook ads. Each of these teams would wake up at 6 a.m., start a campaign for a new region, and at noon would rejigger the budget to spend on what had worked best. The agency with the best ads got the money, and the losers would then look for a different demographic to win the next day.

By the end of the campaign, Trump's team had a database of age, gender, region, and other demographics, and which messages resonated for each one. Facebook's worry had been that its targeting infrastructure would encourage politicians to deliver different messages to different groups—pro-immigration to one region, anti-immigration to another. That was tempting because Facebook ads, unlike, say, radio or television ads, aren't generally exposed—they go straight to the News Feed streams

of targeted users. But Trump's campaign didn't *have* to do that because it used Facebook to figure out which of its many messages would drive a dagger into the brain stem of each individual. "They were just showing only the right message to the right people," says the tech executive familiar with the techniques. "To one person it's immigration, to one person it's jobs, to one person it's military strength. And they are building this beautiful audience. It got so crazy by the end that they would run the campaigns in areas where he was about to give a stump speech and find out what was resonating in that area. They would modify the stump speech in real time, based on the marketing."

Because of the News Feed's tendency to promote sensational content, Trump's wild experimentation found that the most salacious ads would be generously shared by the targets to their friends—and the resulting "organic" distribution was utterly free.

And what did the Trump people do when they found an audience for whom *nothing* resonated, implying that they weren't likely to vote for Trump? To those people, they ran anti-Hillary ads, hoping to discourage anti-Trumpers from voting at all. According to a *Bloomberg* article written by Joshua Green and Sasha Issenberg, who were granted access to the Trump digital campaign in the late stage of the election, Parscale and his team identified three groups among those who were never going to vote for Trump: "idealistic white liberals, young women, and African Americans." The liberals got ads tweaking Clinton for the misdeeds uncovered by the hacked emails of her campaign aides (conveniently stolen from Democrats' inboxes by Russian military operatives). Young women would be reminded in lurid terms about Bill Clinton's sexual misdeeds and the candidate's unsavory treatment of the White House intern at the center of the scandal. African Americans would be reminded that Clinton once referred to some criminal black men as "super predators." (The Trump people, of course, did not remind African Americans that Donald Trump had taken out a full-page ad calling for the execution of the Central Park Five alleged rapists, who had falsely confessed.) The explicit goal was voter suppression.

If you had an audience for whom *everything* resonated, you'd send them more donation ads, which were crucial because Trump, taken aback by his shocking triumph in the primaries, went into the general election with an empty wallet.

Parscale worked his database—which he called Project Alamo in tribute to his San Antonio headquarters—overtime in key states like Florida, Michigan, and Wisconsin. States that would tip the Electoral College to Donald J. Trump.

“Fucking beautiful!” says a tech executive who followed the campaign. “They ran the greatest digital marketing campaign I’ve ever seen, completely by accident. They just did very commonsense things in a new era.”

Lots of people at Facebook knew that Trump’s people were playing the platform like a Stradivarius while the Clinton team was banging it like a broken tambourine. As a matter of course, the ad team had weekly meetings where they discussed big spenders and whether their budgets were increasing or being cut back, and what could be done to better serve them. As Election Day approached, the disparities were more and more stark. Not only was Trump outspending Clinton, but his campaign was simply better.

“In every way, the way they used the product was different,” says Facebook advertising VP Rob Goldman. “The degree to which they measured their outcomes, the kinds of creative they used, the timing of their spend, the way they did their targeting. They took our best practices and operationalized them.”

Yet even as people in Facebook’s ad organization saw the tremendous imbalance in the way each campaign used the platform in both quality and quantity, they regarded the disparity as a curiosity, not something that could become a factor in electing a candidate most of them fervently opposed. “Even having seen all of that [Trump ad activity], nope, I didn’t think Trump was going to win,” says Bosworth, echoing a sentiment widely held inside Facebook. “It was so unthinkable to me that I had ruled it out.”