



Consumer goods giant Unilever, a maker of branded soaps, foodstuffs and personal care items and also one of the world’s biggest online advertisers, has fired a warning shot across the bows of social media giants by threatening to pull ads from digital platforms if they don’t do more to mitigate the spread of what it dubs “toxic” online content — be it fake news, terrorism or child exploitation.

“It is critical that our brands remain not only in a safe environment, but a suitable one,” CMO Keith Weed is expected to say at the annual Interactive Advertising Bureau conference in California today, according to extracts from the speech provided to us ahead of delivery. “Unilever, as a trusted advertiser, do not want to advertise on platforms which do not make a positive contribution to society.”

The remarks echo comments made [last month](#) by UK prime minister Theresa May who singled out social media firms for acute censure, saying they “simply cannot stand by while their platforms are used to facilitate [child abuse](#), [modern slavery](#) or the spreading of [terrorist](#) or [extremist content](#)”.

Unilever's Weed is expected to argue that consumers are worried about "fraudulent practice, fake news, and Russians influencing the U.S. election", and are sensitive to the brands they buy becoming tainted by associated with ad placement alongside awful stuff like terrorist propaganda and [content that exploits children](#).

"2018 is either the year of techlash, where the world turns on the tech giants — and we have seen some of this already — or the year of trust. The year where we collectively rebuild trust back in our systems and our society," he will argue.

Online ad giants Facebook and Google have increasingly found themselves on the hook for enabling the spread of socially divisive, offensive and at times out-and-out illegal content via their platforms — in no small part as a consequence of the popularity of their content-sharing hubs.

While the Internet is filled with all sorts of awful stuff, in its darkest corners, the mainstream reach of platforms like Facebook and YouTube puts them squarely in the political firing line for all sorts of content issues — from political disinformation to socially divisive hate speech.

The fact Facebook and Google are also the chief financial beneficiaries of online ad spending — together accounting for [around 60 per cent of online ad spending in the US](#), for example — makes it difficult for them to dodge the charge that their businesses directly benefit from divisive and exploitative content — all the way from clickbait to fake news to full blown online extremism.

Facebook's 2016 dismissal of concerns about fake news impacting democracy as a "[pretty crazy idea](#)" has certainly not aged well. And CEO Mark Zuckerberg has since admitted his platform is broken and made it his personal goal for 2018 to "[fix Facebook](#)".

Both companies faced a growing backlash last year — with a number of advertisers and brands [pulling ads from YouTube](#) over concerns about the types of content that their marketing messages were being served alongside, thanks to the programmatic (i.e. automatic) nature of the ad placement. The platform also took renewed flak for the [type of content it routinely serves up to kids](#).

While Facebook got a political grilling over [hosting Kremlin disinformation](#) — though Russia’s online dis-ops clearly [sprawl across multiple tech platforms](#). But again, Facebook’s massive reach gifts it a greater share of blame — as the most effective channel (at least that we currently know of) for political disinformation muck spreading. ([Last fall](#), for example, it was forced to admit that ~80,000 pieces of Russian-backed content may have been viewed by 126M Facebook users during the 2016 US election.)

Facebook has been working on adding [ad transparency tools](#) to its platform — though it remains to be seen whether it can do enough to be judged to be effectively self regulating. It doesn’t have the [greatest record on that front](#), frankly speaking.

Last year Google also responded with alacrity to boycotts by its own advertisers, saying it would [expand controls for brands](#) to give them more say over where their ads appeared on YouTube, and by taking “a tougher stance on hateful, offensive and derogatory content” — including demonitizing more types of videos. And has made a [policy change on known terrorists’ content](#). Though it has continued to [disappoint politicians demanding better moderation](#).

As part of its attempts to de-risk the user generated content that its business relies on, and thus avoid the risk of further spooking already spooked advertisers, Google even recently began [removing YouTube videos of the so-called ‘Tide Pod Challenge’](#) — i.e. where people film themselves trying to consume laundry detergent. Videos which it had previously left up, despite having a policy against content that encourages dangerous activities.

Incidentally Tide Pods aren’t a Unilever brand but their parent company, Procter & Gamble, also [roasted social media firms last year](#) — calling for them to “grow up” and [slamming](#) the “non-traditional media supply chain” for being “murky at best, and fraudulent at worst”.

Unilever’s Weed also takes aim at ad fraud in his speech, noting how it’s partnered with IBM to pilot a new blockchain tech for advertising — which he touts as having “the potential to drastically reduce advertising fraud by recording how media is purchased, delivered and interacted with by target audiences, providing reliable measurement metrics”. (Can blockchain really fix click fraud? That Unilever is actively entertaining the idea arguably shows how far trust levels in the digital ad space have fallen.)

But the main message is tilted at social media giants' need to "build social responsibility" — and invest in trust and transparency to avoid damaging the precious substance known as 'brand trust' which the tech giants' revenue-generating digital advertisers depend on.

Though, blockchain experiments aside, Unilever seems rather less publicly clear on exactly what it thinks tech giants should do to vanquish the toxic content their business models have (inadvertently or otherwise) been financially incentivizing.

Governments in Europe have been [leaning on social media giants](#) to accelerate development of tech tools that can automatically flag and even remove problem content (such as hate speech) before it has a chance to spread — though that approach is hardly uncontroversial, and critics argue it whiffs of censorship.

Germany has even passed a [hate speech social media law](#), introducing fines of up to €50M for platforms that fail to promptly remove illegal content.

While, [earlier this month](#), Germany's national competition regulator also announced a probe of the online ad sector — citing concerns that a lack of transparency could be skewing market conditions.

Weed's message to social media can be summed up as: This is a problem we'll work with you to fix, but you need to agree to work on fixing it. "As a brand-led business, Unilever needs its consumers to have trust in our brands," he'll say. "We can't do anything to damage that trust -- including the choice of channels and platforms we use. So, 2018 is the year when social media must win trust back."

Unilever is making three specific "commitments" relating to its digital media supply chain:

1. that it will not invest in "platforms or environments that do not protect our children or which create division in society, and promote anger or hate", further emphasizing: "We will prioritise investing only in responsible platforms that are committed to creating a positive impact in society"
2. that it is committed to creating "responsible content" — with an initial focus on tackling gender stereotypes in advertising

3. that it will push for what it dubs “responsible infrastructure”, saying it will only partner with organizations “which are committed to creating better digital infrastructure, such as aligning around one measurement system and improving the consumer experience”

So, while the company is not yet issuing an explicit ultimatum to Facebook and Google, it's certainly putting them on notice that the [political pressure they've been facing](#) could absolutely turn into a major commercial headache too, if they don't take tackling online muck spreading seriously.

tl;dr massive, mainstream success has a flip side. And boy is big tech going to feel it this year.

Facebook and Google both declined to comment on Unilever's intervention.

*Update:* A Facebook spokesperson offered comment following publication, saying, “We fully support Unilever's commitments and are working closely with them.”