There’s nothing stopping climate change deniers from using Google AdWords



Targeted, personalized ads have long been held up as a win-win-win, for consumers, advertisers and publishers. An article from The New York Times about climate change deniers using Google AdWords to promote their agenda pokes (more) holes in that optimistic vision.

In the Times article, Hiroko Tabuchi laid out how ads proclaiming climate change a hoax appeared at the top of Google search results when searching in private browsing mode. Yet, when the climate change reporter had private browsing mode off — and Google could access more signals such as past search and browsing history to target ads to users most likely to click — ads from environmental groups, not climate change denying groups, appeared.

The Times describes the climate change-denying advertisers as having figured out how to game Google’s system: “The climate denialist ads are an example of how contrarian groups can use the internet’s largest automated advertising systems to their advantage, gaming the system to find a mass platform for false or misleading claims.”

But these advertisers don’t have to do anything special or out of the ordinary to get Google’s algorithms to display their ads. In other words, no gaming is needed. As the Times lays out, there is no specific policy against promoting “alternative facts.” AdWords policy is aimed at consumer protections, preventing advertisers from “giving misleading information about products, services, or businesses.”

(Likewise, AdSense’s misrepresentative content policy is not aimed at policing the editorial veracity of the content on which Google-served ads may appear. Which is why sites that promote conspiracy theories and hoaxes continue to be included in Google’s AdSense ad network.)

This is just one more example of how ad targeting and content optimizing algorithms from search and social media platforms reinforce established beliefs by targeting the content people see in pursuit of higher click-through rates. No gaming required.

About The Author

As Third Door Media’s paid media reporter, Ginny Marvin writes about paid online marketing topics including paid search, paid social, display and retargeting for Search Engine Land and Marketing Land. With more than 15 years of marketing experience, Ginny has held both in-house and agency management positions. She provides search marketing and demand generation advice for ecommerce companies and can be found on Twitter as @ginnymarvin.

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