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A bipartisan group of Senators grilled tech companies today about how Russians used their platforms to interfere in the 2016 election, calling on them to better monitor abuse in the future. A subcommittee of the Senate Judiciary committee challenged top lawyers from Facebook, Google, and Twitter on the potential use of shell companies to hide advertiser

identities, the malicious use of bot networks, and the limited capabilities of existing ad review policies. But despite the bipartisan appeal of criticizing the tech companies in public, it's not clear what, if anything, will come of the critiques.

Facebook, Google, and Twitter sent top legal officials to Washington this week for a series of hearings about Russian interference in 2016 election. In prepared statements, which leaked yesterday, executives pledged their commitment to fighting foreign interference while disclosing that the problem was bigger than they had previously admitted.

Senators asked the lawyers a wide range of questions, largely focused on Facebook. In perhaps the most pressing exchange of the day, Republican Senator John Kennedy of Louisiana asked Facebook general counsel Colin Stretch how the company could possibly keep track of all five million advertisers on its platform. "You don't have the ability to know who every one of those advertisers is, do you, today?" Kennedy said. "Right now? Not your commitment — I'm asking about your ability."

In one of the more heated exchanges of the day, Sen. Al Franken (D-Minn.) pressed Stretch on why the company had allowed the Kremlin-linked Internet Research Agency to buy political ads using Russian currency. "How did Facebook, which prides itself on being able to process billions of data points and instantly transform them in the personal connections with its user, somehow not make the connection that electoral ads, paid for in rubles, were coming from Russia?"

Franken called on Facebook to reject the use of foreign currencies to buy political ads. But Stretch demurred. "It's relatively easy for bad actors to switch currencies," Stretch said. "So it's a signal, but not enough."

In its prepared testimony, Facebook disclosed that 126 million people had been served content from Russia-linked pages between January 2015 and August 2017. Of that, 29 million people saw it because

they had liked one of the Russia-linked pages that Facebook has subsequently removed. The rest saw the posts after they spread organically thanks to likes, comments, and shares that propelled them forward virally. Facebook also deleted 170 Instagram accounts, which posted about 120,000 pieces of content.

Google disclosed that a Kremlin-linked account spent \$4,700 on advertising on YouTube, posting 1,108 English-language videos to 18 YouTube channels. The videos generated 309,000 views during the election cycle.

But despite senators' raised voices, they got little out of tech company executives beyond their prepared statements, other than a commitment to continue working with senators. Sen. Mazie Hirono, a Hawaii Democrat, asked: "In an election where a total of about 115,000 votes would have changed the outcome, can you say that the false and misleading propaganda people saw on your Facebook didn't have an impact on the election?" Stretch responded: "We're not well positioned to know why any one person or an entire electorate voted the way that it did."

Earlier this month, a bipartisan group of senators introduced a bill, known as the Honest Ads Act, that would require new disclosures for online political advertising modeled on requirements for print and broadcast media. During today's hearing, one of the authors, Sen. Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, asked tech executives whether they would commit to supporting her bill. None would.

In an effort to get ahead of federal regulation, tech companies have announced plans to regulate themselves. Mark Zuckerberg laid out a nine-point plan for limiting foreign actors' ability to influence elections, including new requirements that political ads be labeled and available for public inspection. Twitter announced it would build a "transparency center" where political ads bought on its platform can be publicly viewed.

Today's hearing was the first of three this week for the tech companies. Tomorrow, the executives will appear before the Select Intelligence Committees of the House and Senate, where they are expected to face similar questions. – **The Verge**

